

Walkers, Jumpers and Exersaucers – Am I making the right choice for my pre-crawler?

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For busy parents trying to pick up around the house or fix dinner, a walker, jumper or exersaucer seems like a safe way to keep baby occupied. Most are designed for a child of 4 to 16 months. Walkers can keep a child away from certain dangers or allow them to follow you around the house, but they also raise concerns about the negative impact they have on a child's normal development. Despite the name, a walker doesn't help a baby acquire walking skills. Walkers can strengthen lower leg muscles, but not the upper leg and hip muscles your baby will use most. Approximately *50 percent* of infants will use these man-made upright vehicles (1). For parents it's a way to keep their infant happy by being able to move about and stay entertained for numerous hours a week. But is this trade off worth the delay in crucial milestones such as crawling and walking?

A few studies illustrate the damaging effects of baby walkers. One study analyzed babies between the ages of six to fifteen months and compared the motor and mental development of babies who used walkers and those that did not (2). The data concluded that infants who used walkers also sat, crawled and walked late, and scored lower on the Bayley scales of mental and motor skills than the non-walker group. Another study looked into the length of time spent using baby walkers (3). This study showed that infants who used baby walkers for longer periods of time had a significant delay in the onset of crawling. The study suggested that excessive use of baby walkers might alter their normal locomotor development. Another study concluded that for every 24 hours of baby walker use, there was an associated delay of 3.3 days of walking and 3.7 days in standing. When comparing studies, there appears to be more evidence to suggest that baby walkers interfere with the natural process of locomotor skills and may be a cause of developmental delay.

The Committee on Injury and Poison Prevention of the American Academy of Pediatrics forwarded several reasons why the baby walker should not be recommended (5). Walkers do not help an infant to learn how to walk, and can delay normal motor and mental development. As a Chiropractor who has focused my practice on the care of children, I do not recommend the use of baby walkers. It is unnatural to be bipedal and weight bearing prior to learning to sit, crawl and stand. The developmental spine needs to go through each milestone in order to develop properly. Interfering with this process may also have long-term spinal implications (i.e. asymmetry, muscular imbalance etc).

Jumpers don't get any better reviews. Although there is a need for more studies specifically on jumpers, it is believed that they pose the same risks as walkers and exersaucers. Generally, doctors think exersaucers are just fine for babies, but there are exceptions. They hold the baby's hip extended, just as walkers do, which is not good if a child spends a lot of time in it. And, just like walkers, exersaucers prevent a child from seeing his feet. New data on walkers suggests that this lack of visual feedback hinders kids' learning from their own movements. However, exersaucers are better than walkers in that a child is more centered over their feet and less on their toes. They also have to work on balance a bit more.

If you need a safe spot to place your baby while cooking dinner or doing the laundry, walkers, jumpers and exersaucers are handy. But keep in mind that putting your developing infant in one of these for long periods of time is likely to slow down your baby's development.

References

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