

Emerge



A Child's Place

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Occupational Therapy
Speech Therapy

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When Parents Give Up on Tummy Time



Bonnie Hacker, OT
Founder / Director

Due to ever growing concerns about the dramatic rise in motor development delays among infants, infant obesity, and skull deformities among infants, pediatricians have begun recommending increased prone (on tummy) activities for infants. However, it is easy to underestimate the challenge some parents face when introducing these activities. Babies who have led the container lifestyle (i.e. crib, to bouncer, to stroller, to car seat), often find the introduction of tummy time uncomfortable and disconcerting. Some babies let the parents know by screaming, crying, grunting, and making horrible, heart wrenching faces. Parents' natural instincts are to make their baby happy. Introducing tummy time for some babies with strong protest skills can be a serious emotional test for parents. It is not uncommon for parents to abandon tummy time recommendations and rationalize that prone activities are not genuinely important.



Is Tummy Time Important?

The reduction in prone activity over the past 16 years seems to be affecting the motor development of our children. Majnemer and Barr recently found that only 22% of their sample of healthy 6-month-olds could sit without arm support even though, historically, 50% of 6-month-olds have been able to do that.¹ In July, Pathways Awareness completed a survey of 409 pediatric occupational and physical therapists. They found that 66% reported an increase in early motor delays.² Increasingly, we hear accounts from parents about how their children went straight from sitting up to walking and skipped the crawling phase altogether.

The common wisdom is that children who miss infant motor milestones due to the container lifestyle will achieve developmental normalcy after they begin walking. However, the extent to which skipping early motor milestones might hamper future development is unknown and relatively unresearched. One study followed infants as far as 15 months of age and found that difficulty with motor performance persisted.³ During the crawling phase, babies develop eye-hand coordination, hand/thumb strength, core strength, muscle coordination, and neck strength. Kati Knudsen, PT, of the Providence Neurodevelopmental Center for Children in Portland, states that babies who skip tummy time often end up relying on joint strength when they should rely on muscle strength and coordination. They lock their knees to remain standing. They spend more time on their toes when walking to stiffen the ankles, and they lock their elbows to support a seated position. Multiple pediatric therapists have expressed concerns about how skipping these milestones will affect a child's ability to learn pencil grasp and other scholastic skills. Emerge - A Child's Place is helping record numbers of children who struggle to hold a pencil well, because they lack the motor foundations to do so. Childcare professionals and parents alike must bear in mind that developmentally "normal" covers a very wide range. **Just because an infant reaches developmental normalcy after skipping important milestones, does not mean that the child has not suffered a developmental setback with long-term repercussions.** The evidence strongly supports that cultural changes have changed the course of physical development for infants - and not for the better. Rather than gamble that skipping early motor milestones is okay, parents should choose to incorporate tummy time into their infant's daily routines.

Emerge Helps with Tummy Time

This brings us back to the original challenge. What about the babies who resist tummy time vigorously and the parents at their wits' end? Refer those parents to Emerge - A Child's Place. The experienced therapists at Emerge work with parents to explore options in play surfaces, games and distractions, timing, mood monitoring, and other issues that will facilitate tummy time. We will also teach specific carrying techniques and floor games designed to enhance important motor skill development. Ask about Tummy Time classes where infants and mothers get together, infants socialize, and tummy time is enhanced.

Please tell parents about

Emerge - A Child's Place

Believing in a Child's Potential to Flourish

References

1. Majnemer A; Barr R. Influence of supine sleep positioning on early motor milestone acquisition. *Dev Med Child Neurol.* 2005; 47(6): 370-6.
2. Pathways Awareness. Press Release: "National Survey of Pediatric Experts Indicates Increase in Infant Delays." Chicago. July 30, 2008. Available online at: www.pathwaysawareness.org/?q=press-release-survey-results.
3. Majnemer A, Barr R. Association between sleep position and early motor development. *J Pediatr.* 2006 Nov; 149(5): 623-629.