



Crawling: Good for the Body and the Brain

A Physical Therapist's Perspective

A child's first steps bring a lot of excitement. It is a huge developmental accomplishment and certainly should be celebrated. Often times, parents see walking as the first big milestone, but, as pediatric therapists, we know that there are many important motor skills that infants should learn and do long before they walk.

One of these important pre-walking milestones is independent crawling. Sometimes, when babies skip crawling, it seems as if they are "advanced." The truth is that crawling first is strongly preferred since it provides important input to the entire body with long-lasting benefits. Here are some of the main reasons why it is important to encourage and allow a child to crawl:

Crawling works on coordinating the two sides of the body:

- When a baby crawls, it is the first time they are required to coordinate the two sides of their body to move in a different way. Crawling activates both hemispheres of the brain in a balanced and reciprocal way.
- The first time that a baby is able to independently move in a forward direction is during crawling. The eyes must scan the environment and in order to do so, the baby must look across the midline of their body. This helps to develop eye-hand coordination.

Crawling helps to develop trunk and extremity strength and flexibility:

- One of the requirements of crawling is for a baby to be able to hold their body off of the ground against gravity for an extended period of time. This requires a lot of core strength! Crawling is definitely a full body strengthener- it helps to build the muscles of the neck, the stomach, the back, the arms, and the legs.

Crawling provides the ability to see the environment in a different way:

- Crawling enables exploration and manipulation of the environment. The eyes are required to look in all directions to scan the environment. All of this exploration and discovery leads to brain development, and can help to improve cognition.

Although crawling is not the only skill that helps to develop all of these areas, it is unique because it provides the many benefits all at once. Encourage crawling and enjoy it while it lasts. You can feel confident in the fact that it is good for not only the body, but also for the brain!

Crawling works on the development of the arches in the hands and strengthens the wrists and shoulders:

- When babies crawl, it is the only time they are naturally bearing the weight of their body through their arms. This is important for developing strength in the shoulders, wrists, and hands. As a child gets older, they will need hand strength in order to use utensils and to hold a pencil to write. One of the first questions our occupational therapists ask when a child comes in for an evaluation due to poor handwriting is "did the child ever crawl?" Lots of times poor handwriting can be due to weakness in the hands and wrists, and crawling helps to strengthen all of these muscles in preparation for the development of fine motor skills.

Crawling can help to integrate sensory information that is coming into the body:

- Crawling provides lots of tactile (touch) stimulation through both the hands and the feet. This kind of stimulation helps improve body awareness, or the ability to recognize where the parts of your body are in space without having to look at them. As babies continue to grow, it becomes more and more important to be able to move the parts of the body without having to look to see where they are. Being able to experience different sensations coming into the brain from the arms and legs helps the child to integrate sensory information.