

FITNESS AND DEVELOPMENT: 12 TO 18 MONTHS

Your baby is now officially a toddler. Seeing everything on two feet, with basic gross motor skills mastered, children at this age have a new world to explore. However, they are still in the early stages of walking and haven't quite refined balance and coordination. Strengthening is of utmost importance to further advance their gross motor skills. Through repetition of challenging terrains, your new walker will become stronger and build confidence in his motor abilities.

GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Babies typically begin walking around 12 months of age, but usually need 18 months before becoming confident. As walking skills develop, the walk pattern matures in several ways. Instead of waddling, a toddler strikes his/her heel to the ground at the beginning of each step. Their feet tend to move closer together as their balance improves, and their arms swing down at their sides, creating a more adult-like gait. However, a fully mature walking pattern does not emerge until the age of eight. Once walking is preferred to crawling, a toddler attempts independent transitions, such as standing without support and stooping to pick up a toy. He/she also begins to climb the stairs and explore other perhaps less appropriate items, such as the dishwasher!

FITNESS IS FUN!

The best way to support the development of a child at this stage is walking outdoors. From 12 to 18 months, fitness for a toddler includes mastering balance and other newly obtained skills. Uneven terrains, varying surfaces, and random obstacles outside of the house offer lots of practice for a child to challenge their balancing skills. Furthermore, being outdoors allows all the senses to be stimulated, so that a toddler can't help but explore the sites, sounds, and smells. Depending on where you live, weather may deter your child from exploring the outdoors. Be sure both you and your child have warm, water-resistant gear, so your child does not miss out on the fun of jumping in rain puddles or making snow angels.

Sometimes going outside isn't always possible either due to hectic schedules or severe weather conditions. When this is the case, toddlers can still work on balance inside using obstacles courses and climbing activities. You can employ couches, pillows, or any other large item in your house to transform your family room into a gymnasium. Any activity that encourages your toddler to use his/her body in atypical, new or different ways helps with motor planning and coordination. Activities that require two body parts to work together are also important during this stage. These activities include free-form dancing, mirroring games such as Simon Says, and popping soap bubbles with fingers and toes.

HEALTH AND FITNESS OUTSIDE THE HOME

If your child spends time in a daycare or preschool setting, be sure that ample time for physical activity is offered. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends 30 minutes of structured physical activity and 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity per day. Care providers should respect this recommendation to meet the standard level of gross motor activity for toddlers.

FITNESS AS FAMILY

Starting around this stage, a child begins to learn skills through observation, usually watching mom or dad. For example, this age marks when a child's language capacity begins to explode, and often parents hear their own words and phrases being repeated back to them like a parrot. This imitating behavior can be used to instill the importance of fitness. By participating in fitness activities as parents, you act as good role models for your children, provide bonding time with your family, and show your toddler that being active is simply a way of life.

Encouraging fitness includes a range of possibilities. You could take walks as a family after dinner or join a local gym that offers "Mommy and Me" classes. These activities are not meant to be rigorous, but should allow toddlers to see their parents being active and enjoying it. Don't underestimate something as simple as chasing your toddler around the park, as this too helps your child gain strength, challenge balance, and improve cardiovascular endurance. As long as the focus is on having fun as a family while being fit, you will ensure lifelong fitness for your child.