

FITNESS AND DEVELOPMENT: 6 TO 12 MONTHS

Fitness from six to 12 months takes on new meaning as your infant begins to become mobile. He/she is now a little explorer who can't be expected to stay in one place for too long. During this newfound independence, safety becomes the primary focus, not for one designated area, but for the entire home. "Baby proofing" large areas in your home will allow your newly-mobile baby free exploration, challenging his/her strength, balance and coordination, while continuing on the road to long-term fitness.

GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

This stage of development is marked by a progression of several gross motor milestones. They first acquire the trunk strength necessary to sit independently. Although initially unsteady, an infant gradually becomes a more controlled sitter. They learn how to get in and out of a sitting position, and develop enough confidence to play with toys while sitting. Once sitting is mastered, crawling, pulling to stand, cruising with support, and independent standing balance emerge quickly. Their first steps typically begin at 12 months; however, starting to walk anywhere from 10-15 months falls within the normal range.

NATURAL DRIVE

Eager to see the world from new perspectives, infants challenge not only their motor development, but also their cognitive development. By using their emerging gross motor skills, an infant can curiously explore and understand a new item, which broadens his/her cognitive development. As they begin to learn about the world around them, their gross motor development explodes. As parents, your role is to advance this pattern of development by supporting this inner drive to interact with their environment. Even if your child plays with an object as ordinary as mom's slipper, help him/her understand the object so that they can learn the characteristics of a slipper, while also advances strength, coordination, balance, and motor planning.

EQUIPMENT FOR GROSS MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Although toy companies strive to create the latest new contraption to provide babies with a competitive edge in development, no single piece of equipment gives an infant better muscle development, sensory development or gross motor progression as being able to explore freely on the floor. Baby walkers, equipment used to allow pre-ambulatory babies to walk, offer many dangers to infants, including falling down stairs, tipping over, bumping against the walker, and handling hazardous items within reach. Despite these risks, many families continue to rely on walkers, hoping they will help their infant walk sooner.

While walkers are being designed with greater safety mechanisms, there is no evidence that these devices have a proven benefit for developing children. Exersaucers support infants in a standing position and allow them to explore their environment upright. While these devices may stimulate your infant, they are similar to walkers in that they do not strengthen leg muscles as preparation for walking. In fact, babies obtain all the leg strengthening they need through the repeated practice of basic developmental milestones, which can be done by your child lying on the floor. The exersaucer is a helpful device to safely contain your child if you need to relax or focus on another task.

SHOE SELECTION

Purchasing walking shoes for your infant is another difficult decision. Many shoe companies argue that the secret to a good shoe for a new walker is arch support and extra wide widths. The truth is, babies develop arches at two years of age and therefore don't need arch support until then, and almost every shoe company has already accounted for wide-shaped baby feet. When shopping for shoes, look for ones with a flexible sole for movement and a flat bottom for balance. It is fine to be economical, as your child will soon grow out of this first pair of shoes. Keep in mind that shoes aren't crucial to successful ambulation, as their main purpose is protection and warmth. Socks, especially ones with grippers, are in fact a better option, because they allow the small feet muscles to develop.