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Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Large Motor Development

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Parents can easily observe the development of large motor skills in their children. The newborn infant who once stayed put is suddenly the toddler always going somewhere. This change is a natural result of your child's large motor development. It's important to understand how each new large motor skill comes about so you can encourage your child's progress.

Development of large motor skills

Children differ in large motor skills development. Development occurs in stages with each building on the previous ones. The fact that children progress through the stages in sequence and continue to progress is what's important, not the timing.

The large motor skills described below are given with the typical age of achievement.

Birth to 12 months

During the first year of life, a baby learns many skills necessary for walking. Anytime from two to four weeks, babies lift their chins when placed on their stomachs. A short time later, at five to six weeks, they're able to lift their chests and at eight weeks control increases so that babies can lift their chests well above the surface.

Gaining control in order to hold the head steady is important. During the third and fourth month, most babies not only hold their heads steady but, when sitting on someone's lap with their lower ribs supported, have complete head control. About this time babies hold their heads erect when being carried.

At about 4 months, babies can roll from side to back or back to side and at approximately 6 months can turn completely over when laid on their backs or stomachs.

Six-month-old babies can sit alone momentarily but prefer to sit up with support.

At 7 months babies can pull themselves up in their playpens, and they begin crawling using their arms to drag themselves along the floor. Seven- or eight-month-olds sit up steadily.

At 8 to 10 months, babies begin creeping on their hands and knees and this allows them great freedom of movement. Somewhere around 9 to 11 months, babies walk when led.

During this same time, they'll move from standing to walking while holding on to furniture or other support. Some babies stand alone and even walk at twelve months. For other babies, neither of these skills is accomplished until 15 months. Walking either as early as 12 months or as late as 15 months is normal.

One to 3 years old

Children at 18 months of age can usually walk well; most even walk backwards. They can creep down stairs and seat themselves in child-size furniture.

Two-year-olds are able to run. They require close supervision because they can usually open and close doors and can push a chair in position to obtain out-of-reach objects.

Three-year-olds accomplish more large motor skills. They are generally more sure and nimble on their feet than before. They alternate feet while climbing stairs, can ride a tricycle, jump and balance on one foot. They can throw objects overhand with total body effort.

Four to 6 years old

Four-year-olds can skip simply, leading with one foot. With a running start, children can now jump over things (broad jump) in addition to jumping up and down. Children throw objects overhand with less total body effort than when they were younger.

Five-year-olds sometimes skip or gallop and they can stand and balance on tiptoe for short periods. Since they are generally more agile than when they were younger, all large motor activities show improvement. At 6 years, children show more skill in large motor activities. They now throw and catch a ball as well as climb and swing with ease.

Some ways to encourage large motor development

The suggestions below are arranged in age groups. Depending on individual abilities, activities listed for a younger or older age group may be enjoyed.

Birth to 12 months

- Make sure your baby's clothing and bedding are loose enough so arms and legs can move freely.
- Play gentle exercise games. Your baby will enjoy gentle arm and leg movement.
- When your baby lies on its back, grasp the hands and pull gently to a sitting position.
- To encourage your baby to crawl, place a favorite toy just out of reach.
- Provide firm, stable objects on which your baby can pull up to a standing position.

One- to 3-year-olds

- Provide pull toys that make noise. Encourage your child to walk forward and backward while pulling the toy.
- Help your child walk up and down stairs.
- Help your child jump off the first or second step.
- Help your child jump over a small object such as a book.
- Provide opportunity for your child to climb up and through things. If there is a playground with appropriate equipment nearby, it would be the perfect place.
- Make a sandbox (an old tire will do). Simple tools like a stick or old spoon for digging and assorted containers for pouring or packing sand give hours of enjoyment.
- Provide both large and small balls for throwing and kicking.
- Provide a wagon for pulling and carrying objects from place to place.

Four- to 6-year-olds

- Have your child walk along a line drawn on the floor — a good way to learn balance.
- Provide a mat for tumbling play such as rolls and somersaults.
- Play catch with your child — this provides throwing and running practice. Start by using a large ball. Once your child can throw and catch it, try it with a smaller ball then another ball a size smaller and so on.

Tossing balls or bean bags into a container will develop your child's aim. As skill improves, use a smaller container or increase the distance to it.

- Provide dress-up clothes and other props so your child can pretend. Lots of large motor exercise occurs in games such as bus driver, fire fighter or astronaut

When to be concerned

To a great extent, achievement of large motor skills depends on children having the opportunity to try and practice the skills. Children who have never had a tricycle cannot be expected to be able to ride one. If your child has had the opportunity to try and practice the above motor skills and still shows the following conditions, seek professional advice from your doctor.

- Babies or children are extremely awkward and clumsy.
- Babies have no head control at 7 months.
- Babies show little or no large motor movement.
- Babies cannot sit alone at 12 months.
- Babies cannot stand alone at 15 months.
- Babies cannot walk at 18 months.
- Children cannot jump up or down or across a small object at 4 years.
- Children cannot hop on one foot at 6 years.
- Children cannot balance on one foot for five seconds at 6 years.

These are reasons for concern and indicate a need for professional attention. Closely observing your child's achievement allows you to judge whether or not healthy large motor development is occurring. However, since it's difficult to be objective about your child's large motor performance, it helps to understand what is typical of children in a certain age range. In addition to understanding, parental interest and involvement are the keys to promoting healthy large motor development in young children.

References

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- Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education — Early Childhood Education Section. *How Does Your Child Grow and Learn? A Guide for Parents of Young Children*. Jefferson City, Mo. 1977.
- U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. *Serving Infants*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Catalog number (OCD) 73-14, 1971.

Related MU Extension publications

- GH6121, Infant and Toddler Basics: Development During the First Three Years
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