

The Wellness Family

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Baby Walkers and the Aware Parent

All you have to do is walk into a baby store or attend a shower and one item is sure to be found: the baby walker. Approximately 50% of infants use these man-made upright vehicles; and young parents consider them a Godsend. Parents see their happy upright infant capable of travel and staying entertained for hours a week in their environment. What could be better?

Developmental Concerns

An article published in the Journal of Developmental Behavior tells of a study of 109 infants between the ages of six to fifteen months that compared users verses non-users and analyzed their rate of development. The results showed that the infants who used walkers, sat, crawled and walked later than non-users; as well as scored lower on developmental evaluation tests than those who didn't use the walker.

Another study was done of 66 infants divided into three groups according to the length of time spent using the walker. Apparently there was no difference with the onset of sitting or walking in the three groups; but the infants from the group who used a walker the most showed a significant delay in the onset of prone locomotion (creeping or crawling) compared to the other two groups. This study suggests that excessive exposure to the walker can affect the development of normal locomotive skills.

On the other hand, not all studies suggest that a developmental delay will occur with routine use of baby walkers. One study that analyzed 15 pairs of twins suggested that baby walkers didn't influence the onset of independent walking. However, when considering all studies performed, there appears to be more evidence to suggest that baby walkers interfere with the natural process of development than not.

Regardless of the studies, one fact still remains: baby walkers eliminate "floor play", which is an important part of a child's development that includes many benefits:

- Babies learn to roll and crawl
- Babies learn to sit and move from sitting to crawling
- Babies explore their environment at a safe level
- Babies learn to move from sitting to kneeling
- From kneeling, babies learn to pull themselves up to a standing position

Standing at this age begins to develop a baby's leg muscles for walking and the natural next step is holding onto and navigating around furniture. These natural milestones can be significantly stunted or interrupted by the use of baby walkers and stationary activity centers.

Minor and Major Injuries

Invented over 250 years ago, baby walkers were considered the answer to a parent's prayer. Allowing time for babies to entertain themselves, parents could take care of a few important tasks or have a moment to rest and rejuvenate.



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According to pediatricians the problem with baby walkers is that they make a child too mobile. From 1990 to 2001, baby walker injuries sent nearly 200,000 U.S. babies to emergency rooms. Three out of four of these babies fell down stairs; most of them suffering head wounds and some died.

The babies who didn't fall down stairs managed to hurt themselves with items that weren't a concern before because they were "out of the babies reach". The baby walker makes a baby taller, which enables them to reach higher; and makes them more mobile, which means they can be across the room in seconds. This means that, in addition to the risks of falling down stairs, baby walkers can lead to the following serious injuries:

- Skull fracture
- Concussion
- Intra-cranial hemorrhage
- Full-thickness burns or scalds
- Cervical spine fracture

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With these facts in hand the American Academy of Pediatrics and other similar organizations began calling for a ban on baby walkers in 1993. When brought before the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission this request was denied in a vote of 3-0; however, in response to growing concerns parents were given two new alternatives.

In 1994, parents were given the option of the stationary activity center that allows kids to bounce, swivel and tip while not going anywhere. Then, in 1997, new safety design standards were put in place for baby walkers: either having a base too wide to fit through a standard doorway or having an installed braking feature that would stop the walker at the edge of a step before tipping.

According to Brenda Shields and Gary Smith, DrPH, of the Center for Injury Research at Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, both design requirements were a resounding success: "There was a 76% decrease in the number of infant-walker-related injuries treated in U.S. emergency departments from 1990 through 2001, with a marked decrease occurring between 1994 and 2001."

How can this be a success unless that decrease is 100%? In the U.S., 8,800 children visited their local emergency rooms in 1999 because of baby walker injuries. Shields and Smith consider this a success because, until then, there had been an average of 23,000 baby-walker-related injuries each year.

Why Take the Risk?

According to the Canadian Hospital Injury Reporting and Prevention Program, 1,935 baby walker injuries were reported between April 1990 and April 2002. With this number substantially lower than the numbers from the U.S. the CHIRPP was able to affect a ban on baby

walkers in April 2004; a ban that is currently being sought in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, so far unsuccessfully.

A parent aware of the risk to their child would logically choose not to subject them to that risk; however, Canadian consumers face fines of up to \$100,000 or six months in jail if found in possession of any type of baby walker.

The American Academy of Pediatrics states that the evidence of major and minor injury and death from baby walkers warrants a recommended ban on the manufacture and sale of the product altogether. However, if a parent should still elect to use one, parents must choose one that meets the American Society for Testing and Materials performance standards: ASTM F977-96.

The Chiropractic Factor

As for the Chiropractic point of view, your Family Wellness Chiropractor has taken a strong stand against the use of baby walkers and stationary activity centers. Your child's developing spine needs to be allowed to develop properly. This means he or she needs to spend time on the floor on their tummy, they need to be allowed to progress from tummy to knees to feet in a normal progression and timeline. It's not just a matter of safety, it's a matter of allowing your child to develop as nature intended.

Resources:

Smith GA, Bowman MJ, et al. Baby Walker-related injuries continue despite warning labels and public education. *Pediatrics* 1997; 100:e1
Siegel AC, Burton RV. Effects of baby walkers on motor and mental ... *Journal of Developmental Behavior* 1999 Oct; 20(5):355-61
Shields, BJ, Smith GA *Pediatrics* March 2006; vol 117; pp e452-e459
Health Canada Website of Science and Research – www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Dear Parent,

Dr. Glassman is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. Take a moment today to ask your Family Wellness Chiropractor any questions you may have regarding you or your family's overall health and wellness.

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