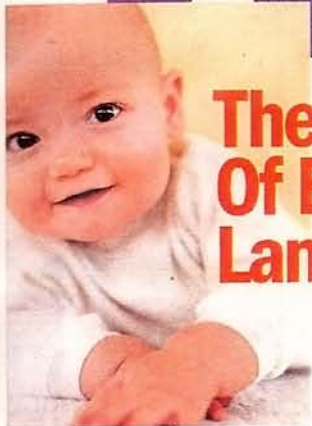


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1 year

look who's (not) walking

When it comes to walking, every 1-year-old sets his own pace.



At some point around my son's first birthday, I stopped taking him to Gymboree classes. Surrounded by mobile 1-year-olds who were cruising, crawling, and toddling in all directions, Liam—who hadn't even started crawling yet—just sat Buddha-like wherever I put him. He enjoyed our outings, but the comparisons unnerved me.

When it comes to milestones, walking is a showstopper, and parents eagerly await those first steps. But for every 1-year-old who's dashing away from Daddy, there's another who seems to be biding her time. Learning about the mechanics of walking and how to distinguish normal motor development from genuine signs of delay will help parents make the judgment call about whether their child needs to be professionally evaluated.

Kids start walking between 10 and 17 months, with first steps taken, on average, between 12 and 15 months. Learning to walk is a complex process that requires appropriate strength and the ability to control different muscle groups, balance, and posture while in motion. For a 1-year-old, the simple act of balancing on two wobbly little feet while supporting a considerably larger body is a feat to cheer.

The process begins earlier than many parents imagine. Babies lay the groundwork by combining two movements: the shifting of weight to roll over and the trunk rotation mastered by most babies when they learn to sit up.

BY CONSTANCE SOMMER

Everything from a child's weight to his personality to his genetic makeup influences the age at which he'll first walk. That's why Andrew Adesman, M.D., chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at Schneider Children's Hospital, in New Hyde Park, New York, cautions parents to avoid making comparisons. "Children walk at their own pace," he says. "Many kids do not take their first independent steps until they are 16 or 17 months."

One way to gauge when your child might start walking is to look at when he met previous milestones. Adam Weingarden, of Farmington Hills, Michigan, worried because his son, Noah, wasn't walking as early as many of his peers. "Yet when I realized that he hadn't rolled over until 7 months and hadn't crawled regularly until 10 months, it made perfect sense," Weingarden says, adding that Noah soon caught up.

Ready, Set, Walk

Signs of a child's walking readiness include his pulling himself up to a standing position and cruising by holding on to furniture. But even the absence of such signs doesn't necessarily suggest a problem. In a British study of more than 400 children, 1-year-olds who hadn't walked at least six steps by 18 months had problems in only one third of the cases.

Other signs, however, could indicate a developmental issue. Pathways Awareness Foundation, a Chicago nonprofit that focuses on movement delays, outlines these signs on its Website (www.pathwaysawareness.org). For a 12-month-old, the red flags include difficulty crawling, toes that stay in a pointed position, and favoring one side of the body. For a 15-month-old, they include difficulty standing, stiff limbs, and sitting with weight shifted to one side. When Liam crawled at 13½ months, for instance, he clearly favored his right side and used a crablike crawl.

"Bring up warning signs with your child's pediatrician," says Kelli Moore, executive director of Pathways Aware-

ness. Ask for a developmental-assessment test or a referral to a pediatric neurologist or a developmental pediatrician, who may check your child's joint flexibility, range of motion, muscle strength, and (possibly) neurological development. "You may find out there isn't an issue and gain peace of mind," Moore says. "But if your child has a problem, she can be referred for help at the earliest possibility."

The causes of delayed walking are numerous and range from hypotonia (poor muscle tone) to mild or more severe forms of cerebral palsy. Some

first steps at 16½ months, and his mobility continues to improve, much to our delight—and relief.

If your child seems to have no developmental problems and you're eagerly awaiting those steps, you can assist his efforts. "Make sure he has plenty of floor time to build up his arm, leg, and trunk muscles," suggests Margie Mizera, a physical therapist in Crestwood, Illinois. Provide a safe area for cruising. And avoid letting your child spend too much time in a walker, which would allow him to stand before he's ready or to walk on his toes

how to choose baby shoes

Whether your 1-year-old is a late walker or an early trotter, she needs a shoe that fits properly—especially because her feet may grow a half size every three months. And she won't be able to tell you if her shoes are too tight. Here's what to look for, says Pamela Colman, D.P.M., the director of health affairs at the American Podiatric Medical Association, in Bethesda, Maryland:

■ BACK

The heel should be snug but not too tight. A proper fit means no sliding up and down as she walks.

■ FRONT OF SHOE

The tip of her longest toe should be one thumbnail to the edge of the shoe.

■ **INSOLE** Arch support is not necessary; children don't develop arches until they're about 6 to 8 years old.

■ **OUTER SOLE** Shoes with flexible, flat bottoms are your safest bet. A too-thick sole may cause your child to resist walking for fear of tripping.

■ **SHOE MATERIAL** If it's breathable, it works. Leather, canvas, and mesh are good options; stiff materials such as plastic are not. Your child's foot should be able to move with the shoe.

—Robin Immerman

conditions, like hip dysplasia, can be corrected with special harnesses or surgery; others can be helped through physical therapy, often available through state-run early-intervention programs. Whatever the cause, Moore says, "a wait-and-see attitude is almost never appropriate."

Checking a Delay

In our case, Liam's assessment suggested that he did have a delay, so our pediatrician recommended physical therapy. Though we initially made the mistake of choosing a therapy practice for adults, we soon found one that specializes in pediatrics. Liam took his

and could, Mizera says, "prevent the muscles from developing properly."

Remember, plateaus and spurts are common. "A child may neglect walking while he concentrates on learning new words," says Katherine Mathews, M.D., an associate professor of pediatrics and neurology at the University of Iowa, in Iowa City. Or, she adds, a toddler may briefly revert to crawling.

Walking, as I've learned, is highly individualistic. Some children take a little longer than we expect but learn on their own. Still others need assistance. Being alert to your child's particular patterns allows you to help her put her best foot forward. □