

Few parents seek help if baby is behind

Study finds most slow to tell doctor if child shows physical delays

BY JIM RITTER
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Fewer than one in five parents would seek immediate help if their infants were showing physical delays, a Children's Memorial Hospital survey has found.

Researchers surveyed 544 parents of babies and toddlers at eight pediatricians' offices in Chicago and Oak Park. Parents were asked about physical milestones children typically achieve by 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15 months. By 3 months, for example, babies typically can push up on their arms and hold their head up while on their tummies. But fewer than 17 percent of parents said they would seek help if their child failed to achieve this milestone.

Parents were better informed about milestones for older babies. For example, more than 93 percent knew that a child should be able to walk by 15 months. But fewer than 72 percent said they would seek help if their child couldn't.

The study concluded that parents in general would be too slow to get help — and for skills in early infancy, they would seek assistance "far later than what is optimal." The study was funded by Chicago-based Pathways Awareness Foundation, a nonprofit group promoting early detection and therapy for children with movement problems.

Early intervention better

Ideally, babies with delayed development should begin therapy between 3 and 6 months. But many babies don't get help until they are between 9 and 15 months, said Dr. John Sarwark, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon at Children's Memorial.

"We continue to see kids who are arriving late for their first intervention," Sarwark said.

The earlier the intervention, the better. For example, some babies with cerebral palsy develop abnormal movement patterns that become fixed. However, with early therapy, such movements can be minimized.

Little Ava Placio of Glenview is lucky her parents didn't wait to get

TYPICAL PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT IN BABIES*

By 3 months: While lying on tummy, pushes up on arms and lifts and holds head up.

By 6 months: Uses hands to support self in sitting. Rolls from back to tummy. While standing with support, accepts entire weight with legs.

By 9 months: Sits and reaches for toys without falling. Moves from tummy or back into sitting. Creeps on hands and knees with alternate arm and leg movement.

By 12 months: Pulls to stand and cruises along furniture. Stands alone and takes several independent steps.

By 15 months: Walks independently and seldom falls. Squats to pick up toy.

*Adjust child's age for prematurity

SOURCE: PATHWAYS AWARENESS FOUNDATION

help. Ava weighed only 1 pound, 13 ounces when she was born in the 26th week of pregnancy, and spent 2½ months in the hospital.

At about 6 months, Donna Placio suspected her daughter's development was delayed when Ava would get excited and kick with only one leg. Ava also was unable to roll over by herself or push up on her arms. Even after adjusting Ava's age for her prematurity, Donna suspected something was wrong.

Ava is getting physical therapy at the Pathways Center in Glenview, and it has made a "major difference," Donna Placio said. Ava, who turns 1 on Saturday, now can sit unsupported, is beginning to crawl and can push up on her tummy. Her mom hopes Ava eventually will catch up completely.

Others slip through cracks

But many parents are reluctant to ask doctors about their concerns, especially if delays appear to be minor, Sarwark said.

The survey found that among those who said they had expressed concerns to their doctors, 57 percent were advised to see a specialist right away. But 43 percent were told not to worry or to wait a few months to see if the problem persisted.

Doctors generally keep a closer eye on high-risk children, including premies, twins and triplets. But other children "are slipping through the cracks," Sarwark said.



Therapist Gay Girolami works with Ava Placio

at the Pathways Center in Glenview. —JEAN LACHAT/SUN-TIMES