

**BABY MILESTONES**

## Raise your pretty head, little one

For 3-month-old infants, head control is essential

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**A** baby's newfound control of his head isn't the most thrilling infant milestone for new parents, who instead fixate on the moment their tiny blob sits, crawls or walks. But an infant who hasn't raised its noodle or pushed up on its forearms by the end of three months could be at risk for an early motor delay, something more than two-thirds of parents don't realize, according to a recent survey by the **Pathways Awareness Foundation**. Even more concerning to some healthcare professionals is that only 5 percent of parents would seek help if their floppy-headed infant missed its deadline, mostly because they didn't know what to look for.

**Don't procrastinate**

"The tendency is to sit and wait and to give the baby the opportunity to demonstrate months later that they can organize themselves," said physical therapist Gay Girolami, executive director at the Pathways Center in Glenview, which provides early intervention for developmental delays. "But we want parents to know what should be a red flag."

Milestones usually fall into three categories: motor development, language development, and social and emotional development. Though babies tend to follow the same progression through the stages, they do it at their own pace and spend different amounts of time at each stage before moving on to the next.

Head control, which generally is the first milestone a baby reaches, is critical because it greatly influences further development, including sitting, crawling, standing or walking.

Delays can be caused by anything from premature birth and substance abuse by the mother to cerebral palsy. But Girolami and other physical therapists suspect they are seeing more cases as a result of the "Back to Sleep" initiative. Launched more than a decade ago, the campaign worked to encourage parents to place sleeping babies on their backs rather than their stomachs to reduce the risk



Physical Therapist, Kerl Gilmore (from left), works with 5-month-old Jonathan Bundy while his mother, Diane Simpson-Bundy, sister Alexis, 7, and father Hollister look on at the Pathways Center in Glenview.

of sudden infant death syndrome.

Though "Back to Sleep" has reduced crib death, an unintended consequence has been that infants receive less "tummy time," which is needed to stretch and strengthen muscles in the upper back and neck. In addition to creating a new generation of children with misshapen heads, or plagiocephaly, the face-up sleeping technique is suspected of increasing the rate of early motor delays.

More than 400,000 children a year are at risk for early motor delays, and 1 in 40 actually has one, according to Pathways, but the delays are treatable if physical, occupational or speech therapy is started early.

"What we're seeing more frequently are children with low muscle



tone, who have sensory processing motor planning or perceptual issues," Girolami said. "We're also seeing a large number of children with torticollis [a tightening of neck muscles, causing a tilted head], which could be from back sleeping or the infant's position in utero."

**Second opinion timely**

Northfield's Diane Simpson-Bundy started her 5-month-old son Jonathan in physical therapy at just 4 months after she and her husband noticed their second child favored one side and tilted his head to the right. Though the pediatrician said not to worry, and they were initially focused on just keeping him alive — he was born with a rare blood disorder — family members encouraged Simpson-

Bundy to get another opinion.

The second doctor diagnosed torticollis and low muscle tone, and Jonathan now wears a helmet 23 hours a day to restore symmetry to his head. By the time he's a year old, he should be caught up with children his age, said Simpson-Bundy, a former Olympic gymnast who knows something about muscle development.

"There wasn't enough mention of 'tummy time' in coordination with 'Back to Sleep,' and kids aren't getting enough time to develop their muscles," said Simpson-Bundy, who despite inter-

vening early, thinks she could have done it even sooner. "In my son's case, some of his issues were developing in utero, and I think he was bount for some kind of therapy. But I was so busy making sure he'd live that I didn't have a keen eye on muscle development and milestones."

Girolami said that in the grand scheme of things, parents shouldn't obsess over whether their child walks at 12 or 16 months. Babies can naturally be two to three weeks off the "schedule," and if the infant was pre-term it could be as many as 10 weeks. But if parents are not seeing the baby lift its head or shoulders within a couple weeks after the three-month mark, and they've adjusted for premature birth, it's an important topic to bring up.

In Illinois, all new parents receive a birthday card from the governor's office that lists the early warning signs of developmental delays. More information also can be found at [pathwaysawareness.org](http://pathwaysawareness.org).