

babytalk

A baby wearing a large, wide-brimmed straw hat is sitting in a grassy field. The baby is shirtless and wearing blue denim pants. The background is a soft-focus green landscape.

STRAIGHT TALK FOR NEW MOMS

ferberize yourself!

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made easy**

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finger foods**

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challenges—solved!**

special report

**do babies
need to crawl?**

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harm in skipping the crawling stage, a growing number of experts—particularly pediatric occupational therapists—say that crawling is actually a critical developmental milestone whose long-term benefits we're only now beginning to recognize. We spoke to nearly 20 authorities on both sides of the issue to get the scoop on this heated debate.

a significant achievement

In 1994, several national health organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, started encouraging parents to put babies to sleep on their backs to help prevent sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). The lifesaving outcome: The incidence of SIDS has decreased more than 50 percent. But according to several studies, an inadvertent result of the campaign is that more kids are achieving motor milestones later, or bypassing them altogether, because their upper bodies aren't as strong due to lack of time spent on their stomachs. When babies skip crawling—and by this we mean the classic hands-and-knees crawl—then they miss out on more opportunities to develop that strength and wind up with weaker upper body muscles.

"Crawling helps strengthen the hands, wrists, elbows, and shoulders because babies have to constantly activate them to support their body weight," says Felice Sklamberg, a pediatric occupational therapist at New York University's School of Medicine. "We're seeing that because non-crawlers aren't as strong, they have a harder time as older children pulling themselves out of a pool, climbing a jungle gym, or even picking themselves up from the floor."

Skipping this milestone can also affect a child's ability to hold silverware or a pencil down the road, since the weight-bearing experience of crawling helps develop arches and stretch out ligaments in the wrist and hand that are needed for fine motor skills. "During the crawling period, the large joint at the base of the thumb is expanded into its full range of motion, so noncrawlers may have messier handwriting, for example," explains Mary Benbow, an occupational therapist and a leading expert on pediatric hand development.

Crawling is a unique experience in other ways as well. "It's a real step up for coordination because it's the first opportunity to practice bilateral coordination—using the arms and legs in reciprocal movements," says Jane Case-Smith, director of the division of occupational therapy at Ohio State University's School of Allied Medical Professions in Columbus and an early-intervention specialist. "This skill is used in activities like getting dressed, self-feeding,

tummy time tips

Tummy time doesn't have to be a battle. Here's how to make it fun for both of you.

(Be sure to watch your baby when he's on his stomach: Falling asleep in this position increases the risk of SIDS.)

start early Put your baby on his stomach for a few minutes at a time, several times a day, in the early weeks. That's one of the tummy time guidelines recently set by the Pathways Awareness Foundation, which advocates for early detection of motor delays. Lie down on a couch with your baby on your chest, lay him across your lap, or put him on his stomach on the changing table before diapering him.

break it up Tummy time doesn't mean plopping your baby on the floor for an hour. Start small, and then gradually increase the time increments—try not to rush to him the second he cries. Pathways recommends several sessions that total about an hour of tummy time per day by 3 months of age.

get involved Get down to your child's eye-level and entertain him with silly faces, smiles, or noises. "Your child will want to stay in that position because he has your full attention," says Pamela High, M.D., director of developmental-behavioral pediatrics at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. "If it's fun for you, it'll be fun for the baby."

motivate him Don't rush to hand your baby his toys. Instead, put him on the floor with a plastic mirror, rattle, or stuffed animal that is slightly out of reach, and encourage him to go get it.

offer some support If your child fusses, try letting him lie on your chest so he can see more easily without having to struggle as much to lift his head. Other options: Put a rolled-up towel under his chest and arms, or play "airplane," holding your baby tummy down and carrying him around the room.

stick with it Even walking babies continue to enjoy activities such as a game of chase on their hands and knees.

and sports. A child who sidesteps

crawling may have more of a struggle catching up."

Babies who skip any kind of scooting or dragging miss out on the benefits of being on the floor as well. "Children learn through interaction with their hands. They don't get as much if they go straight to walking, because then they need to use their hands for balance," says Karen Hendricks-Muñoz, M.D., chief of neonatology and associate professor of pediatrics at New York University's School of Medicine. "Navigating on the ground also helps visual spatial skills and depth perception develop more quickly."

lack of proof

Though many experts will attest to the importance of crawling, others adamantly argue that skipping it is no big deal. "It's a prominent misconception that it's important for kids to include crawling in their development," says Pamela High, M.D., director of developmental-behavioral pediatrics at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, and a professor of pediatrics at Brown Medical School. "Before parents freak out because their child doesn't crawl, we need to have data that kids who don't will have any long-term negative developmental consequence, and