

How to support movement in infants and toddlers

The Hungarian paediatrician Emmi Pikler argued that infants and toddlers should be given freedom to move and freedom to develop motor skills in their own time and at their own pace. She argued that infants do not need to be helped to develop physical skills such as sitting, walking and so on. Infants are innately motivated to learn how to move.

When infants learn how to turn on their belly, roll, creep, crawl, sit, stand and walk, they are also learning how to learn. They develop confidence and competence by overcoming difficulties, and achieving a challenge, learning by experimenting, and by trying out movements. They experience the satisfaction and joy of discovering something by themselves, building their self-confidence and exciting them to learn further.

At this age, infants and toddlers are embodied learners who figure things out by placing their body in different places, and by expressing their learning with their bodies. Brain development occurs with moving, so that in making movements the child is developing her body and her brain at the same time. Therefore, infants and toddlers should be given the freedom to explore their urge to move.

Putting infants into a position that they cannot get into themselves, forces infants into using muscles that they haven't developed yet. This can interfere with natural muscle development and can cause a loss of muscle balance which is usually the focus of infants' experimentations with early movements. In time, children that are given freedom to move according to their own innate drive, and without being pushed into developmentally inappropriate postures, develop balanced and agile movements.

Avoid putting infants into any position that they can't get into themselves. For example, **avoid:**

- **tummy-time**
- **putting infants into a sitting position**
- **propping infants with cushions to dress them or feed them**
- **pulling infants into the sitting position with their hands**
- **using highchairs or other restraining seats, jumpers or bouncers**
- **standing infants up**
- **jumping infants on their feet**
- **holding hands to 'walk' infants**

The best position for young infants is on their backs, where they can safely develop balance, agility and posture, by moving their arms, legs and head freely, without pressure or constraint. Infants placed on their backs will explore what they are capable of doing with their bodies – lifting their legs, grabbing their feet, turning their head to the side, stretching and twisting to move towards objects. All of this is great preparation for more advanced postures. Moving from the back to the side to the tummy and returning to their backs provides a strong foundation for crawling, sitting, standing, and walking. In time, they will learn to move from their back to their side, and then onto their tummies. The side position is very valuable for infants in learning skills such as flexibility and balance.

The use of tummy time (placing infants on their tummies to help them develop back and neck strength) is often recommended, yet research shows that infants placed on their backs and allowed the freedom to move independently progressed to the tummy position at a similar age to infants who were placed on their tummies. Neck and shoulder muscles were also found to be strengthened when infants learned to roll onto their tummies by themselves.

Rather than a highchair, hold infants on your lap, leaving it up to the infant or toddler to decide when they are ready to sit on a chair. Being fed while sitting on the lap of a caregiver promotes intimacy, connection and partnership.