

Foundations for Learning Laid in Infancy

by Carol Marusich

There is a wealth of research about the important role free movement plays in early childhood to foster appropriate motor, spatial, visual, behavioral, and cognitive development. With the exception of the occasional news article or television program, we rarely see this information.

What we do see on an almost daily basis in the mass media, however, is the overabundance of advertising for baby equipment. It is appropriate perhaps that this advertising is targeted at parents, for the devices serve the needs of parents more than the needs of developing babies.

They suggest convenience, ease of use, safety, fun, and the promise of improved learning but they rarely help babies master the age-appropriate abilities that are so vital to their development. In contrast to these colorful images, how boring it is to suggest that sometimes the best equipment is a pair of loving arms and a clean blanket on the rug where your babies can freely explore their own body through movement.

Babies have to work hard to move that heavy head but doing so helps them develop strength and motor control. As they become interested in those visual objects who talk so sweetly to them, they turn their head to follow and learn to turn their eyes. If, instead, babies are seated at a comfortable angle in that beautiful all-purpose baby seat with their head propped in place, they miss that opportunity to develop strength and learn control.

When babies have the opportunity to explore their body without restraint, they expand that early head turn to include reaching out for the object at hand and eventually rolling over. If the desired object is not at hand and motor development has progressed appropriately, babies extend their reach by crawling and creeping.

In her book, “Save Your Baby: Throw Out Your Equipment,” Laura Sobell notes, “The excessive use of...modern conveniences such as infant seats, walkers, jumpers, swings, and vertical baby carriers (back and front packs) is believed to delay normal development—not improve it. Teaching young infants to sit up by using pillows or seats can actually interfere with the development of normal rolling and crawling patterns. Walkers do not teach babies to walk, but can cause unnatural walking patterns, as well as inhibit crawling—a very valuable and much needed activity.” The only time restrictive equipment makes sense is when necessary for the child’s safety.

Babies’ first movements are primitive reflexes such as turning their head in response to a touch on the cheek, sucking, thrashing movements when startled, changing arm and leg positions as their heads are turned from side to side and so on. These early movement reflexes start them on the road to discovering how their body moves and feels. They explore movements again and again until the reflex is slowly modified and voluntary movement takes control. It is a step-by-step process where each level of body coordination is based upon what was learned before.

The ability to move freely during this stage provides the opportunity to develop strength and the knowledge and understanding of how the body works. Babies must learn how to move, what part

to move, where to move, why to move, when to move and when not to move. Hands become theirs to watch, grasp and release. Legs and feet become theirs to watch, feel and kick. Even when babies are sleeping, they are practicing movement patterns and building strength. Do babies ever wake up exactly how you left them?

During the first three years, babies learn about their body and their senses in a way that is unique to this phase of development and unmatched during all the rest of their years combined. They learn how to move and control their bodies, and how their bodies relate spatially to the world and objects around them. They explore their senses and learn how these objects feel, look, taste, sound, what they are named and where they are in relation to themselves and each other. They learn to recognize and understand the interrelationships of different sensory experiences and begin to organize their world. In essence, they learn how to learn and lay the foundation from which all other understanding and experience will develop.

Babies who are frequently restrained in braces or casts—or that favorite swing, baby seat or walker—will be unintentionally limited in their opportunity to explore their bodies (head, hands, feet, legs) as well as the reflex motor patterns and general motor movements necessary for good visual-spatial-motor development. As parents and care providers, it is up to us to be sure that our infants have ample opportunity to develop these basic motor abilities. These are the foundation for movement, balance and eventually the control necessary for fine eye and hand manipulation, visualization and cognitive achievement.

Research suggests that how much and how well people learn throughout life is determined largely by the variety of beneficial experiences to which they were exposed in the first years of life. It is up to us to arrange the conditions in which our children can learn.

What can we do to help our babies in their developmental quest? We can advocate for free movement opportunities and encourage developmentally appropriate activities to help our babies gain the most from their early years.

Carol Marusich, O.D., M.S., FCOVD, is an optometrist in private practice since 1981. She is board certified in vision development and therapy with special interest in learning related vision development.

Original publication date: 2/22/99 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon