

The Best Way to Play: Free Play on the Floor

It is beneficial for infants to play on the floor and out of any sitters, jumpers, walkers or swings. When they engage in free, natural play, infants get to feel their own bodies, the surfaces around them and gravity. When their eyes focus on a toy or object of interest, their body follows and the process of moving begins! They will begin to try to shift their weight and move their own body, as well as learn to understand their capabilities and what they need to do to move on their own.



WHY THE FLOOR, AND NOT THE BED?

Playing on the couch or bed is not as beneficial as the floor. Because those surfaces are soft, they don't provide infants with the same body and spatial information as hard surfaces. The floor also provides an open space, which allows infants to reach for toys and encourages movement. The floor is also where all of us eventually move around and go about our daily lives. As babies learn to roll, crawl and pull to stand on the floor, they also practice all the skills needed for walking. It is not safe or practical to do this on a bed or a couch.

THE DRAWBACKS OF "CUTE" BABY EQUIPMENT

Unfortunately, all of the baby walkers, jumpers, standing activity centers, etc. that are fun, very colorful and well-advertised are not good for your child's development. This is extremely confusing since they are sold everywhere and marketed as being helpful for your child.

Here's why: If a child is placed in a jumper or walker when their body is not ready for it or they are given too much support, they do not learn how to use their muscles or balance their body. They cannot learn proper positions or mechanics for independent movement. These devices encourage unnatural muscle use in a way they would never learn otherwise. Walkers and jumpers can actually delay standing and walking, or play a role in the child learning to toe walk, which is an extremely difficult habit to change. Would we ever expect a six-month-old to be standing, walking or jumping? Definitely not! **Instead of spending money on jumpers and walkers, the best thing you can do for your child's development is create a safe, enclosed space on the floor for a large play mat.**

IF YOUR CHILD DOESN'T LIKE TUMMY TIME OR FLOOR TIME

- **Try new things to stimulate your child's brain**
 - Try to do floor time or tummy time in new places in the house; have new toys or interesting items out; place them in front of a mirror; or play outside on a blanket at the park, beach, in a yard or on the patio
- **Make it fun and silly**
 - Get on the floor with them, talk to them, sing, play peek-a-boo with a blanket or wash cloth, engage them with toys, read a book or look at the pictures, put a toy on your head and be silly. Observe what interests your child and follow their lead.

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- **Talk to your child**
 - Respond to any frustration with, "I see you're frustrated. This is hard work. Mom/dad/grandparent is right here with you."
 - Try not to immediately pick them up unless they are truly distressed; crying; or you know they are hungry, tired, need a break, a diaper change or a hug.
- **Notice and be aware of your own feelings that come up when your child is crying or frustrated**
 - Keep in mind that our own feelings can really affect the way we interact with our children. Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings when you see your child challenged, frustrated or crying.
 - Remember that crying is communication. It is a way to express something since infants and toddlers cannot speak. It does not always mean the child is in pain, miserable or needs to be immediately picked up.
- **Trust your child's own development and accept their personality**
 - Recognize that development is different for every child. Your child's personality, temperament and how you interact with them will affect how they respond to frustration.

HOW YOU TREAT YOUR CHILDREN IS WHAT THEY COME TO EXPECT

As a parent, you want the best for our children, and want them to be happy, capable, independent, regulated people. Beginning in infancy, how you interact with them, talk to them and respond to them plays a huge role in this. If you move them, support them or pick them up constantly when they face any challenge or uncomfortable feeling, they learn to avoid these things altogether. Frustration is a big part of life and, opposite of what we might think, the more we allow and support all types of feelings, the more adaptable and happier our children are.

MAKE TIME FOR ALL KINDS OF MOVEMENT

Sitting is a hallmark six-month milestone; however, proceed with caution when placing your child in a seated position for long amounts of time. It is beneficial and important that your child can roll, play on their sides and bellies, spin on their bellies, and crawl before sitting and standing.

If you did not help a child sit, they would actually most likely crawl before they sat because they would have no way to get to a seated position on their own. Pause before introducing sitting, especially if they don't like tummy time.

However, there are times when children do need extra support and guidance to help them meet their milestones. Please bring up any concerns about your child's development to their pediatrician or primary medical doctor.

Fun fact: A child rolling to their sides, spinning on their belly and crawling are all just as important as major skills such as sitting, standing and walking

