

In Praise of Crawling

by Susan Weber

There are so many magical moments that greet us as we watch our babies grow and develop! At birth, greeting one another with our eyes is a profound moment. Some weeks later, our child's first smile brings us great joy and reinvigorates us to continue the long sleepless nights.

Day by day, week-by-week, new capacities unfold and we are continually awe-struck at the miracles of our children's development. Our babies discover their hands, they wiggle their legs, they roll from back to front and front to back. Why, then, choose crawling as such a moment for celebration? Watch babies crawl! They are so joyful, up on all fours, free from the gravity of the earth just a bit more, traveling to new corners. Crawling is a very special capacity, brilliantly designed by its creator to strengthen our babies in many important ways, and laying a firm foundation for the developmental stages that follow.

What skills does a baby need before she can crawl? She must have strong muscles all along her back, sides, and tummy, so that she can lift her trunk off the ground. For example, it takes several months before the baby, while lying on her back, has enough strength, coordination and body awareness to lift her bottom off the floor and put her foot into her mouth. If we remember back to those earlier days, not so long ago, when we carefully supported the baby's head whenever we picked her up, we realize how far she has come, and how much effort it has taken to build up those now-strong muscles! And then, balance...Raising her head as she lies on her tummy, lying on her side, rolling from side to side – all are small but mighty steps in learning to balance herself, and they all build the skills for crawling.

We know from the scientific research of the last decade that the baby's brain grows greatly in the first two years. So we know at the same time that much must be happening in these precious 24 months. And it is true. Each different movement – rolling, balancing on the side, pulling themselves along with their arms, lifting their heads – each movement and all its variations creates new and more complex roadways in the baby's brain. And as anyone knows who has needed to negotiate city traffic, the more different roadways we know, the more success we will have in reaching our destination, especially if traffic is heavy. The brain is no different and it, too, greatly appreciates the diversity of its roadways.

For the baby, each new movement is an adventure in brain creation, in building an increasingly complex repertoire of life strategies that will later be used for academic learning, social problem solving, and creativity.

To praise crawling is to recognize that this complex skill has given the baby a new freedom. She is learning how to learn, and this carries her through her entire life. Try, fail, try again, persist, try again, make a tiny, almost unnoticed bit of progress, and finally integrating so many little elements we cannot imagine, to succeed!

Not only the joyfulness of crawling is a gift. There is much within the activity of crawling that is important for later learning. Crawling is very important for eye focusing and tracking (following an object with your eyes). It lays one of the foundation stones for reading and also for working with our hands, guided by what our eyes see. Crawling helps to integrate the upper and lower body, the right and left sides of the body, and exercises the trunk in increasingly more sophisticated ways. And the transitional movements from crawling to sitting further develop balance!

The baby's hand, at birth just a curled fist like a spring fiddlehead fern, has a long journey to take to be able to hold a pencil and crayon, to tie a shoe, to butter toast, to use a saw or screwdriver. How does the hand learn to do all these wonderful things? Interestingly, crawling is very important in the development of the hand. The weight that passes through the hand as we are up on all fours serves to "wake up" the muscles of

the hand, to stretch out the tendons of the wrist and fingers, and to develop the arches of the hand. (Did you know that we have arches not only in our feet but also in our hands?) Crawling also helps to integrate primitive movement patterns so that the hand can move on to more sophisticated, coordinated, and complex movements.

And if your baby hasn't crawled, but has scooted past this wonderful and important stage of development? Actually, this is an increasingly common occurrence. In fact, today kindergarten and nursery school teachers commonly encourage crawling in a variety of ways in their classrooms in order to help children who have skipped or spent limited time crawling. As parents, we can get down on the floor and play crawling games with our children – for example, playing “London Bridge” by having children crawl through an arch instead of walk through.

We can encourage activities like drawing with chalk on the driveway or driving little cars and trucks on roadways on the floor, where children will be on their hands and knees and will crawl as part of the activity. We can also create spaces that children will naturally want to crawl through; for example, tunnels with sofa cushions and blankets or crawling spaces through the forsythia bushes or in the snow banks. When the child is still an infant, we can provide an inviting, clean and safe area on the floor, and we can allow the child to spend sufficient time in this environment so that crawling has the possibility to unfold.

Crawling is an important part of the infant's development in the first year of life. It is a rich activity and provides the infant with many foundation stones for later life; this movement in particular has tremendous 'bang for the buck'! It is important to note, however, that there are children who develop perfectly well who skip crawling, as there are other avenues that can provide the child with the same important capacities that crawling does. For example, crosscountry skiing and climbing up trees and on playground equipment provide some of the same components that crawling does. However, crawling is a wonderful, natural movement activity for the baby. No other activity is so all encompassing in providing all of the aspects mentioned above.

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