

Baby Walkers and Jolly Jumpers by Dr. Neil Davies

Tummy time in the first 6 months of life and crawling in the second 6 months of life prior to a baby developing the ability to stand up and then walk are critical phases of development. The use of devices such as baby walkers and Jolly Jumpers, apart from their potential to place a child at risk of traumatic injury, deny them these essential developmental functions.

A baby walker is a device that allows a baby who has yet to develop the ability to walk unaided to be held in the upright position while bearing some weight through the legs. The child is then able to “walk” around in the device. Some basic neurodevelopmental physiology should be considered here. Probably the most important thing to consider is the effect on motor development by placing a child in the walking posture when their neurodevelopment is at the crawling stage. While there may be some convenience benefits for parents and caregivers, the baby’s gross motor development is far better served by being placed face down (prone) and allowed to roll and crawl around the floor. The relationship between the prone position and subsequent neurodevelopment has long been well understood and now that prone sleeping has been causally linked to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, placing baby in the prone position during waking hours has become far more critical.

Aside from their negative effect on neurodevelopment there is the important issue of potential injury, particularly from falling down stairs. The American Academy of Pediatrics has estimated that during 1999 there were 8800 children under 15 months of age treated in emergency departments across the US for baby walker related injuries. In an attempt to assuage the rate of such injuries, manufacturers have developed a braking mechanism, designed to stop the walker if one or more wheels drop off the riding surface. These braking systems, however, have been demonstrated to be ineffective and may offer parents a false sense of security.

The American Academy of Pediatrics policy position on baby walkers is clear cut in that they recommend that baby walkers be banned from sale. Along with the paediatrician and family general practitioner, the chiropractor is in a powerful position to influence parents to avoid purchasing baby walkers, and should take every opportunity to do so both during consultations and in a broader sense by providing information to the wider public about the dangers of walkers and advising the use of stationary activity centres instead. However, despite the best advice, there will be parents who are insistent upon buying a baby walker and in this event they should be advised to make certain the one they buy meets the revised voluntary performance standards.

A Jolly Jumper is a sling-like seat that supports a baby who is not yet able to walk in a semi-standing position. The seat is supported by straps attaching to a doorframe or situated within a tripod stand. The baby’s feet just touch the floor allowing them to

push themselves up and down. There have been instances where the strap attachments to both the seat and the frame have broken and the baby has fallen onto the floor and sustained injury. In other instances, older children brushing past in doorways have pushed babies into walls and caused injury. The Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney recommends that parents do not use Jolly Jumpers and the professional staff at Kiro Kids agree wholeheartedly.

In conclusion, allow your baby to crawl as long as possible and they will stand up and walk when they are ready developmentally to bear weight vertically through their spine and legs.