

Learning To Walk

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Jerome was 10 months old when he grabbed the arm of the sofa, pulled himself up and took his first step. This surprised and thrilled his parents. Their son was walking much sooner than they had expected.

The following day, they tried to coax Jerome into walking for his grandparents. But he just sat there. He wouldn't even pull himself to a standing position, something he had been doing with regularity for several weeks.

Jerome's reluctance to try walking again is not unusual.

Children learn to walk in stages. Some skip a stage. Others don't. Some, like Jerome, seem to progress rapidly, then stop or regress for a few days. All seem to learn at their own pace.

Most babies first get around by creeping – pulling themselves forward with their arms while letting their stomach and legs drag on the floor. Crawling on all fours is often the next stage. Then, when babies are strong enough, they often start pulling themselves up to a standing position. It is one way they practice their balance. Most babies also pass through a cruising stage, taking a few steps by holding onto the edge of a table or chair.

Children usually take their first steps between 12 and 15 months. But some walk a little earlier, others later. For most children, the age does not forecast later athletic, mental, or social skills.

Also, parents should not try to hurry a child to walk. Children do best when allowed to set their own pace. But you can do a few things to encourage your child.

For example, you can provide opportunities to practice. When your child can only walk a few steps, try arranging the furniture so those steps will take him or her across the room by going from chair to chair. Just make sure you child-proof the house to prevent serious falls and injuries.

When your baby falls – and he or she will, a lot – smile and encourage another try. If you wince, make a face, and get concerned, so will your baby.

Show your enthusiasm and excitement when your child takes, at first one step, then two, then more. Appreciate each accomplishment and ignore setbacks or regressions. Be your child's first and foremost cheerleader. Have fun.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.