Is a walking ring a no-no?

Dr Melodie de Jager

Babies are born inquisitive. They want to touch and explore and as their eyesight expands to see further afield, so does their need to touch and explore what they see increase. But they first need to get there, and to get there, they need to be mobile. Oh the sheer frustration when a baby wants to go but his body says: not yet.

It is the moaning and groaning born from frustration of immobility that encourages many parents to reach for a walking ring (or baby walker) because an upright baby is a happy baby. And the bells and whistles are so entertaining and developmentally sound. A walking ring must be a good thing. But is it really?

MOANING MOTIVATES BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

According to Dr Debra Sunbeck moaning and groaning stimulates brain growth because ‘the brain is an infinite reservoir of potential that lies dormant until you develop a need’. The brain responds to a baby’s persistent enthusiastic need to move by creating just the right neurochemical pathways to fulfil the desire to move. These pathways prompt muscles to develop in a specific sequence: head control, rolling, sitting, grasping, crawling, pulling up, cruising and finally walking.

A baby tends to start the moaning, groaning and struggling from a very early age but it tends to peak around 6 months just as baby’s brain develops the intricate neurochemical pathways for crawling. Their frustration levels increase because it is very hard work for a baby to coordinate two arms and two legs and then to lift the entire body off the ground and move forward.

Click to see a clip of a baby working really hard during Tummy Time. Make sure your sound is on, you want to catch every little grunt and moan that brave little Jacob Silbermann utters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U1k4xioTAI&feature=youtu.be

Dr Heyns, a Cape Town based paediatrician, says ‘the sequential coordination of a baby’s muscles and his mental capacity is closely correlated to parallel this development’.

You didn’t learn to walk just because you were at the right developmental stage to stand up and walk. Your desire to get across the room, to run into your mom’s and dad’s embrace, or play with your sister or brother, charged you up with an intense enthusiasm to learn how to walk. - Dr Debra Sunbeck
STRUGGLING STRENGTHENS

When a baby is placed in a walking ring:

- he misses out on the struggle-to-strengthen phase needed to develop muscle strength and coordination to become mobile
- he may skip crawling altogether and
- even walk later.

According to paediatrician, Dr David Geller, studies have shown that babies who use a walking ring may actually learn to walk about a month later than those who don’t, because walking rings allow babies to move around before they are physically ready for it. He continues to say that when a baby skips the developmental steps leading up to walking, it can cause unusual movement patterns and delayed muscle control. Usual movement patterns and muscle control develop when babies watch their feet while learning to walk and understand how their feet and legs move. Most walking rings have a tray that prevents babies from seeing what’s happening with their feet, and without this visual and proprioceptive feedback, unusual movement patterns develop which may delay muscle development.

LEGAL STEPS TO BAN WALKING RINGS

The Canadian government passed a law in 2004 to prohibit the sale and advertisement of new and second hand walking rings. The driving force behind this law was that walking rings were responsible for thousands of accidents involving babies that could have otherwise been avoided. The American Academy of Pediatrics also advises against using walking rings not only because they can discourage a baby from learning to walk on his own, but also because walking rings can be dangerous. The article continues to say: ‘thousands of babies end up in emergency rooms and doctor’s offices from falling down stairs or bumping into furniture while in a walking ring’. The European Child Safety Alliance and ANEC supports the ban on walking rings with a joint statement that reads that in many European countries, baby walkers (walking rings) ‘are linked to more injuries than any other type of nursery equipment, causing an unacceptably high number of severe falls, burns and scalds, and poisonings.

What makes baby walking rings particularly dangerous, is:

1. the baby’s increased mobility at a speed of up to 1 metre per second at which the baby moves uncontrollably across the room, putting them at a risk to fall down stairs; tip-over on uneven flooring; violent collisions with objects and
2. due to the raised height babies in walking rings are also more likely to reach and pull down objects such as electric appliances, hot drinks, or chemicals.

Many European organisations have called for bans on baby walking rings due to the level of risk and injury they pose, combined with their lack of tangible benefit or necessity.
BENEFITS OF NATURAL DEVELOPMENT

Movement is so much part of everyday life, that it is very easy to take it for granted. It is equally easy, and may even have quite serious consequences when we overlook the importance of the role of movement in learning to read and to write many years later\textsuperscript{x}.

To move appropriately is a sign of development

Mollie Davies

If you consider that when a baby uses his or her whole body to explore, it equals the physical effort of a two-hour aerobic workout; and if you consider that new walkers average 13 185 steps a day – a daily travelling distance of 39 football fields; and that the energy used by ‘new walkers’ is the equivalent of a marathon (42km) every seven days\textsuperscript{ix}, the scales tip heavily in favor of unhampered natural development.

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\textsuperscript{ii} http://www.dr-heyns.co.za/blog/2012/03/08/baby-walkers-are-they-good-or-are-they-bad/http://www.dr-heyns.co.za/blog/2012/03/08/baby-walkers-are-they-good-or-are-they-bad/

\textsuperscript{iii} http://www.babycenter.com/404_will-baby-walkers-and-jumpers-help-my-baby-learn-to-walk_6878.bc

\textsuperscript{iv} http://cdn2.calorababy.co.za/baby/all-about-walking-rings.html


\textsuperscript{vii} Petridou E; Simou E; Skondras C, et al. \textit{Hazards of baby walkers in a European context}. Injury Prevention, 1996, 2(2),118 – 120.

