

Infants and toddlers are discovering how their bodies work. They need to be unencumbered by baby equipment and the adjusting and positioning of adults so that they can safely find balance and self-reliance. The challenge for parents is to trust rather than teach (because teaching means interfering) and to let our baby show us what he is ready to do by doing it himself – naturally.

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Baby Equipment

What Does Your Baby Really Need?

Over the past few years I have noticed more and more ‘educational’ baby equipment being advertised and marketed to adults as something that is vital for your child’s development. For most of the infant equipment out there, this is absolutely untrue.

Going through much of the heavily promoted equipment available for infants and looking carefully at some of the drawbacks of these products can be really eye opening. As a centre that strongly advocates free movement we wanted to write about the range of different equipment recommended for infants.

Bumbo seats: These are a relatively new product and have been marketed as a great way to contain your baby in order for them to eat, sit, etc. There have been some safety warnings recently with these, where children have fallen over when sitting in them - even when they are placed on the floor! I really enjoyed one comment on a review discussing that she disagrees with the many people who think that the bumbo will teach their baby to sit. “For babies to be able to sit independently, they need to have good tummy and back muscles” I enjoyed her comment later on confronting us to think about our own muscles. “Think about it, if you wanted to strengthen those long-forgotten core muscles, you’re not going to be sitting in a stable chair, are you? If sitting in a chair worked those muscle groups, we’d all have amazing bodies (and I for one, don’t!)” As Guida pointed out to me you don’t develop the muscles needed to sit while being in the sitting position, you develop the muscles while moving on your back, side, and stomach which then helps you maintain the sitting position.

Jolly jumpers: These are a very popular toy for infants and many children have used them for years. Their use encourages muscle imbalance because your baby will be placed in a sitting position before he is ready, and can cause foot deformities. (Hermsen-van Wanerooy, 2002) I recall in my first year of teaching working with a colleague who had worked with an infant who needed extensive surgery on his Achilles tendon after being in the jolly jumper for long periods of time when he was much too young for that exuberant jumping motion.

Swings: The motion of a swing puts babies in an unnatural, altered state. I’ve seen many infants get a really scary, glassy-eyed, thousand-yard-stare on their face before eventually sending them to sleep. This is inappropriate in a vertical position, and even worse when not of their own choosing.

Bouncinette: This was originally introduced to get children off the floor and into a semi-sitting position.

Toy frame/Play gym: This is designed to encourage your baby to reach and play with a toy. Often the toys are too big for the baby to reach or hold, or are too far away. If the child does grasp it, they will not be able to bring it towards their mouth, which is what they are genuinely interested in doing – at a young age this is their main interest.. Instead of these frames, we place toys in an arc around their head. This encourages them to roll and stretch, and develop the muscles which will later move them onto their stomach. But we do not place the objects out of reach as this means children will be too frustrated and give up trying. Children are born intrinsically motivated and we think carefully about how to support this strong motivation without stopping it, or pushing children too far.

Exersaucer: This equipment encourages sitting and pushing with their feet long before the baby is ready to do these things on their own. They can put a baby at risk of developing problems with muscle balance too.

Baby walker: There are many issues with baby walkers with children falling down stairs etc. But they include all of the same issues as with the exersaucer.

Push trolley: This is given to children most often to encourage them to walk when in fact they would be quite happy cruising along your furniture. Although your child may look great when they are walking behind this object it is likely they will walk with their feet turned in, or with a range of other unnatural foot combinations. It can be difficult for your child to “unlearn” these habits and I have observed many children who move quickly leaning forward as they never learned to balance between their two feet, standing mid air, and then to take steps. A lot of unnecessary upper body tension is created while holding onto a push trolley. When a child is confident and strong in their walking these are not a problem.

Front pack: Adults often like to carry infants in front or backpacks especially if a child likes body contact and you need to get on with other tasks throughout the day. However the baby is not well supported, and is in an upright position (rather than their more natural horizontal position). This puts a lot of pressure on their spine and developing discs between their vertebrae. Often adults still hold the child to give them more support, but even this is not enough. Many people argue that these packs connect them with their baby as they are close, but mostly my observations

Giving our infants a safe environment with opportunities for free, unconfined, and self-directed movement fosters their innate desire to explore, practice and perfect physical skills. They are then naturally geared toward a lifelong inclination to exercise, which (as stacks of research conclude) will lead them to a longer, healthier, (brainier) and happier life.

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Baby Equipment Continued

show the adults looking past the infant gazing at them, and out into the world.

Car seats: Many children are now transported around in their capsules when they are not in the car. I have heard of concern from pediatricians at National Women's years ago about the pressure put on children's respiratory systems when they are kept in this hunched over position for hours at a time. I don't think I need to go into the challenges to a child's natural movement! I have observed infants that sleep in their capsules, and are kept in them for playing as well as eating. Amazingly enough there are now car seats that have been safety approved in New Zealand where the child lies flat. My favourite is the Windoo carry cot by Bebe Confort. These are not available for sale in NZ, but sometimes come up on trade me. Other quality ones are available at www.globalbaby.co.nz and they stock the Casual Play reclining capsules, and Casual Play carry cots.

If you'd like some ideas of great ways to help support your child with equipment best suited to their active movement and development then I would suggest you invest some serious money into safety gates in the places around your house that you do not want your child to have access to. I have seen excellent safety gates made in homes to protect expensive stereo and television equipment, fireplaces, kitchen areas, stairs, and other dangerous places. Some people start off their infant's play area in a playpen when they are young and then add on to the size of the playpen as the child grows and is more actively moving within the space. Or if that is not such an exciting idea for you then put some money away for your child's tertiary education each time you want to buy your child some big and (usually) expensive equipment. We all know that is getting expensive!

