

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Getting Ready to Walk

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Infants and Toddlers

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My baby is eight months old, and I want to help him get ready to walk. What can I do?

Infants typically start walking between the time they are a year old up to about a year and a half. When a child begins to walk doesn't affect how good a walker he or she becomes—each child develops on a personal developmental timeline. However, there are many things you can do to help support your baby's ability to walk in the future by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

According to the Academy of Pediatrics, it is important to give babies many opportunities to move around so they can develop physically.

- 1. Set up a “yes environment.”** This means giving your baby the freedom to safely sit up, crawl, roll over, scoot and hold onto surfaces when he is ready to try to stand and cruise around.
 - You can create safe places for your baby to explore by putting fragile things out of his reach. If you don't want your child to play with particular items, put them where your child can't get them.
 - Make sure there are no small objects on the floor that your baby could choke on, and find a way to cover sharp edges and electrical outlets.
 - To give your baby time and space to explore, try to limit the amount of time he spends in car seats, swings or playpens. For more information about safety, see:
<http://www.safekids.org/infantsafety?gclid=CMn2m830t8ICFWHo7Aod6XwAow>

- 2. Be an active part of your child's explorations.** Watch what your child is doing and talk to him about it, like: “You are working so hard to pull yourself up!” When you are “there for him” as he moves around, you become a “secure base” for his exploring the world: your child can feel confident in venturing out because he can depend on you to support him.

According to the studies of Carol Dweck of Stanford University, children are more likely to take risks, to feel comfortable making mistakes and to take on learning that is hard when they are praised for their effort (“You worked so hard!”), not their talent or natural abilities (“You are such a great walker!”).

- 3. Celebrate your child's explorations and discoveries by praising his effort and strategies.** Say things like: “Wow, you're standing all by yourself! You are really working hard to balance!” or “You used your muscles to crawl all the way over to the wall!” When he falls, encourage him to get right back up. Learning this lesson is vital in life. Your support now will help him learn to try new things and become a self-directed, engaged learner.
- 4. Build on your child's interests.** Your child's interests provide opportunities for you to help him master skills like walking and to remain a self-directed learner. Watch your child at play to get an idea of what he is trying to figure out.

Then you can think of ways to help him learn even more.

- Is your child interested in pulling himself up to standing? Find different areas in your house that your child can safely practice this skill.
- Is your child starting to use the furniture to hold on to as he “cruises” around the room? See if you can set up a small obstacle course for him with a row of chairs of different heights.
- Your voice is one of your baby’s favorite things. Try singing, using nursery rhymes and telling stories as other ways to entice your baby to move around and dance.
- Try using favorite objects to encourage your child to move. You can put a favorite toy on the end of the couch or blanket on the floor and see if your child can figure out how to reach it. Don’t make it too hard—you want your baby to be excited, not frustrated.

Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley conducted an experiment that demonstrated how parental concerns are conveyed to children. He found that if mothers—his study was conducted with mothers, not fathers, but the same would be true for them—showed a happy face that encouraged their children to try something new, the child was much more likely to take on the challenge. When mothers showed a fearful face, the babies typically refused to keep going.

5. Send messages of confidence when your son falls. Babies fall down when they are learning to walk and, in general, they don’t hurt themselves if they are in a safe place. Your words, your tone of voice and the expressions on your face are all cues he will use in how he reacts to falling down.

- Are you encouraging him with your voice, or is your voice fearful?
- Are you smiling, or do you have a tense look on your face?

Of course, you need to protect your child from harm, but not overprotect him when the situation is safe. Your child will learn to get back up and keep trying when you show him that you believe he can do it!

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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