



Wee Learn

Wee Beginners (0-18 months): When Your Toddler is a Late Walker



When Vered Levant's son, Matthew, still hadn't taken his first steps at nearly 18 months old, she was worried. "People kept asking her if he was walking yet. It freaked her out," she recalls. She took him to her doctor, who assured her it wasn't a developmental issue, given that he had already accomplished other milestones, like talking. A week later, he started walking. "Turns out he was just lazy," the Calgary mom laughs. Fast-forward three years and Levant's second kid, Isabelle, is nearing the 18-month mark and following in her brother's footsteps, or lack thereof. "This time, I'm not so worried, because I can tell she isn't delayed. She's crawling and communicating. She'll do it when she's ready."

Joanne Kay, a fellow Calgary mom, had a similar experience with her daughter, Alex, who barely took a step until she hit 15 months. Kay's first child, Aidan, started walking right on schedule at 12 months, and he skipped crawling altogether. She says she was more concerned about her first-born not crawling than when her daughter learned to walk. "I think everything is more chilled out with your second child. I knew she would walk eventually, and I had a better idea of what to expect." Still, when Alex did start putting her feet to work, Kay was relieved.

So when is a late bloomer cause for concern? Peter Rosenbaum, a professor of paediatrics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont., and Canada research chair in childhood disability, says there is considerable variation for this milestone. "Some children walk at nine to 10 months, and others at 16 months or later." He explains that "quality" of movement is sometimes more important than a child's age or ability to toddle on two feet. "For example, a 15-month-old who does not walk but crawls actively is going to be fine, but another child who is generally stiff or floppy is a worry." (Rigidness or lack of muscle tone could indicate cerebral palsy or other conditions.)

It's also important to remember to adjust your expectations for preemies. "People forget to make the appropriate correction for the degree of prematurity," says Rosenbaum. A 13-month-old who was born eight weeks premature may be hitting milestones more typical of an 11-month-old.

Lisa Rivard, a paediatric physiotherapist in Hamilton, Ont., suggests observing your toddler for the following: if he has equal use of both sides of the body; whether or not he can get in and out of a sitting position on his own; whether he crawls on hands and knees or moves around on his bottom; whether he's beginning to pull himself up to stand or cruise along furniture; and whether he will take weight on both legs with feet flat when you're supporting his torso. All these actions provide a solid foundation for walking.

You can also try to carry your child less often, and encourage play in a variety of positions and levels, such as crawling over cushions or kneeling. "This helps them to develop the ability to shift their weight, as well as develop strength, balance, coordination and confidence, all of which are needed to become an independent walker," says Rivard. Remember that development varies from kid to kid, depending on experience and motivation. "No two children are alike."

