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7 Benefits of Crawling

By Denise Porretto

Learning to crawl offers baby more than just transportation.

Crawling is an important part of your baby's development for many reasons. Of course, it takes her motor abilities to a new level. But it also spurs growth and refines a host of other skills, says Karen Adolph, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at New York University. In fact, some development experts refer to this stage as the "psychological birth" of a baby, because it spurs her growth and refines a lot of other skills. Here are seven of the important benefits your baby receives as she becomes an expert crawler:

1. She can connect with you in new ways. When your baby crawls across the room, notice how she turns around to look back. She's checking on your whereabouts and looking for any messages you're sending with facial expressions and gestures, such as shaking your head to mean "Stop right there!" As she explores her newfound world, your baby needs reassurance that she can look to you for guidance if she's unsure or frightened.

2. He discovers that things exist far away from him. Your baby has had a sense of depth perception since birth, but it was limited. Anything beyond a certain point wasn't registered as being far away, because he couldn't see it or wasn't yet capable of detecting the visual clues that indicate distance. Even when his vision improved, everything far away appeared to be at about the same distance, much like the stars in the night sky appear to us. But crawling gives him the experience necessary to calibrate how far away something really is -- the more crawling it takes to reach it, the farther away it is, and vice versa. With improved depth perception, your baby also realizes that objects don't literally shrink or grow as they move farther away or closer.

3. She learns how to navigate her environment. Pretty soon your baby will know the lay of the living room. She's figured out that if she makes a right at the coffee table, bears left at Daddy's favorite chair, loops around his pile of newspapers, and heads straight past the safety gate in the doorway, she'll arrive at her basket full of toys.

4. He notices his surroundings more. In a related development, your baby is now keenly aware of "optic flow" -- the world sweeping past him as he crawls forward. Back in the days when he had to be carried or wheeled around, he didn't need to pay much attention to optic flow. But as he crawls, he depends on visual information to make note of the landmarks and his location relative to the environment. It's just like adults driving as opposed to being a passenger in the car: With someone else driving, we miss a lot. But behind the wheel, we're more tuned in to where we are and where we're going -- and we're more likely to remember how to get there next time.

5. She's forced to make decisions. The trip across a room is fraught with challenges beyond steering and finding her location. When your baby encounters a slope in the floor or steps leading downward, she has to decide whether to proceed. If she has only a few weeks' worth of crawling under her diaper, she may charge ahead -- and take a nasty tumble. Babies with more experience will know when to slow down or stop. Navigation skills take a lot of experience, and a crawling baby certainly gets it.

6. He keeps his goals in mind. Don't tell the babies, but crawling is not the most efficient way to travel. Reaching a goal while crawling is more complex than attaining goals that involve just one discrete action (reaching for a bottle, for example), because it takes time and requires that the baby connect a series of movements. Keeping an eye on the prize helps. Babies who crawl perform better in object-search games than babies the same age who don't crawl. Experts believe it's because locomotion has helped the crawlers focus their gaze and attention.

7. Her emotions intensify. The angry beast in your little beauty has been released. Tempting objects and beguiling places are spread before her and she now has the wherewithal to get to them, but there are those annoying restrictions -- "Not, don't go there." "Don't do that." "Blah, blah, blah." Your baby will get frustrated by being thwarted and her anger will probably be more intense than before she was mobile. On the other hand, her feelings of glee will also intensify as she becomes more independent. It's extremely exciting for your baby to reach a special toy or beloved person all on her own! Even better, studies have found that newly mobile infants show increased affection for their caregivers. This crawling thing will be a wonderful experience for everyone.

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