

The importance of tummy time

Before the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) began the "Back to Sleep" campaign, many parents put their babies to sleep on their stomachs. This automatically gave babies an opportunity to play on their tummies as soon as they woke up.

Since the AAP implemented "Back to Sleep" and changed their recommendations to encourage parents to put their children to sleep on their backs only, we are seeing that babies are getting less and less tummy time.

In addition, more parents are unsure when and how much tummy time their babies should get, and are sometimes even unaware of how important tummy time is.

Motor development - Studies have shown that children who get less tummy time master motor skills like rolling, sitting, crawling, and walking later than peers who got more tummy time for longer periods. They were also more likely to have difficulties with skills like bringing their hands to their mouth, and performing activities that require propping on forearms (holding up on elbows while on their stomach or side, rolling to the stomach to obtain a toy).

Tummy time is absolutely crucial for motor development. Core strength begins while on the stomach, and all physical development builds from a child's ability to lift his head off the surface while on his stomach. Pushing up on hands



while on the stomach prepares babies for holding themselves up in sitting, which leads to crawling, which leads to walking, language development and handwriting. Tummy time is absolutely crucial for development.

Head shape and positional torticollis - Since the beginning of "Back to Sleep" recommendations, there has been an increase in the number of children who have plagiocephaly (abnormal head shape in which one side of the head is flattened) and brachycephaly (abnormal head shape in which the back of the head is flattened).

This is explained by the fact that when lying on the back gravity pulls on the head--which is still pretty malleable--in such a way that it puts pressure on the part of the skull in contact with the surface. This creates a flat surface that further predisposes a child to maintain a certain position and further flatten one spot.

Holding a head in one position also creates tightness in the muscles on one side of the neck. This is called torticollis and further contributes to a

preference for a certain head position and further change in head shape.

Balance - The vestibular system is the part of the inner ear that senses head movement and is an important part of balance. This system is activated when a child lifts her head off the ground while on her stomach and looks around. Children who don't get enough tummy time are more likely to have balance problems and movement awareness difficulties.

Hand eye coordination - The beginnings of hand-eye coordination happen when infants are lying on their stomach and they are able to see their hand movements on the floor in front of their face. They are then able to learn that they have control over their hands.

Our developmental specialists have seen many kids with no other apparent problems, but who seem to have little awareness of their hands and arms. They get stuck on their arms when they roll or don't know how to use them to reach or push up on. This is likely due to inadequate tummy time.

The solution to not liking tummy time, as frustrating as this may sound, is tummy time. Children who have not had enough tummy time don't like it because their muscles have not developed enough and so the position is uncomfortable.

There may also be an underlying reason they don't like being on their stomach, such as constipation, gas, or reflux. These conditions may actually be helped by being on their tummy if persisted because the muscle control and assistance with pressure may help these conditions.

Here are some more helpful suggestions to make tummy time less torturous.

1. Make it comfortable. Help your child transition from a more comfortable position by rolling to the tummy rather than going straight there. Ensure that the surface is soft enough to be comfortable. Get down on the ground yourself and talk or sing with your baby.

2. Make it easy. Lifting the head straight from the floor takes a lot of work against gravity. Help your child have more success by holding them against your chest while you sit, recline, or lie down on your back. The farther down you recline the harder it will be for your baby, so encourage head control in a more upright position to begin.

Another way to help your child be successful at holding their head up is by propping them up on something. By propping your baby over your leg, a breastfeeding pillow, a yoga mat, or a towel, you allow them to have more success looking around at people, toys, or the surroundings, and this will make tummy time more engaging.

3. Make it enjoyable. Engage your child in tummy time on an exercise ball. Have siblings or parents nearby to engage the baby. Change the location and surface of tummy time every time to make it new, exciting and stimulating.

Tummy time will likely not be easy at first, especially if your child already knows they don't like it. But your child deserves the effort and time you put into being creative and helping her enjoy such an important experience that will shape her development. Remember, "Back To Sleep" for sleeping and when your baby's awake, incorporate tummy time throughout the day.