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INSIGHTS

Walking training with Activity Rings

By physiotherapist Hannah Harboe

A child will normally walk at between 10 and 18 months. Learning to walk is an important milestone in a child's development. Even though the normal age range for learning to walk is relatively wide, parents tend to worry if their child is not walking by his/her first birthday. In this respect, parental concern is often groundless. Most children will let go and walk on their own before they reach 18 months.

In some cases, a child can walk but dares not let go of a helping hand. There are several possible reasons for this:

If the child's vestibular system is over-reactive, and the child finds it difficult to keep his/her balance.

If, for psychological reasons the child needs extra support, e.g. if he or she has been pushed over by other children/older siblings.

If the child finds it difficult to concentrate, focus and prioritise the multiple sensory impressions to which he/she is exposed in spaces shared with other people.

If the child has difficulty stabilising his/her joints and applying the correct muscular force required to walk.

Due to the different heights of the child and the adult, the child's hands and arms are generally above his/her head, when he/she practices walking with parents and grandparents. Practising walking with the arms above the head is inappropriate for several reasons. For example, the adult may take the weight off the child's legs, so the child does not experience the downward pressure through his/her hip, knee and ankle joints that stimulates the proprioceptive sense and develops stability. When the child holds an adult's hands, the child may steer and control the walking process, but does not have to relate to balance, because this is not determined by the child's legs, but by the adult's hands.

Activity Rings are soft rubber rings with a surface that is pleasant to touch. The rings can be used to perform a wide variety of functions:

They are good for practising catching and throwing.

They can be used to mark points along an obstacle track. To train balance, the subject can walk with them on his/her head.

Small children find the rings nice to hold.

The bright colours encourage the child to reach out and examine them more closely. The ring dimensions make them ideal to use as a link between two people, when holding hands would be too close for comfort. The ring diameter is easy to grip firmly - even for a very small hand.



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Case:

Peter is a little guy of 18 months. He is an only child. He was born prematurely and is more cautious and more sensitive than other children the family is acquainted with.

The parents are puzzled that Peter is not willing to walk unaided. He has cruised around the coffee table for some time and he loves to walk with Dad, who holds both Peter's hands over Peter's head. Peter is not keen on swinging. He tends to get small shocks, when he is about to lose his balance.

Having examined him, I find he shows signs of general sensory sensitivity and an over-reactive vestibular system.

Peter is not happy about my coming close to or touching him. The training session takes place with me sitting at a fair distance, guiding the parents with regard to the exercises they must do with Peter.

To conduct a regular training session with him, Peter would require several sessions just to get to know me and familiarise himself with the room and all the equipment in it.

However, I assess that several sessions would be unnecessary. Once Peter discovers that he can walk, the walking in itself will give him ample vestibular stimulation. Walking on his own will also give him a sense of mastery. My experience tells me that if a child has a positive experience and a sense of mastery, this will have a consequential effect on other areas, in which the child feels unsure of himself and reacts sensitively.

During this session, Peter's Dad practises walking with Peter on my instructions. Peter's Mum notes down what I say and records short videos of Peter and his father. In this way, we ensure that the parents understand and can remember my instructions when they get home. I teach the parents to stimulate Peter's senses and ensure that he gets sufficient breaks and "peace and quiet". I give them exercises to encourage Peter to move and walk unaided.

Peter is happy to cruise along my training bench. Dad coaxes him with sultanas to move several times from one end of the bench to the other. Once Peter is confident, Dad gives him an Activity Ring to hold. Peter uses the bench for support via the other hand. Dad lays his hand over Peter's to show him that he has to hold tight. Dad gently pulls on the ring and Peter lets go of the bench. Peter walks forwards holding the ring. The trick is for the adult to hold the ring below the level of the child's heart to ensure that the ring does



not take any weight off the child's legs. Walking with the ring requires Peter to control his balance more than holding hands.

I give the parents an Activity Ring so that they can start walking training at home. Next day they call to tell me that Peter is already walking with the ring at home. After 10 minutes' training, Dad let go of the ring. Peter carried on walking with the ring – but without Dad at the other end.

After one week's training with the ring, Peter is able to walk entirely on his own. He and both parents are glowing with pride.

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