



The Developmental Sequence for Standing and Walking



Standing and walking require balance and coordination. Your baby will spend many hours learning and practicing the skills needed to stand erect and move forward at the same time.

Babies develop at different rates and they don't all do things in exactly the same way. Some babies are content to sit and play longer than others. Very active babies may want to get up on their feet and try to walk very early. These individual traits don't indicate how your baby will develop in other areas. But there are some general stages you can look for.

Standing

Newborn infants have a reflex for stepping. They will take a few steps forward when held under the arms in a standing position and leaned slightly forward. This reflex is strongest at 3 to 4 weeks of age and usually disappears by the time the baby is 2 months old. Most babies don't try to put weight on their legs again for some time as they develop the muscle control needed for balance. They must lift their heads and gain control of their bodies in other positions before they stand.

By 3 to 4 months, babies start to take some weight on their legs again but have difficulty keeping their hips in line with their shoulders and feet. Their buttocks will wobble until they develop more control of the muscles in the lower trunk and hips.

At 5 to 6 months, babies love to be held standing and may move their bodies up and down as they are held. They will begin to stamp one foot, then the other. They are exercising the muscles they will use much later.

Between 7 and 9 months, most babies begin to experiment with pulling themselves to a standing position. This takes much trial and error. They pull with their arms on crib rails or playpen, getting their knees under them. Their bottoms rise off the surface and they plop back down.



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One day they will put one hand above the other and climb overhand until they are standing! They often scream at that point, because they don't know where they are or how to get down. Then they learn to lean their buttocks back, bend their knees, and sit down.

In the next few months, babies perfect their ability to move up and down from standing. They creep to an object, get on their knees, and pull with their arms. They put one foot up, then the other. They push up from squatting to standing. They even learn to do this with a toy in one hand. Babies practice moving from standing to squatting until they can lower themselves to the floor easily.

Babies teeter as they first stand alone, holding onto something for support. Some babies seem frightened; they cautiously develop standing control of their bodies. Other seem to be fear less and may even try to lunge from one support to the next. There comes a time when they want to stand for everything—they will stand in their highchairs, strollers, and shopping carts. They need to be watched carefully, as they will lean and topple over.

Most babies spend months holding onto things or leaning against furniture as they stand. This helps them to develop balance in an erect position. At first they hold on with both hands, then they lean and hold on with one hand. They might lean on their forearms and use their hands for play. They begin to twist their bodies sideways so they are leaning on one hip. They turn completely around and lean their buttocks against the sofa. All of this helps them to eventually let go and stand by themselves at 12 to 14 months.



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Walking

Walking is very different from standing. At 7 or 8 months, babies again try to take steps when someone holds their hands. The movements will not be as coordinated as their early, automatic steps. Now they lift one leg high and try to put it down. The foot often lands too far forward and to the side.

With practice, the steps will become more controlled, and the feet will be closer together, as long as someone holds their hands. As babies lean on furniture, they will begin to take a step or two sideways. This early cruising is done with legs stiff. Then they learn to turn their bodies slightly and take a forward step. This becomes a very quick way of moving and soon they are walking from one piece of furniture to another.



At 11 or 12 months, some babies will begin to experiment with pushing things such as chairs and realize that they can make them move. Let your baby push a sturdy kitchen chair or wheeled toy to practice stepping and balance.

A baby's first unsupported steps are often accidental: You let go as the baby is walking, the baby takes a step or two, realizes what has happened, and plops to the floor. Or the baby steps from one piece of furniture to another that is just beyond reach. Or the baby is leaning on something, turns the upper body around, and takes a step. The arms spread like wings and a leg swing out, and the baby takes a step or two before falling.

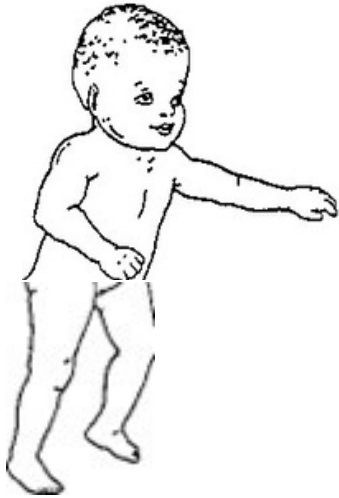
Some babies take unsupported steps before they can stand alone. Others get their standing balance and slowly move one leg forward, adjust their weight and take another step. Within a week or so they are able to walk around a room. But walking takes all their concentration—to get somewhere quickly, they creep.



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By 14 months, most babies walk independently. At first, they lift their legs high in the air. Their feet are wide apart, and their arms are held up at their sides. As their balance improves, they will lower their arms and be able to carry a toy.



Some babies turn their feet out or in as they first try to combine balance with moving forward. They may walk on the inner edges of their feet or be up on their toes. Usually their legs and feet will look more normal when they have walked for awhile. The pediatrician should evaluate your baby after a month or so of independent walking. Most doctors recommend that early walkers go barefoot or wear soft-soled shoes. This is good exercise for the feet and lets the baby use the toes for balance.

As walking becomes steadier, the feet come closer together and the steps even out. Babies get the control to squat to the floor and pick up a toy, and they learn to stop and start at will. They are on their way to exploring in an upright posture. Toddlers need constant supervision, since their physical abilities are well beyond their understanding of danger.

Should my baby use a walker?

That's up to you. A walker can give an active baby lots of exercise, but it won't help your baby walk any sooner. It also keeps your baby from exploring by feeling and picking up things your baby needs to get down to the floor to play and then get back up again. If you decide to use a walker, supervise your baby carefully—stairs can be dangerous, even ones with closed doors.

