

## BABY WALKERS

### Background

A baby walker consists of a wheeled base supporting a rigid frame that holds a fabric seat with leg openings and usually a plastic tray. The device is designed to support a pre-ambulatory infant, with feet on the floor, and to allow mobility while the infant is learning to walk. Some walkers are equipped with bouncing mechanisms, activity toys, or locking devices that keep them from moving, and some fold flat for storage.<sup>1</sup>

The use of baby walkers has been controversial for many years. Parents, carers, health professionals and child safety workers have debated the practice of placing an infant who is not yet independently walking in a walker. Well meaning parents and carers may think that a walker will assist the child's development, or may use a walker as a means of occupying the infant instead of allowing him/her to spend time on the floor.<sup>2</sup> This may result in infants spending prolonged periods of time in a walker, to the detriment of floor play time.

Concerns regarding the use of baby walkers include:

1. Injury risks associated with Baby Walkers
2. The lack of evidence to support using a baby walker to assist the physical development of a child.

### 1. Injury risks associated with Baby Walkers

Baby walkers are dangerous as they allow a baby to move more quickly around the house. This increases the chance of children reaching hazards before a parent/carer realises.<sup>3</sup> Research indicates that an infant placed in a baby walker is at risk of injury due to:

- Falling whilst in the walker.<sup>4, 1</sup>
- Moving into a dangerous place e.g. stairs, open fireplaces.<sup>4, 5</sup>
- Accessing dangerous objects / products (e.g. chemicals, kettles, and saucepans) as the child's reach is extended.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. The lack of evidence to support using a baby walker to assist the physical development of a child.

There is evidence that the use of baby walkers may impact adversely on the developmental activities necessary for an infant to achieve independent walking.<sup>7</sup> This includes time spent on the floor to practise rolling, crawling, sitting and pulling up to stand which are important pre-walking skills and should be encouraged. Use of baby walkers may result in:

- A decreased variety of movement experiences.
- A restriction of repetitive "practice" movements which are seen in pre-walking infants.
- The use of inappropriate movement and balance strategies.
- Reduced time in the crawling position that allows weight bearing through the pelvis and shoulder girdle simultaneously.

### The APA Position:

The position of the Australian Physiotherapy Association is that:

- The use of baby walkers should be discouraged due to evidence that there is considerable risk of injury and because they may impede normal balanced muscle development.<sup>1, 8</sup>

- If a parent insists on using a baby walker, it is vital that they choose a walker that complies with the mandatory Australian baby walker consumer product safety standard.<sup>9</sup>
- Stationary activity centers should be promoted as a safer alternative to mobile walkers.<sup>10</sup>
- If a child needs to be playing freely whilst the parent/carer is attending to household duties in the vicinity then an Australian Standard approved playpen which allows freedom to move, should be used to safely enclose the child.
- Babies should spend time on the floor rolling, crawling, creeping, sitting and pulling up to stand to ensure optimal development. If there are concerns regarding a child's development then that child should be assessed by a paediatric physiotherapist who can provide strategies to optimise physical development.

## References

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