

One way babies learn to use their bodies is by learning to achieve large physical tasks, or gross motor skills, such as crawling and walking.

Development of Physical Skills

While your baby is busy growing taller, gaining weight and cutting teeth, he will also be learning how to interact physically with his environment. That is not to say that your baby's physical development does not begin until after birth. No doubt you were well aware of your infant's intra-uterine acrobatics.



During the first three months of your baby's life, however, reflexes govern much of his behavior. As those newborn reflexes fade, they are replaced by more purposeful movements. As he gains strength and coordination in his muscles, your baby is able to explore and manipulate things in his environment. Each day, he moves more competently.

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Physical development is divided into two categories: fine motor and gross motor. Fine motor skills require precise coordination of the small muscles. Acquisition of the hand-eye coordination is the focus of fine motor development. Gross motor skills are governed by larger, stronger, less exacting muscles. These skills include holding up the head, sitting, crawling, and walking.

Acquisition of developmental skills occurs in an orderly, predictable sequence. The precise timing of the mastery of any one skill, though, is subject to much normal variation-something to keep in mind when you are tempted to label your baby as "early" or "late" in development.

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Scientists have observed that motor skills generally develop from the center of the body outward and from head to tail. These developments don't just occur by instinct. The more chances babies have to practice these skills, the more they will be able to grow and strengthen.

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Each baby approaches the world with his own unique style. Resist comparing your child with your friend's children. When you hear that another child is walking at nine months, don't despair because your child is still perfecting his crawl. Instead, focus on his special talents. For instance, your baby may be much better than another at picking up and examining small objects. No matter when it occurs, celebrate your child's every accomplishment with him.

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Physical development follows three general patterns.

1. Muscular development progresses from head to toe. In other words, your baby will learn to lift and hold up his head before his torso is strong enough to maintain a sitting posture.
2. The strength and coordination of the limbs begins close to the body and moves outward. Your baby will coordinate his arm movements at the shoulder, then the elbows, then the wrists. Skillful manipulation of the fingers comes last.
3. Motor responses are general at first. Later they become more specific. For example, if you hold a red ball before your baby when he is three months old, he may smile, wave his arms and legs,

and finally make an attempt to swipe at the ball with one or both arms. A few months later, he may still swipe at the ball, but will quickly, and deliberately grasp it with one hand.