

Learning to Crawl

Most new parents hope and assume their infant will navigate successfully through all the normal developmental phases—rolling over, sitting up, and crawling. But what if they don't?

Clients of mine had their first baby in their early 40s. After Christine was born they were thrilled to watch and identify every stage of development. As she grew they could identify numerous *Awareness Through Movement*^(R) lessons, such as learning to lift her head either from the belly, or the back; teaching herself to roll over; or putting her feet to her mouth.

One day I received a frantic phone call from the mother. “She’s not crawling properly. What do we do?” I suggested they bring her into my office so I could see what was happening.

We placed Christine on her hands and knees on the table with a toy at the opposite end, waving it to get her attention to crawl towards it. As she attempted to motor forward, we could see that she had her left knee solidly under her hip, but she appeared to have no concept of what to do with the right knee. She merely dragged it along and did not bear much weight on it. As she made the excursion down the table I could see Christine was struggling, using her left knee to propel herself forward. Then her body would list to the right side because she did not know what to do with the right knee. What an interesting strategy she had developed. It was a major effort for her to move herself forward.

A major component of her motor concept and balance was missing. As I watched her move forward, she would slide almost onto her right side, and then push herself onto the left leg and both hands. As she made that movement, I gently grasped her right ankle, and slid her right knee under her hip to weight bear, thinking maybe this was the missing connection in her brain.

She stopped, looked around and grinned at us. She paused for about a minute assessing things. You could see the mental wheels turning. Her next movement, however, was to return to her familiar strategy, dragging the right knee behind. I allowed her to do several more movements dragging the right knee, then intervened again, sliding the right ankle and knee forward until they were directly under her right hip. At this juncture, she stopped, rocked herself on both hands and knees forward and back with a very puzzled look on her face. We waited. She attempted a backwards movement starting with her right knee, then lost her balance and went to her belly. Gently, I placed her onto both hands and knees and again. This time, I rocked her weight slowly to the left hand and knee, then back to the right hand and knee several times to see if she could get the connection of weight bearing equally on both sides. I was hoping that her right side could hold her and be stable, and her brain might make the connection about stability. Again, we waited to see what her next move would be.

Information about moving, crawling, and walking is hard-wired into our limbic system, but we explore these movements little by little. Our brain begins to make sensory distinctions through trial and error. It's not the muscles that change the movement, but the brain that makes the distinctions between stability and falling on our face. Gravity produces the external environment against which we push, but learning is required to make movements predictable and repeatable. We try, fail, try again, fail a few more times, eventually succeeding and somewhere in our attempts our limbic human brain understands the connection of how to do what we want to do. Not all children will react as Christine did, but children generally learn more quickly.

Christine's next move was to smile, followed by a look of astonishment. Off she went in a true crawl with her right knee under herself, using it as precisely as she did the left. Priceless.

Three small interventions and she had it! She was crawling the length of the table to mom and the toy as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Her parents reported later that she never returned to dragging the right knee. Months later as she attempted walking, she had no trouble getting over both feet.