



Info Sheet #1

SOUTH DAKOTA INSTITUTE FOR INFANT TODDLER DEVELOPMENT & CARE . . . RELATING TO BABIES AND THOSE WHO CARE FOR THEM

Keeping babies happy and safe outside “containers”

I'm a provider caring for six young children — three are babies. How do I keep everyone safe, busy and happy, while I manage diapers, bottle feedings or take a moment to go to the bathroom, answer the phone or make lunch for the little ones?

When I am busy, my answer to this situation is often the baby walker, swing or bouncy seat. All are convenient and the babies seem to enjoy them. And for that matter, walkers, swings and seats exercise babies' legs, which probably helps their muscles develop.

That scenario reveals the safety-minded thinking of a well-meaning child care provider. The reality, though, is that her “solution” is in direct opposition to the recommendations of child development experts, who refer to such devices as “baby containers,” which are not good for babies.

“How can this be?” a child care provider might respond. These devices give babies opportunities to move their legs without getting into places they shouldn't be. What is it — especially about baby walkers — that prompts experts to take issue with something that child care providers find so useful? Here's what those experts say.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, which represents 57,000 children's doctors in the United States, recommends banning the manufacture and sale of baby walkers. Just 250 miles north of South Dakota, such a ban exists in Canada. For the doctors recommending the ban, this is a matter of life and death. They have taken this bold step as the result of infants being seriously injured or killed in walkers. Falls, which include fractures and head injuries, are the most frequent cause of these accidents. Babies under a year of age have been poisoned as the result of the easier access to hazards these walkers permit.

Pediatricians have other reasons for urging the ban. Studies that compare development of babies who spend time in walkers demonstrate the devices do not help infants learn to walk — and may even slow the process.^{1,2}



¹ American Academy of Pediatrics (2001). Injuries associated with infant walkers. *Pediatrics*, 108, 790-792

² Siegel A.C., & Burton R.V. (1999). Effects of baby walker on motor and mental development in human infants. *Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics*: 20, 355-361.

We all know that babies learn about the world by exploring it. Development during the early months of life is tied to making connections. Walkers allow babies to move about, but unnaturally. In a walker, babies can't see their feet! In a very real sense, walkers disconnect the eyes from movements made by the feet and legs. Experts think that is a reason why babies who spend the most time in walkers are likely to postpone walking independently.

Think about how a baby (let's call her Katie) begins to walk. First she sits, then she crawls, and with time she pulls herself to stand and gains balance as she tries out this new position. Then forward motion begins as her body rights itself and her legs move her forward.

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A walker positions Katie's head before her feet. She may bump into objects she encounters — a wall or (hopefully not!) stairwell in her path. When the Katies who have spent a great deal of time in walkers finally try walking alone, they frequently do it on tippy-toes with heads forward.

Not only do walkers affect motor development, but a Katie who spends most of her time in one misses other opportunities for self-initiated exploration. While in a "container," her choices for learning are limited, which has been associated with a slower pace in mental as well as motor development.

Of course, toys may be placed on the tray attached to container-type baby equipment, but toys are dropped. Katie can't follow them with her eyes, so from her viewpoint, they simply disappear. Babies learn most effectively about their surroundings by feeling, fingering, mouthing, banging, dropping objects — then seeking. Boundaries are important, but when they limit babies' freedom to wiggle, roll and crawl to discover the mysteries of their world, they hamper learning.

There is no doubt about it! There are times when care providers must focus their attention away from the babies. At such times, Katie may be safely placed in a playpen. Or, when necessary, a seat without wheels can be used for short periods.

Even when their attention is stretched, child care providers' are always concerned for the well-being of the babies and young children in their care. How can floor and lap time be optimized so that babies can enjoy the freedom of mobility within a range of safe and receptive arms? Caregivers might seek assistance during difficult stretches of the day — by recruiting parents to bring snacks and lunches, which can ease one aspect of this challenging profession.

By avoiding the container-solution, care providers can experience the joy of watching the babies in their care delight in discovering new abilities — which is a critical part of early learning!



***Info Sheets are published by the South Dakota Institute for
Infant Toddler Development and Care, which is funded by a grant from the Bush Foundation.***