



*Once children start walking unaided, shoes of flexible, light and breathable materials are best. The heel counter should be the only rigid part of the shoe.*

# HOW CORRECT FOOTWEAR CAN PREVENT LITTLE FEET FROM BIG PROBLEMS LATER

By Maribeth Bunch

**F**rom birth, every parent is concerned about his or her child's feet. In fact, at birth, we are relieved when we count all ten toes.

Witnessing our children's first few years of life leaves us to feel somewhat vulnerable as our innate protective instincts and fears kick in the moment our children gain the slightest locomotive independence. We guide them through safe pathways as scooting turns into crawling, and we walk close by as crawling soon turns into standing for the first time.

According to a child's locomotor development, the average age a child starts walking with help is at 11-12 months old. By the fourteenth month, the toddler is walking alone; by the seventeenth month he's mastered walking sideway and backwards; at 21 months walking upstairs with help is a huge feat and by two years of age, the child can now walk upstairs and downstairs alone leading with the same foot.

By the age of two, children can walk very fast, averaging about 170 steps per minute. Their stance becomes narrower to accommodate this speed. They climb up and down stairs unaided, although they tend to lead with the same foot, instead of alternating feet as adults do. With such an amazing pace of development and progressive locomotion,

protective, supportive and functional footwear is imperative for a child's developing foot.

As most parents count the ten toes on their child's feet at birth, what most parents don't know is that each foot has 26 bones and if the foot in its amazing developmental years is not provided with proper footwear, this can lead to a lifetime of foot problems in adolescent and teen years through to adulthood.

The California Podiatric Medical Association reports that approximately 80% of children of all ages have trouble with their feet because of improper footwear.

Did you know that by the age of six, about 30% of all children have foot disorders that require professional treatment due to improper footwear? Children's feet grow fast, as often as two or three sizes a year beginning at about 12 months of age.

The growth of a young child's foot is sporadic, with the most rapid period of growth occurring within the first 10 years. During the first few years of life, a flat foot is perfectly normal and the correct choice of footwear in very early years, plays a pivotal role in developing normal feet and the foot problems your children could have for the rest of their adult lives.

As children grow, they need footwear that provides a healthy environment for proper bone development. Many minor childhood issues like growing pain, night pain, heel pain and even back pain can be prevented. Proper footwear allows free play of the foot's muscles, and thus strengthening them while providing optimal support needed for balance, stability and durability.

## SELECTING THE RIGHT SHOES

The function of a child's shoe is to prevent injury, insulate the feet from excessive temperatures, and protect them during the stomping or kicking that can occur when they have a temper tantrum or as they learn to be acrobatic in play.

They also have to surmount environmental threats, an unfortunate side affect of modern day living. Walking on concrete or unforgiving surfaces that don't provide the natural support or the 'give' that Mother Nature intended, as human feet were designed to walk on soft, earthy surfaces like sand, grass and dirt.

For adults, the shoe industry has become increasingly centred on shoe fashion and the marketing of shoes as a status symbol. However, for children, shoes have maintained their original role of protection from the hazards of the world we live in. According to most experts, shoes are not recommended for pre-walking infants since the bones and ligaments in their feet are still flexible, rapidly developing and prone to deforming forces.

In fact, a stiff shoe can decrease a child's ability to balance and cause frequent falling. A soft, warm bootie is the shoe of choice until the child is able to walk unassisted. Once walking, a flexible shoe is preferred to allow for normal foot function. The idea that shoes should be the most expensive for proper function is just a myth.

While there seems to be an assortment of opinions regarding shoes, most experts have agreed that the proper shoe should be flexible, light, and made of breathable materials. If the shoe is too heavy or rigid, the foot will not develop normally. The heel counter should be the only rigid part of the shoe.

This is the part of the shoe that surrounds the heel and provides the greatest amount of support. The shoe should flex at the forefoot and midfoot, but not at the heel counter. Some suggest high top sneakers to add stability, but there is controversy with this since they can act as a 'brace' and disrupt the normal development of the muscles that support the foot and ankle.

Children's feet grow at a rapid and unpredictable pace owing to the fact that they tend to grow in spurts. This is often very frustrating for parents since the cost of quality children's shoes is about one-half that of the adult's version.

Parents should be advised that saving money by "handing down" shoes from older children to younger siblings can be problematic since every child wears shoes differently. While the size may be just right, the old wear pattern of the shoe may throw off the normal gait in the new owner. Since the support of the shoe is most likely

compromised, an older pair of shoes should be carefully inspected prior to being passed down.

Perhaps the most acceptable way of increasing the life of a shoe is to buy the shoe slightly bigger than the child's measured length since it is better to be too big than too small in terms of shoe fit. There should be about two centimetres from the longest toe (not always the first) to the tip of the shoe. Also check to see that the child's foot is not lifting out of the heel and that the child doesn't trip over the shoe.

### SHOE SIZE SHOULD BE CHECKED AS FOLLOWS:

Age	Check shoe fit
1-6 years	Every 2 months
6-10 years	Every 3 months
10-12 years	Every 4 months
12-15 years	Every 5 months
15-20 years	Every 6 months
>20 years	Every new shoe purchase

The Footwear Council offers the following fitting tips:

- If children repeatedly take off their shoes, this may indicate that the shoes are too small.
- Any sign of a limp could mean trouble and shoes must be checked.
- If the shoe lining shows excessive wear in the area of the fifth toe, the shoes are too short. You can feel the inside lining of the shoe for dents for improper toe pressure.
- Watch for any red marks across the top of the foot, over the tops of the toe, or on the sides of the foot. This indicates that the shoe is too narrow or too small.
- If the soles are unevenly worn with excessive wear on the inside or outside edges this could be an indication of improper foot or ankle function. The child should be taken to see a specialist who can determine the best type of treatment to correct this.
- Be wary of passing shoes down because you may only end up passing down foot problems.

Some footwear manufacturers are now identifying the needs of their tiniest consumers and focusing on educating parents on the importance of correct footwear and the ever-changing developmental demands of Little Feet in action. Nike recently launched their newest innovation in youth footwear, a shoe that cradles the growing foot as a protective shield while enabling complete mobility as nature intended, safely and comfortably.

It's my personal philosophy that the footwear industry has a unique opportunity to not only manufacture a product that looks good, but also a product that can provide both short- and long-term benefits to good feet health. After all, we only have two feet to carry us the distance day in and day out and it all starts with busy little feet. 🏃‍♂️

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