

# Heads Up, Push Up, Call Up

By Erika Gimbel, NPN member since 2004

Out of all the milestones your new baby reaches, "head control" isn't close to being as exciting as the moment your baby smiles, coos or sits up. However, an infant who hasn't lifted up his head or pushed up on his arms by the end of three months may be at risk for developing an early motor delay.

A recent national survey conducted by Pathways Awareness Foundation in Chicago showed that most parents are unaware of this three-month milestone. Two-thirds of the parents didn't know that their child should be lifting up his head and pushing up on his arms by three months – and only five percent of them would call a doctor.

"Parents tend to wait and see," said Dr. John Sarwark of Children's Memorial's Department of Pediatric Orthopedics. "But if parents haven't seen the baby lift its head or shoulders within a couple of weeks after the three-month mark, it's an important topic to bring up with their health care professional."

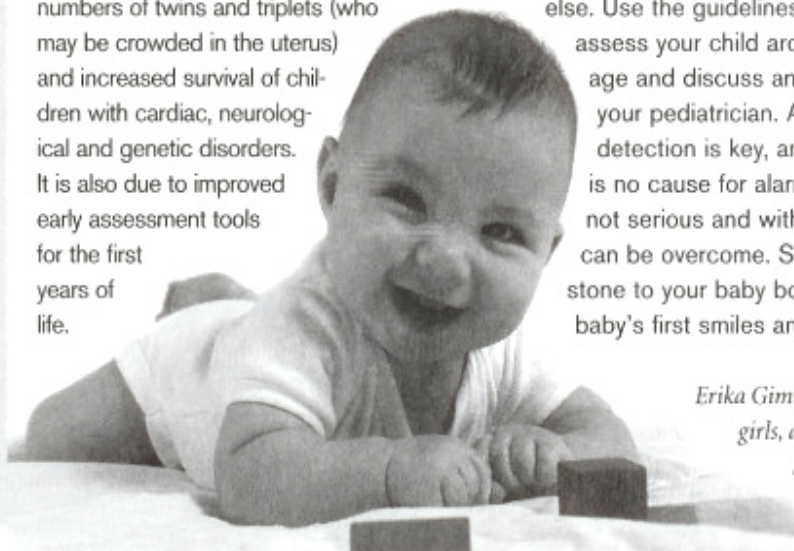
The term "early motor delay" describes a wide variety of conditions, ranging from low muscle tone to cerebral palsy. The good

news is that most cases are not serious. With physical therapy and a strategy of tummy time while awake most children can catch up quickly. Also, numerous studies show that parents, when they know what to look for, are as good or better than professionals at evaluating their child since they see their children daily in a variety of situations.

Diane Simpson-Bundy, a former Olympian who lives in Northfield, knows a thing or two about muscles, but wasn't sure whether she should take her son, Jonathan, for an evaluation. "Jonathan was born with a blood disorder and I was focused on that," she said. "My sister, a nurse, and my husband convinced me to get a second opinion about the fact that Jonathan wasn't holding his head up properly and it was tilted to one side."

Jonathan was diagnosed with torticollis, a tightening of neck muscles, which doctors say was a result of his position in utero. Jonathan started physical therapy at four months, and with once-a-week sessions and practice at home, he is expected to fully catch up by age one.

Each year more than 400,000 children in the U.S. are at risk for an early motor delay and actual incidences are one in 40, a 150 percent increase from 25 years ago. Dr. Michael Msall of the University of Chicago Comer and La Rabida Children's Hospitals and professor of pediatrics at University of Chicago said the increase is due to several factors, including a higher survival rate of preterm babies, increased numbers of twins and triplets (who may be crowded in the uterus) and increased survival of children with cardiac, neurological and genetic disorders. It is also due to improved early assessment tools for the first years of life.



## Resources

There are many resources for information and referrals. Some sources include your pediatrician, developmental-behavioral pediatricians, pediatric neurologists, nurse practitioners and therapists. If your child is diagnosed with an early motor delay, the cost of therapy is often covered by insurance. In addition, Illinois' Early Intervention program provides free evaluation and physical therapy for children with developmental delays.

> Pathways Awareness Foundation's website, [www.pathwaysawareness.org](http://www.pathwaysawareness.org), and its "parent answered" help line, 1-800-955-CHILD (2445), provide information on early motor delays and referrals to doctors, therapists and therapy centers.

> Information on the Illinois Early Intervention Program can be found at [www.dhs.state.il.us/ei/](http://www.dhs.state.il.us/ei/) or 1-800-323-GROW (4769).

## Identifying an Early Motor Delay

While lying on tummy, baby:

- > Pushes up on arms
- > Lifts and holds head up

Signs of concern:

- > Difficulty lifting head
- > Stiff legs with little or no movement
- > Pushes back with head

**Note: If your child is premature, adjust the three-month milestone to correspond with your child's original due date.**

Gay Girolami, a physical therapist and executive director of Pathways Center, a physical therapy center for children in Glenview, said she is seeing more cases of torticollis, which may be a secondary effect of the back-to-sleep initiative that helps prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Girolami advocates back-sleeping but parents should encourage as much supervised tummy time as possible when babies are awake to help them develop neck and back muscles.

"The infants who need the most tummy time are preterm infants and infants with complex health conditions," Msall said. "Tummy time will help facilitate their experiences against gravity which is the basis for motor learning and exploration."

You should feel confident about evaluating your baby's motor development. You know your child better than anyone else. Use the guidelines outlined above to assess your child around 3 months of age and discuss any concerns with your pediatrician. And, while early detection is key, an early motor delay is no cause for alarm. Most cases are not serious and with proper intervention can be overcome. So add another milestone to your baby book and enjoy your baby's first smiles and coos! ■

*Erika Gimbel is the mother of two girls, ages three and one, and lives in Jefferson Park.*

