

BACK TO BABY BASICS



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Julie Lockwood, 5, reaches for a bean bag as she is held by Catherine Risigo-Wickline at Jumpstart Therapy & Fitness network in Oakville. Julie has been working on strength, coordination and visual perception for about a year.

Therapy makes up for not learning to crawl

BY LARAIN WESCHLER
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WATERTOWN — Five-year-old Julie Lockwood giggled as she swung back and forth on her belly, trying to reach a bean bag and toss it into a bucket.

The game was not just fun, it was also helping Julie to develop her extensor muscle strength, balance and coordination.

Like many children born in the past two decades, Julie was not allowed to sleep on her stomach for fear of sudden infant death syndrome.

Because she slept on her back, Julie never learned to crawl, according to Catherine Risigo-Wickline, owner of Jumpstart Therapy & Fitness Network, a children's therapy center in Oakville. Instead of

crawling, Julie started walking at an early age, Risigo-Wickline said.

Although experts are divided about the importance of crawling to later development and learning, Risigo-Wickline believes skipping this crucial step has left Julie without the physical and perceptual skills necessary to succeed in school.



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According to an article by the American Academy of Pediatrics, a few children never crawl, instead scooting on their bottoms or slithering on their stomachs.

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"As long as your baby is learning to coordinate each side of her body and is using each arm and leg equally, there's no cause for concern. The important thing is that she's able to explore her surroundings on her own and is strengthening her body in preparation for walking," the 2011 article states.

Risigo-Wickline said the belly-down fetal position helps babies calm down when they cry and develops core strength as they learn to pick their heads up, push up on their hands, and eventually learn to crawl. Crawling helps children develop neural pathways to explore their world, develop finger dexterity, and even their tongue muscles for speech, Risigo-Wickline said.

When Julie started walking at nine months, her doctor applauded her for taking her first steps so early. He should have seen that as a red flag, Risigo-Wickline said.

"We thought she was very advanced, and that was a wonderful thing," Julie's mother, Karen Lockwood, said. "It's like taking algebra and skipping everything else and going right to calculus."

It wasn't until halfway through her first year of preschool that Julie's parents noticed that something was wrong.

Their daughter was suddenly unhappy. She wasn't able to retain the information her classmates were learning and



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Julie Lockwood, 5, reaches for a balloon at Jumpstart Therapy & Fitness network in Oakville, where she has been working on strength, coordination and visual perception for about a year.

didn't like to participate in class activities. She preferred activi-

ties that didn't require a lot of movement, couldn't hold a pen-

cil properly and tended to wiggle in her chair.

Because she had poor visual perception and no peripheral vision, Julie would bump into things. While her peers could recognize all the letters in the alphabet, Julie only knew nine.

Julie was already participating in Jumpstart's playgroup, so when Lockwood told Cathy Risigo-Wickline about Julie's troubles, she immediately recommended a full evaluation.

"She was afraid of her own shadow," Risigo-Wickline said of Julie before she started physical therapy.

At JumpStart, Julie works on her fine and gross motor skills by swinging, climbing, throwing and moving through a castle obstacle course.

After one year of therapy, Julie has improved tremendously, her mother said. When she started therapy, Julie's whole body moved when someone called her name.

Now, she can turn her head independently of her torso. She has more friends and has caught up with her peers in school. She takes gymnastics classes and plans to play soccer in the spring.

Lockwood said her daughter wouldn't have passed kindergarten if she hadn't learned physical self-confidence from therapy.

"She's just enjoying school. It's not a bad place to be anymore," Lockwood said.

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