



Ko crawls in circles around the secure base of his mother's body, beginning cautiously and then gaining in confidence while she talks to him.

Ko explores further afield, focusing visually on things both near and far away, urged by his mother to return by clapping her hands on the ground

## PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# At a crawl

Crawling is an important physical stage in its own right which enables babies to break away from their carers for the first time and is significant in reflex development, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Ko (9 months) is out in the park with his mum. They don't have a garden but mum takes him out somewhere every day. Mum's first language is Japanese and she also speaks English. Ko was asleep in his sling when they arrived and mum laid him down on the grass until he woke up naturally.

Ko has just begun crawling. After a few minutes of playing with mum and getting used to his surroundings in the park, he begins cautiously to move off and crawl around, stopping to focus on the grass and plucking at the daisies, as well as watching the people passing by.

He keeps close to mum's body, scrambling over her legs and then crawling carefully around her as she sits on the grass. She keeps talking to him, laughing with pleasure as he reappears from behind her back.

As his confidence grows, he branches out a bit further, crawling

off towards the bench at the edge of the grass. He quickly comes back to mum, who greets him warmly, bringing her focus down to his face and clapping her hands on the ground as he quickly crawls towards her.

### GOOD PRACTICE

**Ko has recently begun to crawl and is enjoying the new-found freedom and independence that this brings him.**

He is no longer completely dependent on someone providing interesting things to stimulate him – he is able to go off and find them for himself.

Increased scientific understanding of child development helps us to appreciate this crucially important stage of a baby's development and the link between physical development and the building of brains.



### FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films 'Babies Outdoors – Play, Learning and Development'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilm.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilm.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

When he is crawling, Ko is doing more than just getting around. He is developing several important physical aspects, all of which are important for his future learning and development. Jan White describes these fully in the notes for this Siren Film; here are a few of the main ones:

**Vision** His vision and spatial awareness is being developed by moving freely in a space with things that are both near and far from him. His eyes are focusing on his hands and the ground as he moves along, and also on things in the distance. The open spaces of the park provide lots of opportunities for long-distance focus like this.

**Brain** The alternating movements on each side of his body as he crawls help build the connection between both sides of his brain. This cross-lateral movement encourages both sides of his body to work together.

**Body awareness** Taking his weight on his hands, arms, knees and legs and feeling their impact on the ground as he moves across the grass helps Ko with his proprioception, or body awareness. This is what helps him to understand where his body starts and finishes, which is important for later co-ordination.

**Reflexes** There are several important reflexes that are present at birth or in the first year. The symmetrical tonic neck reflex is important in crawling – it tells the arms to straighten when the knees bend and if the arms are bent, it makes the legs want to straighten. This reflex makes the regular crawling position easy

and instinctive. It usually dissipates and goes away when it is no longer needed, once the child is walking.

**2 As the above points clearly demonstrate, crawling is an important part of physical development in its own right, and not just a preparation for walking.**

The importance of crawling explains why it can sometimes be a problem for some children who begin to walk early and miss out on valuable crawling time.

The work of Sally Goddard Blythe and others has drawn attention to the problems that can occur when these early reflexes remain longer than needed. For one reason or another, a child may not have had enough opportunity to work through a particular process, so the reflex has been retained.

Not having enough crawling experience can mean that the symmetrical tonic neck reflex is still active, which can make some actions difficult as a child gets older. Imagine sitting at a desk and bending your arms to write, and your legs instinctively wanting to straighten out?

It looks like you are slumping, but your body is just responding to the instinctive reflex. Similarly, if you are being good and sitting up straight with your knees bent, then your body resists bending your arms so that you can write properly.

There are intervention and treatment programmes that can address

these reflex issues and other neuro-developmental delays, but one important preventative measure is to ensure that babies and young children continue to get lots of natural opportunities for playful crawling, before and after they have begun to walk. (See References and Further Reading for more information.)

**3 Ko's mum is his safe base in the big open space of the park, providing a place to return to when he chooses.**

Ko sticks close and carefully crawls around her until he feels ready to go off and explore a little bit further afield. While he looks back and 'checks in' with her, she keeps talking to him all the while. And soon enough, he is ready to come straight back into her welcoming arms.

The presence of this secure base reduces Ko's anxiety and frees him to be able to explore. The influential attachment theorist, John Bowlby, was particularly interested in this aspect of parent-child relationships. In *A Secure Base*, he describes a study by Anderson (1972) observing two- and three-year-olds playing with their mothers in a London park. The children rarely went far without returning and keeping their mother in sight. If they lost sight of her, then all exploration was forgotten and the 'top priority then became to regain her, in an older child by searching and in a younger one by howling' (Bowlby 1988: 69).



### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

- Siren Film Notes, 'Babies Outdoors – Play, learning and development' by Jan White (2010)
- Sally Goddard Blythe, *The Well Balanced Child*. Hawthorn Press
- JW Anderson, 'Attachment behaviour out of doors' in N Blurton Jones' (ed) *Ethological Studies of Child Behaviour*. Cambridge (cited in Bowlby)
- John Bowlby (1988), *A Secure Base*. Routledge
- Information on neurodevelopmental delay is at: [www.inpp.org.uk/intervention-adults-children/more-information/reflexes](http://www.inpp.org.uk/intervention-adults-children/more-information/reflexes)
- For playful crawling, ideas, see 'Physical Development, Part 3' (*Nursery World*, 15 January 2009, [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/go/physical-development](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/go/physical-development))

He describes these explorations as 'excursions' and suggests that this sense of a safe base provided by our attachment figures stays with us even as adults. 'All of us, from the cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organised as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figures' (ibid).

**4 The constant presence of a secure base is crucial for a baby being cared for outside of the home and is the reason why the key person approach is so important in early childcare.**

Without that sense of security and constancy, then the all-important excursions into learning and new experiences are much less likely to happen successfully.

Regular little walks outdoors to familiar places, such as the park, with relaxed and attentive carers are much more valuable for young babies than infrequent big trips and outings. Get them out of their prams and down on the grass, and enjoy picking those daisies with them. ■



### LINKS TO THE EYFS

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **PR 2.4** Key Person
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.2** Active Learning