



### **"Prone-to-Play"**

#### **Tummy-Time Activities to Encourage Motor Development in Infants**

By Jo Briceno, Pediatric Physical Therapist

During the past two decades, most pediatricians and health care providers use the term "Back-to-Bed" to encourage mothers of infants to place babies on their backs when sleeping to reduce the incidence of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Occurring simultaneously has been an increase in the use of baby positioning devices such as baby carriers, infant seats and baby walkers. As a result, infants are spending a considerable amount of time lying on their backs or in a supported sitting position and spending much less time playing on their tummy (also referred to as the "prone" position). Although many pediatricians have encouraged parents to place babies on their tummy to play, many parents report that their baby cries or is fussy when placed on their tummy, and therefore, do not place their baby on their tummy. Many pediatric physical and occupational therapists are concerned that this trend has resulted in atypical or inefficient development of gross and fine motor skills.

#### **Why is "Prone-to-Play" Important?**

It is in the prone (tummy-lying) position that babies develop symmetrical muscular strength in the muscles of head, neck and back that later allow for the development of symmetry and balance in sitting, on hands and knees, and when kneeling and standing. Additionally, it is in the prone position that babies develop most of the muscular control needed to roll, crawl, pull-up to standing and walk.

Babies who do not spend enough time playing in a prone position are at increased risk for the following:

- Flat spots on the back or side of the head
- Facial asymmetry or head tilting
- Delay in achieving independence in motor milestones such as sitting, quadruped and standing
- Delay or asymmetry in crawling or walking

This article highlights the developmental motor milestones babies achieve while in a prone (tummy-lying) position

along with suggestions for fun activities that you can do with your baby to encourage these skills, or **"Prone-to-Play."**

#### **Stage One (0-1 Month)**

At this stage, when the babies are placed on their stomach, they rest with the head rotated toward the side and the weight on the cheek and upper body, putting a lot of pressure on their face. Soon after birth, however, babies start developing the ability to momentarily lift and turn their head toward the side.

#### **Activity**

While your baby is awake, hold and cuddle the baby on their tummy in an upright, slanted posture over your chest, while you are lying on your back. Talk and sing to your baby or use musical toys in front of the baby's face. Repeat this activity several times during the day but for short intervals (about 1 minute).



#### **Stage Two (2-3 Months)**

At 2 months of age, the baby can briefly lift the head to a 45° angle and turn it slightly toward the side. At this age, asymmetry is normal. As the baby turns his head, he extends one arm and learns to push off slightly on one arm. At 3 months of age the baby has better midline control and can now easily lift his head and chest 45°. In this position, the baby is able to hold his head stable for extended periods of time and can turn his head slightly without leaning to the side and can use their eyes to follow a moving visual stimulus.

#### **Activity**

Place the baby on your chest or over your legs. Encourage him/her to lift the head up while assisting the baby to tuck the elbows toward the shoulders. Place objects above the level of the baby's eyes to encourage the baby to lift the head up.

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### Stage Three (4 to 6 months)

The baby can now lift and hold their head up between 45° to 90° and can extend his entire body up while shifting his weight from one forearm to the other. The hands are generally positioned in front of the shoulders. The baby is able to lift the arms simultaneously to the sides and forward and sometimes pushes on extended elbows while lifting the chest. Pushing up on the arms is important for the development of arm and hand function as the baby's arms are strengthened and they receive sensory stimulation into the palms of their hands. By the sixth month of age, the prone position is usually the baby's favorite position.

#### Activity

Provide the baby with plenty of "Prone-to-Play" time on the floor while they are awake. Place a rolled towel or a boppy pillow under the baby's chest (at nipple level), to assist them in lifting their head and chest, if needed. Present toys to the baby, at or above the eye level to encourage reaching. Musical toys or simple cause-and-effect toys are best.



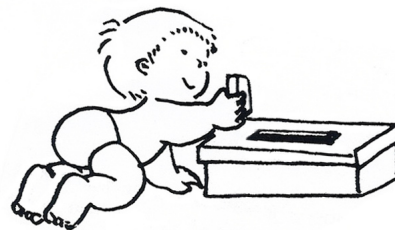
### Stage Four (7-9 Months)

Many babies are now able to get to a hands and knees position independently and may start rocking on hands and knees. In this position, the baby continues to

develop strength in both arms and legs. The baby not only continues to strengthen his arms, legs and trunk, but he begins to learn how to use both arms and legs in a reciprocal, bilateral manner as they begin to crawl and move throughout their environment. In addition to the development of motor skills, babies develop spatial awareness as they move in, out, and around objects.

#### Activity

Encourage the baby to reach up and forward and to the side while on hands/knees.



Just as placing your child "Back-to-Bed" is important for preventing SIDS, placing your baby "Prone-to-Play" is important to assure that your baby receives the needed sensory and motor experiences for the development of motor skills.

*Jo Briceno is a pediatric physical therapist with Sovereign Pediatric Therapy and has over 20 years of experience serving children and families with special needs.*

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#### Jo Briceno, PT

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