

To use or not to use baby walker with typically developing children: mothers' perceptions and home environment stimulation

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The use of baby walker during the process of gait acquisition is a parents' choice, based on beliefs that this equipment may stimulate the emergence of independent gait. Therapists' attitudes towards the use of baby walker are often in opposite direction, based on clinical assumption that it does not allow children to develop essential motor foundations necessary for stable locomotion pattern. Nevertheless, some parents choose using it while others choose not to. **Objectives:** Evaluate the home environmental stimulation available to children who used and who did not use baby walker, and the perception of the mothers' about the use of baby walker on the gait acquisition of typically developing infants. **Methods:** Data were collected in two distinct times: at the inclusion of infants in this study (between 7 and 10 months of age) and at the first month after independent gait acquisition. The 24 infants were selected by convenience, 12 in baby-walker group (BWG) and 12 in control group (CG); groups were equivalent in age, gender and SES. The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment-HOME test was administered to all infants at their inclusion in this study. Infants were followed weekly by telephone to determine the moment of independent gait acquisition. A qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted with toddlers' mothers after gait acquisition. Content analysis identified the emerging thematic themes from the interviews. **Results:** T-test revealed that the mean HOME scores from the BWG were higher than the CG, ($p=0.014$; effect size $d=0.24$). Qualitative analysis of the interviews with BWG mothers' identified the following categories: 1) stimulus to development, 2) freedom for the mother, 3) satisfaction. The interviews with CG mothers' showed: 1) risk of accidents, 2) potential hazard to the development of gait. **Conclusions:** Results indicate that the home environment of the BWG seems more stimulating than that of CG. The beliefs underlying the decision to use the baby walker suggest different reasoning patterns about the role of this equipment for toddlers' development and independence. **Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy:** Results help understand the choices and decisions supporting child-rearing practices.