

Something's Afoot – Finding the Right Shoes for Your Child

The moment a baby takes his first step he begins a journey of about 115,000 miles. That's approximately how far a person will walk in a lifetime. Taking good care of that baby's feet now may help prevent problems later in life.

According to the American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons, allowing toddlers to walk barefoot, or with non-skid socks, indoors will help the foot to grow normally and to strengthen. When it comes time to put shoes on little feet, parents should look for shoes that are flexible, but supportive enough to aid in the proper development of the bones and muscles of the foot, as well as provide comfort and stability.

The right shoe

Experts suggest looking for shoes with a firm, comfortable fit, rounded toe with plenty of room, flexible flat soles, good heel support and laces or straps to keep the foot from slipping inside the shoe. Other recommendations are:

- Avoid hard and inflexible shoes, which can make walking more difficult.
- Children's feet grow rapidly; they will need to be measured and fitted for new shoes every three to four months.
- Try shoes on both feet and buy the size that best fits the larger foot.
- Try on shoes wearing the same type of socks you will wear with the shoes.
- After your child has worn a new pair of shoes for a while, examine your child's bare feet for signs of redness or irritation.
- There should be "wiggle room" for the toes – about one-half inch of space (or a thumb's width) between the tip of the toes and the end of the shoe.
- Have the child walk around the store for a few minutes to check for pressure spots in or irritation from the shoe.
- Choose shoes with leather uppers. Synthetics such as nylon, plastic and rubber don't allow sweat to escape, which increases the chances of athlete's foot and toenail problems.
- Make sure the top of the shoe doesn't press on the toes or the toenails.

Shoes for sports

When choosing an athletic shoe, consider the child's needs. Experts recommend "cross trainers" for general use, such as gym class or play. However, if a child participates in a particular sport more than three hours a week, he should have a shoe specifically designed for that sport.

When buying an athletic shoe for your child:

- Bring your child to the store and have her feet measured while standing. A perfect fit is important - shoes that don't fit properly can cause a number of problems, including blisters, curling of the toes, bunions, calluses, pinched nerves, ingrown toenails and foot and ankle injuries.
- When standing in a sports shoe, there should always be one thumb's width between the end of the shoe and the longest toe.
- Have your child wear the socks she plans to wear with the shoes. Socks made of synthetic fibers that wick moisture away from the skin are best, as they help prevent blisters and athlete's foot.
- Let the child wear the shoe for at least 10 minutes and take a short jog around the store.
- Replace running shoes regularly; check the wear of the shoes frequently.
- Choose shoes made of leather, suede or canvas, as they are the most durable and "breathable" shoes. Synthetic materials don't allow the foot to "breathe" and may even contribute to skin diseases and foot odor.

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