Next steps: your toddler's gait after he starts to walk

The moment is here, your web cam is on and you beam your toddler's first steps to hundreds of relatives. But what comes after this highly anticipated moment? Your toddler's walking gait looks more like Frankenstein's than that of an Olympic athlete. Deborah Stack, who holds Masters and Doctoral Degrees in Physical Therapy from Thomas Jefferson University, joins us today to tell us what to expect next from your little Frankenstein.

Naline Lai, MD and Julie Kardos, MD

I remember looking at my 16-month-old son and telling him, "You need to learn to walk before your new brother or sister is born." I did not relish the idea of simultaneously carrying two children. But even after my second was born, I still did a lot of carrying. We all focus on our children's first steps, but mature walking does not occur immediately.

Toddlerhood officially begins when a child takes his first steps, around 12-15 months, and ends with a mature walking pattern around age three years. But what happens in between? Look for your child to begin taking steps with his feet closer together. His hands progress from being held out to the side near the shoulders to a relaxed position lowered at his sides as he moves. Children will also begin to be able to walk on a wider variety of surfaces such carpet, grass, sand and inclines. They will learn to walk sideways and backwards as well as maneuver around and over toys in their path. Initially your child will probably walk on his toes or with his whole foot hitting the ground at the same time and his feet as wide apart as his shoulders or even more. By age three, most children will walk with their feet just a few

inches apart and a “heel-toe” gait, meaning their heel will hit first and then they will shift their weight forward to the big toe before lifting it for the next step. Skills such as running and jumping occur at varying times during toddlerhood.

Taking a walk is a great way to help your child develop his gait. But don’t restrict him to staying on the path! Try walking on grass, playground surfaces, sand boxes, and snow. Once your child can walk on level surfaces, try walking up and down hills and then across them. Decrease your support as he gains confidence. At the playground, climbing is a great way for toddlers to strengthen their muscles, as well as to develop balance and spatial awareness.

This holiday season, save the shipping boxes. Stepping in and out of low boxes is a great way to practice balance and will provide hours of fun during the upcoming holiday festivities.

These tips will help you enjoy your child’s “next steps” as much as his first ones.

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