

When Not to Worry

By Heather Hudson

Are kids more resilient than parents think? This was a serious question in our household after our toddler took a nasty spill down a flight of stairs and, aside from a big scare, walked away just fine. Was my daughter a master stunt person at the age of 14 months or are most kids this hardy?

According to Leslie Solomonian, an intern at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, toddlers can endure the cringe-worthy crashes and inexplicable head-over-feet tumbles associated with learning to walk, run – and, yes, climb stairs – because the bones in their scalp aren't yet fused. In fact, none of their bones are completely calcified at a young age.

"Before children reach adulthood, they have a little more flexibility in their bone structure, which allows them to withstand the unavoidable bumps and bruises that are inherent in the clumsiness of toddler hood," Solomonian says.

This released me from my worrier's shackles and it got me thinking. What other things can I relax about? As it turns out, plenty.

Colds and Such

A runny nose, hacking cough and bright red cheeks often send anxious parents straight to the doctor's office. But Dr. Paul Meinert, general consulting pediatrician at the Kingston General Hospital in Ontario, Canada, says it's often best to let viruses run their natural course. "It's perfectly normal for kids to contract six to 10 colds in a year," says Dr. Meinert. "Eighty per cent of all childhood infections are viral and don't need to be treated with anything. In the vast majority of cases, there's nothing to worry about."

Though it can be difficult to watch your normally active toddler laid out and cranky for a few days, minor illnesses may even be beneficial to their future health. Solomonian contends that contracting colds is actually good for developing healthy immune systems. She says it's important to be exposed to a number of challenges while we're young. "If I see a child who is never sick, I wonder if she has a good immune response and question her body's ability to fight viruses later on in life," she says.

When to be concerned: A virus usually lasts three to seven days. You may want to check with your doctor if your child's illness is prolonged and the symptoms severe.

Fever Frets

Generally thought of as something to treat – and fast – a fever is actually a common and benign part of being sick. Meinert and Solomonian agree that, generally, a fever is nothing to worry about.

But when Rae Thompson's oldest son, Dexter, spiked his first temperature, she was anything but calm. The Toronto, Ontario mother remembers groggily combing her local 24-hour drugstore snatching up every type of thermometer on the market. "We figured that if we could just pinpoint the exact temperature, we'd know if it was serious or not," she says.

By the time her second son, Jackson, came along, she'd chucked all the thermometers in favor of focusing on the child, not his symptoms. "We've learned that fevers come and go within a day or so and we try to help them out by offering lots of liquids, tepid baths and TLC," Thompson says. "We've never used a thermometer on Jackson and he's managed to escape peril somehow."

From a naturopathic perspective, a fever is a sign that the body is working to fight infection and should not be artificially lowered. Dr. Meinert agrees that the lethargy induced by fever forces children to get the rest they need to recover, but he sees nothing wrong with administering acetaminophen or ibuprofen to make children more comfortable. It just might be harder to keep them in bed.

When to be concerned: A temperature above 38.5 degrees Celsius/101.3 Fahrenheit, taken rectally, is considered a fever. Consult your doctor if your child's temperature is elevated longer than three to five days or two days if there are no other symptoms of illness.

Food Issues

Natalie Rotstein of Toronto, Canada, confesses to worrying when her 2-year-old daughter, Jessica, occasionally goes on an eating strike. Fortunately, her experience with older daughter, Rachel, helps her keep perspective. "My kids tend to go through stages with food," she says. "For a week Jessica may only want to eat crackers. Five years ago I would have panicked that she wasn't getting proper nutrition, but I've learned to ride it out. It always passes."

According to Dr. Meinert, it's part of a toddler's nature to be a picky eater. As they learn to tolerate new tastes and textures, they tend to get hung up on their favorites. So what do you do when your child refuses to eat anything but raisins? "Don't engage in power struggles around food," says Dr. Meinert. "I've never seen a child starve himself. As long as you're offering a variety of healthy choices at structured intervals, eventually, he will eat."

Still, if you've got a kid who can go two days on a few bites of cereal and a slice of apple, it can be hard to not to worry. For the tougher cases, Solomonian recommends aiming for a balanced day or week instead of a balanced meal. "It's not like what we take in at each meal is all we have until the next time we eat," she says. "The body is amazingly adaptable and will do everything it can to get what it needs. We have a great capacity for storing fuel."

As long as you're being consistent in offering a range of healthy choices from all food groups, both experts agree the finicky phase will pass and your child will come around. But if you're truly concerned about your child's intake of important vitamins and minerals, consider supplementing with a multi-vitamin.

"Vitamins make up for a deficient diet to some degree and also offer peace of mind that your child is getting the proper nutrients a growing body needs," says Solomonian. "I recommend a multi-vitamin designed for children in colorless liquid, not chewable form."

When to be concerned: If your child loses weight or appears not to be growing at a progressive rate.

Meeting Developmental Milestones

When Rotstein's daughter, Rachel, was 2 years old, she rarely jumped and climbed like other kids her age. But she was clearly advanced in her verbal skills. "Rachel was very social and very talkative," Rotstein says. "As she was developing her language skills, she might have neglected her gross motor skills a little bit. But it all evened out by the time she hit preschool."

Dr. Meinert says Rotstein was right not to worry. First-time parents often obsessively track every detail of their child's development. But he cautions against going strictly by the book. "It's more about a steady progression than rapid acquisition of milestones," he says.

Just like adults, children are individuals and progress at different rates. Appreciate their individuality and take heart in the fact that, sooner or later, most of them end up with the same basic skills.

When to be concerned: If a child exhibits the ability to perform a new skill, such as saying several words, and then suddenly stops talking, it's worthwhile to check it out.

Perspective and experience seem to be the key words when it comes to riding out the inevitable sniffles, struggles and stumbling blocks in your toddler's life. Though Dr. Meinert says you should always see your healthcare professional if you're truly alarmed, most childhood ailments get better with time and the kind of loving attention that only a parent can provide.

Though we can relax about the common health issues all children experience, accidents can happen in the blink of an eye, as I can attest after my daughter's descent down the stairs. And since there is no limit to the number of daredevil feats most toddlers will to attempt, a safe environment and a vigilant eye are your best bets for keeping kids out of harm's way.

About the Author: Heather Hudson is a freelance writer based in Toronto.