

# Why is Crawling On Hands & Knees So Important?

By Eliza Parker, Infant Developmental Movement Educator, ConsciousBaby.com

Yes! Crawling on hands and knees is *that* significant! It often begins around 7, 8, or 9 months and can last ...well, however long it takes! If you have a crawler, observe her; or if not (or even if so), try it yourself! Specifically, which limb moves first? What part of the body follows next?

## What makes crawling so special?

### Brain development: the magic of crisscrossing

Hands & Knees crawling requires *opposite-side* limbs, unlike belly crawling (which emphasizes same-side leg and arm). This is called “contra-lateral” or “cross-lateral” (crossing sides). Watch how the movement sequences diagonally through the body as Baby reaches forward with one hand and her opposite knee follows.



What does this mean? (It’s super exciting!) You’ve probably heard a bit about brain halves. There’s an important pathway between these hemispheres—a band of nerve fibers called the corpus callosum. The crisscrossing of movement through the body supports the crisscrossing of information in the brain. That is, crawling helps develop this band of nerves that allows the hemispheres of Baby’s brain to communicate with each other.

In her fabulous book, *Smart Moves*, Dr. Carla Hannaford says, “*Cross lateral movements, like a baby’s crawling, activate both hemispheres in a balanced way. These activities work both sides of the body evenly and involve coordinated movements of both eyes, both ears, both hands and both feet as well as balanced core muscles. When both eyes, both ears, both hands and feet are being used equally, the corpus callosum orchestrating these processes between the two hemispheres becomes more fully developed. Because both hemispheres and all four lobes are activated, cognitive function is heightened and ease of learning increases.*” (p. 81)

### Culmination of all previous motor milestones! In typical development, you probably saw:

*Spinal, or ‘Head-Tail’*: Baby rolled!

*Upper-lower*: Baby pushed up on both arms at the same time to lift her head, or kicked both legs

*Side-side*: She supported herself on one elbow while playing or belly crawled—movements that coordinated a same-side arm and leg at the same time

What do you get when you combine *upper-lower* and *side-side* abilities? Not to mention your *head-tail* axis? You can put them together and move diagonally (crossing sides), or in any combination—basically, you can move any way you want, 3-dimensionally!

### Spine learns about rotating (twisting)

**Ability to cross midline** (to move a limb to the opposite side of the body). This is important for reflex integration, daily function, vision, hearing, and learning.

**Prepares the hip joints for standing and walking**: helps organize and shape the hip sockets. As Keith Mankin, MD (NCScoliosis.com) notes, “*The muscle function starts to reshape the hips. As the hips reshape, pulled inward and forward by the muscle function, they become stronger and better positioned to lift the body and to start forward propulsion. And ultimately, these functional changes lead to increased strength and*

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*balance which lift the child upward into stance and walking.”*

**Strengthens the lower back** (whole torso!) in preparation for being upright

**Prepares the ankles** for supporting all of Baby’s body weight

**Strengthens hand-eye coordination**

**Supports reading.** Really—all this integration of brain halves, reflexes, cross lateral hand-eye coordination, and whole body... Once, I had a mother of 7 report that those of her kids who crawled were great readers, while those who didn’t were having difficulty.

## Do other “creative options” count?

Some babies crawl with one knee and one foot or scoot on their bottom. These babies very wisely found a solution for getting around! However, these options can actually indicate that they’re having difficulty finding both hands and both knees (there are many possible reasons why this can happen!). So, they can miss out on some of the benefits of crawling. If your baby is crawling ‘creatively,’ there are fun, nonjudgmental, noninvasive ways to provide support.



*By the way ~ crawling isn’t just beneficial for babies! It can be of great support to children of any age, grown ups who wish to problem solve or maximize brain potential, and people who experience challenge in motor function or who’ve had a stroke. Go on, try it!*

## But some say crawling is not important

You may hear this. I’ve noticed it’s sometimes said for the simple fact that crawling often doesn’t happen these days—so if babies aren’t doing it, it must not be important. However, there are a few current parenting trends contributing to the inhibition of reflexes and typical motor development in general, such as propping in holding devices. An increase in the skipping of crawling points to these and other factors—it does not indicate that crawling is not important!

Dr. Hannaford again: *“We have known for years that children who miss the vitally important crawling stage may exhibit learning difficulties later on. Crawling, a cross-lateral movement, activates development of the corpus callosum . . . This gets both sides of the body working together, including the arms, legs, eyes (binocular vision) and the ears (binaural hearing). With equal stimulation, the senses more fully access the environment and both sides of the body can move in a more integrated way for more efficient action.”* (p 100)

## The bonus, but only if you wait and watch

Crawling is profoundly important. There’s no rush to stand and walk. Allow Baby to crawl for as long as she will, without “walking” her, *until she chooses to walk on her own*, and reap the benefits for a lifetime! (And! Be blown away by the fastest speed crawling you’ll ever see! Seriously, it’s worth the wait!)

## Questions, concerns, curiosities?

*Always listen to your gut feelings*, please, even if you’re told not to worry about it or that your baby will “grow out of it.” For more about working with Eliza in a friendly, empowering, listening, respectful, supportive experience, see [ConsciousBaby.com](http://ConsciousBaby.com).

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