

Gross Motor Play with a Purpose

3 - 6
MONTHS



Starfish Therapies

Welcome



At Starfish our favorite part of what we do is helping our kids find opportunities for fun AND work. Play is, after all, their job! We hope that our passion connected with you in our first volume, [Gross Motor Play with a Purpose: 0 to 3 months](#). As you know, babies don't stop moving and grooving at 3 months! Far from it, they actually start to move more! We're here for you with more purposeful play ideas and positions to support your baby's gross motor development at this new stage.

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Tools and Toys

- Activity Center
- Rattles
- Mirrors
- Boppy Pillow
- Cause and Effect Toys (i.e. musical or sound, spinner, popper)
- [Toys of various heights](#)

Check out our [Amazon store](#) for our favorites options!



Toy Rotation

Toys galore! You've probably been gifted so many toys for your new baby, plus, everywhere you look there is another MUST HAVE toy for development so the pile keeps growing. The sheer volume can present overwhelming choices to your little one or lead to reduced motivation to work and move towards something because there is always something else to settle for. This is where the concept of **toy rotation** comes in. By dividing up your toys into small groups and rotating through these groups on a schedule, children can:

- Assess their options and engage easier
- Are more motivated by the toys
- Are excited all over again when the "new" toys come out!

Check out our blog post here on [toy rotation](#) for more information!

Key Terms

Prone:



Lying on the stomach

Supine:



Lying on the back

Sidelying:



Lying on their side

Flexors: used to refer to the large muscle groups in the front of the body that work to bend the body bringing hands, feet, knees, chin etc. towards the middle. Think of curling up in a ball and that's what these muscles do! You can see an example in the picture to the right. This is what's called "physiological flexion" in newborns.



Good Morning
Extensors!

Extensors: opposite to the flexors, these muscle groups are in the back and they work to keep the body elongated and straightened



Flexors at work!

Tactile: sensation of touch and feel

Auditory: referencing sound of any kind

Visual: any input to their vision

For more milestone terms check out our [developmental round up](#) post!

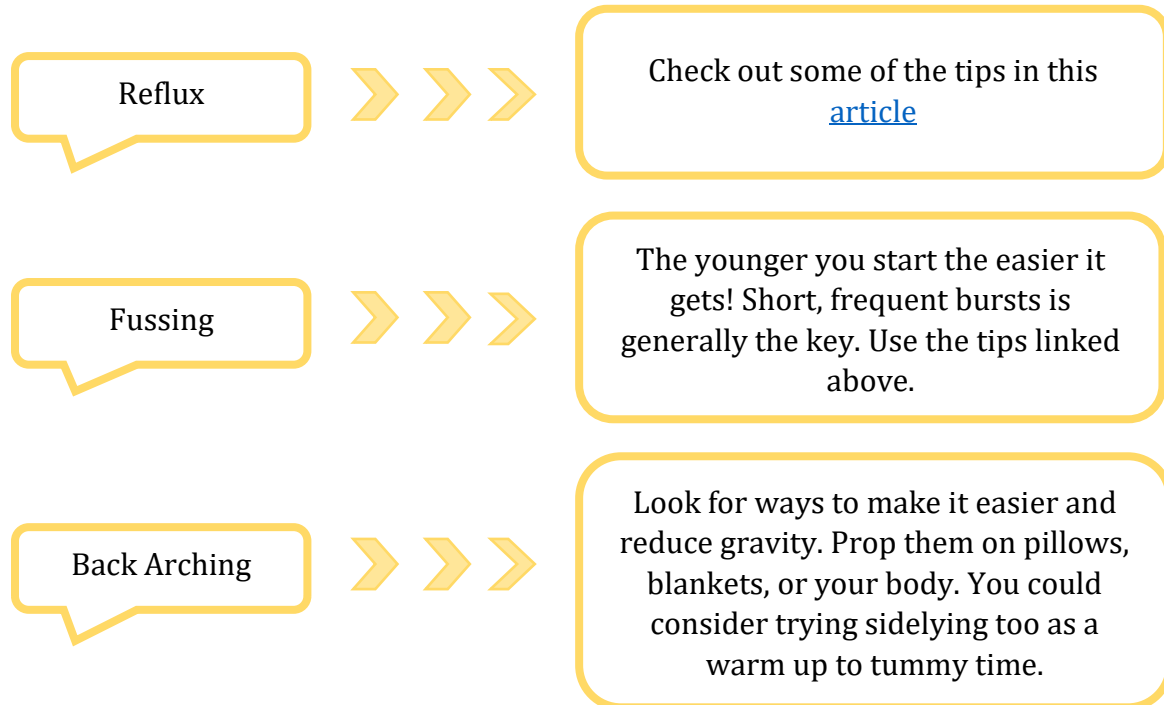
My Child Hates Tummy Time...Should I Be Concerned?

In short: yes AND no. As with so much when it comes to these young, fascinating, and ever changing humans – nothing is black and white! There are so many factors that go into tolerating tummy time and each child is unique. Let's dive into our reasoning and talk about certain things you can look for to give you more information.



We say yes because tummy time is SO important and therefore, if your baby is not getting enough of it, that can be worrisome. Even if your child fusses a bit, you want to work with them to increase their tolerance. This is why we also say no. More often than not, **you can help** them tolerate it better and get in all the time they need. Hopefully this book and [our previous volume](#) have provided you with lots of ideas of how to work towards this and even a sample schedule for getting in those precious minutes! We also have some social media posts with [more tips](#). Basically, don't give up!

Check out this chart and see if it lines up with what you're observing with your baby and then try out the ideas we have paired with it!



If you've worked through all of this and are still struggling, check out our [virtual wellness programs](#) that offer more guided support.

3-4 Months



Tummy Time

Tummy time continues to be essential (in case we haven't hammered this point in enough!). Luckily they are older now with more strength and tolerance in the position. Aim for at least an hour a day in whatever frequency they currently tolerate.

You may see your baby exploring these new skills on their own or you can try them out together:

- Keep [helping them roll](#) into tummy time. They're learning that this is a means of moving to a new position! Are they helping you more with this part?
- They should be able to [bear a little weight](#) on their forearms now without your extra support
 - Place motivating items slightly above their head so they are encouraged to hold it up!
 - Try:
 - Your face
 - [Engaging toys](#)
 - Contrast images
 - Mirrors
 - Flat on the floor will be the position of most work for your baby and with their increased strength they should be able to tolerate this more.



- Mixing in propped on your lap or a pillow are still good options to get more time out of the day if they might be too fatigued for a floor round!

BONUS! Propped is a good way to start working on [reaching!](#)

Supine

Being on their back and exploring [hand and foot play](#) is important for developing crucial core strength and is a precursor to rolling. Try some of these activities to build up those abdominals!

- Tuck your baby into a ball and rock them side to side
- Encourage kicking and lifting of their legs
 - Do it for them so they can learn/copy
 - Use jingle or rattle socks
 - Musical play mats can promote kicking
 - Turn them around under the floor activity center so they kick the dangling toys
- Tickling their tummies also encourages activation and their giggles are infectious!
- Check out additional information in our posts about
 - [Hand and foot play](#)
 - [Building baby abs](#)



Sidelying

Your baby might be getting to a point where they can get into this position on their own. Continue practicing [reaching](#) while on their side as it encourages midline play, oblique abdominal activation, and ultimately down the line – rolling. Engaging toys, turning pages of a book, mirrors, or silly faces are all great for this! For even more ideas [check here](#).

Supported Sitting and Standing

Your little one is getting older and stronger and these positions (at least sitting) are next on their “to-be-conquered” list so let’s give them a boost!



Supported Sitting:

Throughout this month you may find that you can move your support a little lower on their bodies. These activities will continue to challenge their trunk strength and control:

- Encourage them to [use their hands for play](#)
 - Spinning a wheel
 - Grasping/shaking toys
 - Hitting/batting toys
- [Bounce them](#) in supported sitting on your lap!
- Work on visually tracking toys or your face from side to side and up/down
- Read stories or have music time!

Supported Standing:

Don't be afraid to support them in standing! While at this age standing is not a primary focus, there is also certainly no harm in it and it offers some variety of position which presents a whole new perspective to your little one and supports musculoskeletal growth! At this age you should notice:

- Your baby can stand on their feet with support from you around their upper trunk (under their arms)
- They can hold their weight through both feet for short bursts of time before “collapsing”



Free the Baby!

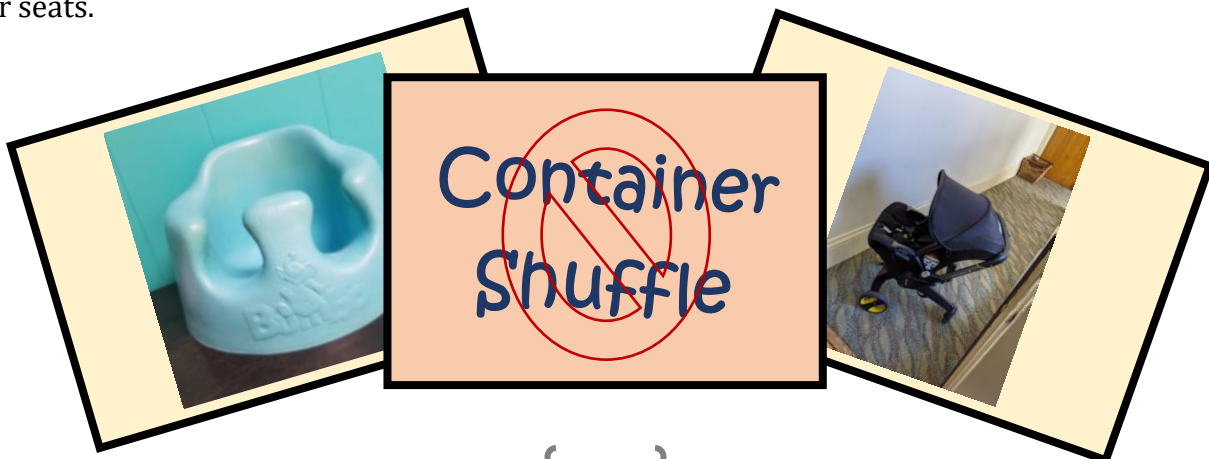
A Note on the Impact of Containers

One of the most frequent questions we get from parents is with regards to all of the shiny, fun, new equipment they have been gifted for their new baby or see advertised. Parents want to know whether it is good for development and at what age it's ok to use certain pieces and we are so glad they ask! It's an important topic and is more impactful on baby's development than some may realize.

There has actually been a term coined for the motor, behavior, and other problems related to a baby or infant spending too much time in a piece of equipment: "[Container Baby Syndrome](#)." In this new term, *container* refers to any commonly used piece of baby equipment such as car seats, strollers, Bumbo seats, swings, and bouncers. Don't faint on us yet! This does not mean that these things are off limits! Moderation and monitoring is the key.

The real problem here is that every minute your baby spends *inside* anything is a minute where they are not able to freely move all parts of their body and explore. Movement is necessary to strengthen all their muscles by working against gravity, and freedom and exploration help them learn how to move their muscles together for a purpose which develops [motor planning](#) and [coordination](#). Without these opportunities, it has been frequently observed that babies will be delayed in their development of skills like sitting, rolling, and walking.

So how do we combat this and also keep our sanity as parents? Do your best to keep baby's time in the carrier or stroller to only those times when it is necessary for transport: going for a walk, driving somewhere, etc. Outside of those occurrences, free play on a blanket on the floor (particularly on their tummy) is the best! When you need your hands free, try a sling or carrier. If you need more alternatives, the baby equipment listed above is suitable in short bursts (no more than 15 minutes ideally). Posture in these pieces is very important though so consult your physical therapist if you have questions, particularly about items like jumpers, exer-saucers, and floor seats.



4-5 Months



Tummy Time

With all the practice you've been doing in this position, your baby is getting stronger and likely tolerating the position better. Try some of these suggestions to keep them moving along. If they're still fussy with tummy time don't be disheartened and DON'T GIVE UP! Keep in mind that everything we're doing in these activities is like a workout at the gym for them. If you're still having trouble check out the more specific and tailored [tummy time wellness programs](#) available through our website.

- Continue rolling in and out of tummy time
 - Help them with this [through their hips](#) now so that they do more of the work!
 - They may start rolling from tummy to back on their own
 - Tracking an object over their shoulder helps to initiate this!
 - Don't start worrying if they do this once and then not again for a long time! Often the [first time](#) happens as an accident.
- More movement in their legs should be noticeable (bending, kicking, and lifting). Tickle their feet, legs, and bottom to promote this!
- They'll be much stronger on their forearms now with their elbows tucked into their sides and moving under their shoulders rather than out to the side or behind their shoulders



- Place objects slightly elevated (a few inches off the ground) or use taller objects to encourage staying propped
- Encourage reaching from this position as well [as flat on tummy](#)
 - This works on weight shifting which is a precursor for rolling
 - Looking to the side while propped also encourages this!

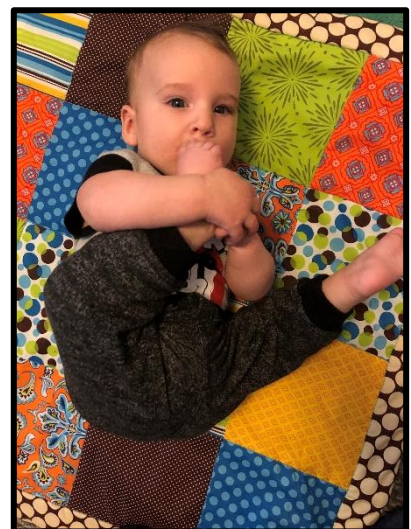


The next “level” of tummy time is being [fully up on straight arms](#). You can start working towards this by having them propped over your lap. Check out more ideas [here!](#)

Supine

Activity centers continue to be great play spaces when they’re playing on their backs. These centers offer great opportunities for reaching against gravity, improving accuracy, playing with their hands, visual and sensory feedback, and kicking! Let’s ramp up the work in this position with the following play ideas!

- Encourage [reaching high](#) with one hand at a time or both together!
- Work on reaching across their bodies also as this will be crucial to [developing rolling](#)
- Encourage hand and foot play
 - This flexion of their bodies builds core strength and is a [precursor to rolling](#)!
 - Wrist and ankle rattle socks are fun toys for this though lots of babies are happy to just constantly pull off their own socks!



- Try peek-a-boo with their feet
- Tickle their bellies



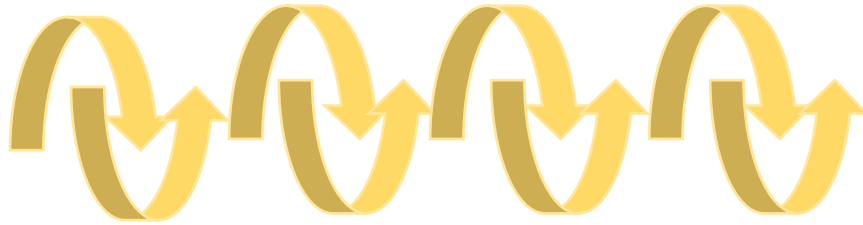
Now is also a good time to start exploring the [pull to sit](#) transition some more! This is when we help babies move from lying on their backs to sitting up by giving them our hands to pull on (though at first you'll be doing most of the pulling). This exercise is important for learning transitions and is also a great way to strengthen your baby's core and neck. It is important during this exercise that they not "lag" their head behind their shoulders. If you hold their hands and slowly start the pull up but they let their head stay back, move your hands up to provide more support. Start with having your hands around the back of their shoulder! Check out this [blog post](#) for more details on pull to sit and ideas to modify the activity if it's not quite working out for you.

Rolling

We've discussed rolling several times now as a means to move between lying on their back and lying on their tummy. But they're starting to get into the age where they'll be making these transitions more independently. So let's look at some activities to help them hone this skill in addition to all the demonstration you've been giving them these last months! Tummy to back generally hits first so let's start there.

- [Lie them on a pillow](#) and tip it side to side
 - The rocking will assist weight shifting required to initiate a roll
 - Momentum also makes the task a bit easier when they're learning!

- At first, you can use your hands at their hips to help finish off the roll
- Work in reaching for a toy to help them gain independence!
- Use a blanket or towel in a similar way by lifting an edge to place them at a tilt
- Make sure to practice both sides. We want to get and stay ahead of any side preferences!
- Check out this [post](#) for more tips on helping with this roll and review the important components in this [video](#)!



Supported Sitting

By this age your baby should be able to sit while propped on their arms without you holding them. See the below pictures for how much strength they'll gain in this position over the next month! It is still exhausting for them though so still mix in sitting with your support. You should be able to predominantly support them lower on their trunks. Now that they have more ability to control their trunk, try out some other ways of supporting them which start to [work towards more independence](#)!



- Sitting with [a reverse boppy](#)
- [Sitting with anterior support](#) from a box or bench
- Sitting with hands or elbows propping on the floor or on their legs.

Watch them get stronger and go from the picture on left to the picture on right!



While they're sitting with your support, continue encouraging reaching and playing using their hands. They should be able to maintain grasp with one hand at this age (but not yet one object in each hand so if you want to do clapping or banging of toys you'll have to help out!)

Supported Standing

Continue supporting your baby at their trunk as they explore the upright standing position. Just a reminder, at this age we are not working on independent standing but rather giving them the opportunity to experience weight bearing through their legs.

Using adult support is the best way to work on standing at this age as compared to swings, jumpers, etc. These pieces of equipment don't support appropriate alignment in standing and contribute to [container baby syndrome](#). You should notice that they are able to tolerate a bit more time and stand a bit straighter at this age. Try maintaining standing while singing a song and gently bounce!

5-6 Months



Tummy Time

As shown at the end of the last tummy time section, your baby should be strong enough to explore [pushing up on hands](#) instead of forearms so that their chest comes off the floor. If your baby is doing this, generally tummy time is tolerated a little better because they feel less trapped. However, you may also find them rolling out of it a lot! It's great to give them that freedom of movement but also important to make sure that they continue getting in lots of time on their belly. As with most things, it's all about striking a balance! Try some of these activities to keep them engaged:



- Encourage full propping on straight arms by placing toys and interesting objects in a slightly elevated position
- Try placing items just *slightly* out of reach. This will encourage them towards more exploration such as:
 - [Pivoting](#) around to either side
 - Shifting onto either arm
 - Maybe even pulling themselves forward on their belly

If you notice that your child isn't progressing towards rolling as expected or as outlined in this book, consider trying our [6 week rolling program](#) either at your own pace or with virtual assistance from one of our therapists!

Rolling, particularly tummy to back, is likely emerging with more consistency now. Continue encouraging it with tracking objects over their shoulders. Make sure you practice [both sides evenly](#)! Check out some of these [posts](#) and [videos](#) for more information and ideas on rolling.

Supine

Playing on their backs may seem like something they've grown past now that they are starting to roll and sit. However, it is still a great position for core strengthening and presents opportunities to practice freedom of movement and control over transitions. Continue tickling their bellies and encouraging them to play with their feet as a baby ab workout! Try some of these newer activities to help your baby understand how they will eventually be able to move themselves in and out of lying down:

- Keep practicing those [pull to sits!](#)
 - You should be able to hold them closer down at their wrists or hands and have them be able to keep their head in line with their bodies
 - Encourage a good head position by engaging them with talking, singing, or facial expressions
 - Try slowly reversing the movement for extra strengthening! Some kids actually find it easier to learn the motion by doing this reverse activity!
- Start showing baby how they can get from [lying down to sitting up](#) on their own by taking them through the motion
 - Start by getting them on their side
 - Place one hand on their top hip to stabilize and one hand in their armpit that is on the floor
 - Use your hands to press their shoulders up and their hip down at the same time
 - Try and get them to help press up with their arm as this is how they will [do it themselves one day!](#)



Rolling

Now that movement has started it'll be tough to slow them down. Embrace it! Let's look at some ideas to continue facilitating rolling every which way. You've reviewed the components of belly to back rolling so check out this informational [video](#) on the reverse to get all of the background details needed.

- Reaching, reaching, reaching! Both from belly to back and from back to belly, this is the prime motivator and initiator for rolling
- The pillow and towel tricks from last chapter are still great activities and usually elicit a giggle! Make it harder by tipping the pillow or towel less so they have to do more work.
- If they still need help with rolling, have patience before jumping into the assistance.
 - See how far they can get before they get stuck?
 - How little can you do to help them? Just a little poke?
 - If you help them through a stuck position, wait them out in the mid-range of the roll a bit. It's good for them to problem solve finishing it up from there!

Rolling At Night

Now that your baby is rolling over more independently it's bound to [interrupt their sleep](#) (as will the acquisition of most new skills). They go to sleep on their backs, spontaneously roll onto their tummies, and then can't easily get back and they wake up crying and frustrated. How can we handle this? Well here's a few tips!

Don't just pick them up and put them down on their back.

Take them through it so they have the opportunity to learn.

Persevere.

After the first few times, let them fuss for a little bit and odds are they will either figure it out themselves or get comfortable and go back to sleep.*

* Always consult your pediatrician about when it is appropriate to allow baby to sleep on their belly.

Sitting

As your little one keeps growing, continue to challenge them in sitting by moving your support lower and lower. If they can't keep their chest up off their legs then you may have gone too low. At this age though they should be able to take on a lot of the work so don't let them off the hook! Try some of these activities to keep them engaged and motivated to work in sitting:

- Sitting inside a laundry basket, luggage, or large box
 - Prop with pillows as needed based on your baby's level
 - Place one or two toys in there that they can engage with
 - Read them a story
- Sitting and propping on their hands
 - Encourage them to really use their arms AND strengthen their neck with:
 - Noise making or attention grabbing toys
 - Singing or reading
 - Mirrors



BONUS! Let them explore getting from this propped sitting position to [lying down](#). This might look like a fall or crash but that's ok in a safe environment! And it helps them learn how to grade and control their movements.

If your baby is taking off on this sitting business, keep them interested and challenged! Mix in some [side sitting](#) and kneeling positions. These will be great precursors to crawling.



Transitions

With all the work that has been put in between you and your baby over the last 5 to 6 months they have gotten stronger and more explorative. They are eager to gain independence and move about with more freedom! Transitions are the key. These include moving between [lying and sitting](#), from sitting to kneeling, from [sitting to quadruped](#) (hands and knees), and eventually from [sitting to standing](#). Let's take an introductory dive into these and how you can start to work towards them.

We've already discussed lying to and from sitting transitions [above](#) and transitioning into standing will come in due time. Quadruped is the next position for your baby to master so here we highlight side sitting which is a crucial step along that path.

Side sitting is a variation on sitting which brings their feet closer under them than their previous sitting positions making it more challenging on their



balance and trunk strength. It is a crucial transitional position.

Initially, your baby will use it to get from sitting to lying on their stomach. As they get stronger, they will do this same move and land on extended arms eventually getting into hands and knees for crawling. It's even an important position in the future when pulling to stand.

This one position has HUGE impacts all down the line of gross motor development so it's important that they are comfortable and stable in it! Practice side sitting as you would regularly practice sitting. Check out some more ideas to practice [here](#)!

Standing

Standing as a skill is still not a focus for babies at this age but it is a position which offers opportunities to bear weight through their legs and often is a position of preference for kiddos. This is an interesting topic actually. Many parents will tell us of how much their kid likes standing and how good they are at it but looks can be deceiving.

In this position, while being supported by you or with their hands on a support, they can lock themselves into a position that looks rather stiff. By doing this they don't have to use their muscles to control anything which actually makes it easier/less work for them than sitting.

This isn't to say that it is a bad thing and you should never let them stand with you again. It's only to bring the physiological explanation to your attention so that other important positions that develop trunk strength and balance don't get overlooked. Continue to allow your baby to stand with your support and use it as a reward or break from more challenging positions like sitting or kneeling but keep those skills as the main targets! No need to rush it, they've got lots to work on in the meantime:



(See our next edition for all of these new skills and more!)

My Child Isn't Rolling Yet...Should I Be Concerned?



Rolling is often a child's first major gross motor milestone and one of the first opportunities for independent mobility. The skill of rolling typically develops in the 3-6 month old age range however, every child develops at their own rate. Whether your child is within this range or outside of it, there are some things you can look at to determine whether or not there is cause for concern.

Start by asking yourself these 3 questions:

1. How much time is your child spending on his or her tummy?

We have really emphasized this throughout these volumes because it is so important for the development of future skills and here is the first moment where you might see a low tolerance to tummy time or lack of opportunity/exposure impact their milestones.

2. If your child is on the floor and they start to fuss does someone automatically pick them up or carry them?

Positions that help children develop strength are not always the most tolerable because they require work to maintain. Hopefully through our resources we've helped to make this easier and push through small bursts of frustration but if they are really done with it try to help them by demonstrating rolling over rather than just picking them up. This way they can begin seeing options for themselves. If they start to learn that they can move out of a position it encourages independent movement as opposed to being dependent on someone coming and picking them up or moving them around.

3. How much time is your child spending in a carrier, bouncy, Bumbo, or stroller?

[Skip back to page 10!](#) Less is always better. Muscular activity greatly decreases when your child is externally supported so make sure to designate time free of restraints and support to allow for volitional movement and exploration.

Reflect on your answers! If your baby has lots of time to freely move and explore, gets at least an hour total a day of tummy time, and you've been showing them how to roll in/out of the position there is likely not cause for alarm. If your answers to more than one of these questions don't align with the descriptions, it might be time to try out one of our [milestone wellness programs](#) or consult your local physical therapist.

Well Done!

Big pat on the back for all of the hard work you and your child have put in over the last 3 months! No one says it's easy but we hope we've helped to make it fun!

Even still, sometimes you need an extra support system. We're here! If you want more support and resources contact us to talk to one of our experts:

Starfish Therapies

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Resource Party

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Next edition of purposeful play ideas and positions for 6-9 months!

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