

Five Things Most of Us Can Learn from Toddlers

by Kathleen Porter

Toddlers hold the key to back pain relief. They may have to rely on grown-ups to teach them how to tie a shoe and use the potty, but when it comes to knowing how to sit, stand, bend and walk with ease, we can take our cues from these little ones. Moreover, toddlers, in spite of their tender age, hold the secret of good posture. All healthy babies teach themselves how to stand and walk by falling down enough times to discover the central axis along which they must align in order to balance a heavy head on top of the spine. In fact, the back pain sufferer is far more likely to have veered off from this axis than the person who ages with the alignment of a toddler. The shocker is that this posture is surprisingly different from what most people have been taught about sitting or standing – “up straight.” And it isn’t rocket science; we knew it when we were toddlers, and we can learn it again as adults. Here are five things that toddlers know about posture that you’ve probably forgotten:

- Toddlers rely on their skeletons to hold them up. Without aligned bones, they fall down. Babies know that their leg bones must be vertical when standing, just like foundation posts on a building. You can check to see if your leg bones are vertical by standing sideways in front of a mirror and moving your legs back and forth. Observe how the pelvis swings like a bell in a church tower. When the front rim of the “bell” is aiming back between upright vertical legs that serve as pillars or sturdy columns, the pelvis is in the neutral position that supports the spine along the axis.
- Toddlers sit squarely on their sit bones. To locate these bones, sit on a level surface with your feet flat on the floor and slide your right hand, palm up, under your right buttock. Let your weight come down onto your hand and roll around until you feel a bony “knob” pushing into your hand. Next, place your weight directly onto both sit bones (there’s another one on the left side) by pulling the flesh of the buttocks out behind you.

Bring awareness to the pubic bone now, where two bones of your pelvis meet low in the front. Slowly move the pubic bone upward away from the seat, observing the rounding that comes into your back as your spine collapses. Notice, also, how your weight has rolled onto the back edge of the sit bones. Now, as you begin to press the pubic bone downwards into the seat, observe the rolling forward of the pelvis and the lengthening of the spine as it rises upward. Just as you did while standing, you’ve succeeded in placing the pelvis in the neutral position that all toddlers discover.

- Toddlers do not lift or collapse their chests. To do either would cause them to lose their balance. “Home base” requires that the pelvis be in its neutral position to allow the rib cage to hang suspended from an extended, aligned spine. You can experiment with this by first “parking” your pelvis in neutral, with the pubic bone aiming down into the chair. You may have to concentrate to prevent the pubis from rising up away from the chair as you first lower, then lift, your breastbone a few times. Notice the rounding that comes into your back when you sink your chest, and the arching backward of the spine that occurs as you lift the chest up. (Note: Because lifting the chest when the pelvis is in neutral causes the spine to arch backwards, do not take this any farther than is comfortable.) Whether collapsed or ram-rod straight, these are the two either/or positions that many people think are their only options. Repeat this movement again, this time very slowly, to see if you can detect the relaxed middle where your chest is neither collapsed nor lifted and where your spine comfortably supports itself like the trunk of a tree.
- Toddlers do not firm their “abs” or suck in their bellies. Tightening the “abs” (rectus abdominis) interferes with natural breathing by binding up the diaphragm, the primary muscle of respiration. Give this experiment a try. Suck in your abdominal muscles and hold for a few seconds, long enough to notice that you’ve stopped breathing. Now relax your belly ever so slightly, then a little more and a little more, and you will experience how breathing returns quite naturally. Every one of the billions of cells in your body requires a healthy supply of oxygen for its food, a fact that illustrates the damage caused by the culturally-imposed standard that tells us that women must have flat bellies, while men should aspire to have “six-pack” or “killer” abs. Learning to align the bones so that we don’t have to build artificial, tension-storing “strength” to hold us up is an essential component of natural, relaxed breathing.
- Toddlers are willing to experiment with what is unfamiliar. Toddlers never stop trying to learn new things, almost all of which they approach with fresh eyes and an open mind. Because the steps outlined above challenge certain long-held assumptions you may have held, it can be helpful to approach this new information with a toddler’s open mind and willingness to experience the unfamiliar. So much of what we have been taught about health and fitness is based on the mistaken belief that strength and flexibility are

qualities that must be worked at in order to be maintained. Authentic natural strength and flexibility are simply inevitable byproducts of living a normally active life aligned with the body's central axis. One need only examine the postural habits of those small women in the world who are able to successfully carry enormously heavy loads on their heads, as well as older people who age with relative comfort and ease of movement, to see the importance of aligning with the fundamental laws of nature that toddlers understand. By remembering what you once knew when you learned to stand and walk (in other words, embracing your inner toddler!) you, too, will be able to rely on the structural framework of an aligned, living skeleton to provide all the support you need to be naturally strong, flexible and pain-free. Kathleen Porter, based in Hilo, Hawaii, is the author of *Ageless Spine, Lasting Health* (Synergy Books, 2006). Visit her online at www.agelessspine.com.

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