

EARLY HEAD START TIP SHEET

No. 41

Tummy Time for Infants, May 2010

What is “tummy time” and why is it important?

Response:

“Tummy time” simply refers to the time that babies spend awake and playing on their stomachs. As a reminder, **babies should never be placed on their stomachs to sleep.** (For more information on safe sleep techniques, review the resources available from the *Back to Sleep Campaign* in the *Resources* section below.)

A thoughtful and intentional approach to tummy time is important for several reasons:

- It gives infants a different perspective from which to see the world.
- It gives infants the chance to practice and master important physical skills such as the ability to lift and support their heads, hold their heads steady, and turn their heads. They also develop strength in and control of their neck, shoulders, and back. These skills and abilities help infants prepare for rolling over, crawling, pulling up, and later, walking.
- It allows an infant to develop a round head. Infants who spend much of their day on their backs may develop a flat spot on the back of their heads.

In addition to tummy time, another important way to support infants’ development of neck control and upper body strength is to minimize the use of infant seats and swings throughout the day.

When should infants begin tummy time?

While some infants really enjoy being on their stomachs, many do not. Until their necks have developed greater strength and control, infants may find that it is hard work to hold their heads up. That said, even the youngest infants can benefit from and enjoy time on their bellies. Tummy time can begin right after birth, although some parents prefer to wait until after their baby’s umbilical stump falls off. In these cases, “tummy time” should ideally begin by one month of age.

For an infant with a disability, confer with the child’s occupational or physical therapist to determine the best approach and most appropriate means of support for tummy time.

How long should infants spend in tummy time?

Start with 1-2 minutes of tummy time, as many as 8 to 10 times per day. Gradually add a minute or so to tummy time as babies begin developing greater neck control and strength in the neck and shoulders (i.e., they can hold their heads up for longer periods of time). As infants become more comfortable in this position, they can spend up to 5-10 minutes on their stomachs at a time.

If you see babies enjoying this position, allow them to continue playing on their stomachs until they offer cues that they are tiring of this position. These cues may include crying, frustrated facial expressions, back arching, and others.

Activities that support tummy time

Following are a range of ways to make tummy time enjoyable for infants.

- Have adults do tummy time along with infants by:
 - Laying on their backs and placing an infant on their chest. Once the baby is comfortable in this position, try moving the baby to the tummy time position on a blanket on the floor.
 - Lying on their stomachs in front of the infants so that babies look up from the tummy time position and see a loved one.
- Place a rolled towel under an infant's chest, extending out under the arms and shoulders. This makes it easier for the baby to lift and turn his/her head. A small, narrow bolster or nursing pillow can also be used for this purpose.
- Place new or interesting toys, like a child-safe mirror or music box, in front of infants to look at or reach for while on their stomachs.
- Place two infants near one another, so they can watch and coo to each other.
- Open a favorite book and place it in front of infants during tummy time. Staff or parents can lie next to the baby and read together.
- Darken the room a bit and shine a flashlight onto the floor or wall in front of infants who are in the tummy time position. They will be fascinated watching the light beam move slowly in front of them.



Photo: EHSNRC/courtesy of Perez Family

Working with families to provide tummy time

EHS staff can partner with parents to decide when and how to begin providing infants with tummy time. As staff talk with parents about why playing on the stomach is important for early motor development, they may encounter families who have a cultural belief that babies should not be placed on the floor. In other cases, it may not be advisable for babies to be placed on the floor for health or hygiene reasons. In these situations, staff can work with families to adapt tummy time, such as to:

- Identify alternate floor coverings such as a blanket or butcher paper.
- Identify alternate locations for tummy time such as low-sided cardboard box or a crib mattress. Note: tummy time can also occur on a bed or mattress if it is a relatively hard surface and the infant is well-supervised by an adult.
- Build tummy time into daily routines. For example, burp babies by laying them across a lap or place babies on their tummies briefly after each diaper change. Holding babies against an adult's chest (with the baby's head on the adult's heart) also promotes the baby's neck control.

Questions to Consider for Planning and Programming:

- Have teaching and/or home visiting staff received training on tummy time, the reason for its importance, and the variety of ways it can be implemented within EHS services?
- For center-based, family child care, or child care partnership settings, is there a clean, open space available for infants to have regular tummy time?

- In the home-based option, do home visitors ask parents if they have a place where they feel comfortable providing their baby with tummy time? If not, have home visitors received information about alternatives to floor-based tummy time?
- Do program staff ask parents at enrollment about their infant's favorite tummy time activities? How does the program partner with parents to support them in providing tummy time (or alternatives) to their infants?
- If an infant has a disability or special need that impacts his/her ability to engage in tummy time, how has staff accommodated this need? Have appropriate alternatives to tummy time been discussed with the parents, the other members of the infant's Part C team and/or the program's Disabilities Coordinator?
- Is tummy time a regular part of each enrolled infant's experience in the program? How is this aspect of curriculum documented by staff?
- Are gross motor skills, such as upper body strength, part of each child's individual development plan? How are milestones in this area tracked by the program and communicated to parents?
- Does the program have equipment (such as nursing pillows, rolled towels, or bolsters) to use with infants during tummy time?
- Are infants placed on their stomachs during other routines across the day—for example, being placed on their tummies briefly after a diaper change?
- Are all infants placed on their backs for sleep? Is this policy, and the reason for its importance, communicated to parents upon enrollment? Is the need for tummy time included in the program's Back-to-Sleep policy?

Performance Standards, Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations:

- 1304.21(a)(5)(i) In center-based settings, grantee and delegate agencies must promote each child's physical development by providing sufficient time, indoor and outdoor space, equipment, materials and adult guidance for active play and movement that support the development of gross motor skills;
- 1304.21(b)(1)(iii) Grantee and delegate agencies' program of services for infants and toddlers must encourage (see 45 CFR 1304.3(a)(5) for a definition of curriculum) opportunities for each child to explore a variety of sensory and motor experiences with support and stimulation from teachers [and other staff] and family members.
- 1304.21(b)(3)(i) Grantee and delegate agencies must promote the physical development of infants and toddlers by supporting the development of the physical skills of infants and toddlers including gross motor skills, such as grasping, pulling, pushing, crawling, walking, and climbing;
- 1304.53(b)(3) To reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), all sleeping arrangements for infants must use firm mattresses and avoid soft bedding materials such as comforters, pillows, fluffy blankets or stuffed toys.

Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics.

- **Back to Sleep, Tummy to Play.** <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/sleep/Pages/Back-to-Sleep-Tummy-to-Play.aspx> (accessed August 14, 2010).
- **Questions and Answers Regarding the Prevention and Management of Skull Deformities in Infants.** July 2003. <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/archives/julyskullqa.htm> (accessed August 14, 2010).

Back to Sleep Public Education Campaign. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/sids/> (accessed August 14, 2010).

Coulter-O’Berry, Colleen and Dulcey Lima. **Tummy Time Tools: Activities to Help You Position, Hold, Carry, Hold, and Play With Your Baby.** Children’s Healthcare of America. <http://www.apta.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=50825> (accessed August 14, 2010).

Early Head Start National Resource Center. **News You Can Use: Play.** DHHS/ACF/OHS. March 2010. http://www.ehsnrc.org/Publications/nycu_archive/nycu_play.htm (accessed August 14, 2010).

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This Tip Sheet is not a regulatory document. Its intent is to provide a basis for dialogue, clarification, and problem solving among Office of Head Start, Regional Offices, TA consultants, and grantees. If you need further clarification on Head Start Policies and regulations, please contact your Regional Program Specialist.