

HealthPoint

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Tips to Improve Stair Climbing Skills

For young toddlers, stairs may seem intimidating as it challenges their balance, depth perception, motor planning and strength. Many toddlers are scared to walk up and down the stairs and prefer to crawl or receive adult support. By the age of 2, children should be walking up and down stairs with handrail support using a step to gait pattern. They should begin using a reciprocal pattern by the age of 3 with decreasing handrail support when going up the steps. Descending stairs is more difficult due to decreased eccentric muscle control and mastery of an alternating foot pattern without support is not common until around age 4. Below are tips and exercises to perform with your child to help promote a reciprocal gait pattern when using stairs!

- 1) **Start off Small:** As stated earlier stairs can be intimidating and many children are fearful of them. Start with just working on 3-5 stairs and progress your way up to a full flight. If 3-5 stairs are still difficult for your child, start stepping up and down from just the bottom step, small curb or step stool to get fluent with the motion and build the strength needed to successfully climb up and down the stairs.



- 2) **Give Your Child Visuals:** Place colored footprints, tape or stickers on the stairs to promote an alternating foot pattern. When using footprints or tape you want to have two colors and for stickers you want to pick just two images. Take each color or image and associate one with the left leg and one with the right. Place each color or image on every other step and on the side of the body they are matched with. The visuals will show your child where to step by matching their foot with the image or color. For added visual input, place the matching color or image on your child's foot that correlates with the visual on the steps. As your child gets more fluent using a reciprocal pattern try and take away the prompts starting with the visuals placed on your child's foot and working to take away all the visuals placed on the steps.

- 3) **Give Physical and Verbal Prompts:** Initially, you may have to place your child's foot to the next step to promote the reciprocal pattern. As they become more comfortable with the alternating pattern, try to decrease your assistance to just taps on their thigh or hamstring of the leg you wish for them to progress. In addition to the physical and visual prompts, provide verbal cues to encourage a reciprocal pattern. A great verbal cue that has worked with many kiddos is "Big Girl/Boy Steps". Have your child alternate their feet and with each step you say one word in the phrase. If they put both feet on the same step you restart the phrase and tell them that was not a "Big Girl/Boy Step".



- 4) **Work on Balance:** When performing stair climbing, you have to stand on one leg for a short duration while the other leg is stepping. A great activity to work on your child's balance while getting them comfortable with the movement pattern needed to achieve stair climbing is having them hold a modified single leg stance. Start by having your child place one foot on the ground and one foot on the bottom step of a staircase or step stool. Have your child hold this position for 20-30 seconds on each leg. Create more of a challenge by having them place their foot on a pillow or wobble pillow instead of stable ground to work on ankle stability. You can also have your child place their raised foot on a pillow or ball to increase the difficulty. Lastly, while holding this position, have your child play a game at the table, try to pop bubbles or play a tossing game to add a dynamic component and take away upper extremity support. Remember, make sure to perform on both legs!



- 5) **Improve Eccentric Muscle Control:** It is important to have good eccentric quad control when going down stairs. Eccentric control is when the muscle lengthens. A great way to work on eccentric control is having your child slowly lower themselves down into a chair and return to standing. Another great exercise is having your child hold a wall squat while counting to 10, singing a short nursery rhyme or playing catch. Thirdly, you can have your child work on squatting to pick up objects from the ground and return to standing. You can increase the difficulty of this skill by having your child stand on a couch cushion or unstable surface while attempting to squat and pick up a toy. Lastly, you can practice stepping down from a small step stool, a bottom step of a staircase or curb.

6) **Decrease Support:** Many children will try to put both hands on the handrail as a way to feel safer and help them control their body when climbing up and down stairs. To promote single handhold on the handrail, have your child hold a small toy in their opposite hand. As your child prepares to use no support, have them place their arms in the air or hold a large object, i.e. a playground ball, in both hands to keep them from reaching for the handrail. Remember start small and work up to a full flight of stairs. Also, stand close until your child becomes more proficient for safety.

7) **Be The Model:** Kids watch our every move and often model our behavior. Be the visual your child needs to be successful on the stairs. Standing next to your child complete stair climbing together. Go slowly up and down the stairs showing your child the reciprocal pattern with each step and see if they will imitate you.



8) **Keep it Fun:** Stair climbing is an everyday routine that loses interest fast, especially of a young toddler. Make stair climbing a game by throwing a bean bag up the steps to determine how many steps you have to climb. Another fun game is throwing a toy, parachute man down from the top step, retrieving him and returning him to the top. Lastly, you can place numbers and letters on the steps and have your child retrieve one at a time, carry them down the steps, and place them alphabetical, word or number order to make the activity more educational.

