

Feet first

Baby feet are much more than cute little things we kiss and tickle

IT'S NATURAL TO THINK BABIES' LITTLE FEET ARE JUST SMALLER – AND CUTER – VERSIONS OF ADULT FEET. IN FACT, CHILDREN'S FEET ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM ADULT FEET AND REQUIRE SPECIAL CARE.

Soft bones

While adults have 26 bones in each foot, babies have only a few hard bones. The majority of the 'bones' in their feet are actually soft pliable cartilage, which will gradually harden over many years and will not fully set until they're about 18.

Cartilage – what your ears are made of – is very soft, flexible and malleable. Therefore, it is important you don't unintentionally restrict the growth of your child's feet through ill-fitting socks and shoes. If you do they can have painful foot problems later.

The first year

Children's feet grow rapidly in the first year. Babies' feet are around 10cm long at birth. By the age of 12 months they will have doubled in size and be about half their adult size.

"This is a very important stage in the development of

THIS LITTLE PIGGY...



until they have been walking for six to eight weeks. Even then, they're only needed for protection against hot and cold surfaces and sharp objects. Children should go barefoot as much as possible, especially around home.

When it's time to buy those first shoes, Peter Parkinson, president of the National Footwear Retailers Association, recommends getting them professionally fitted. Tim Jackson, Clarks national sales manager agrees, "You wouldn't get your children's teeth cared for by anyone other than a professional,

- Skin rashes, hard skin, lumps or bumps on the feet
- Your child complains to you of recurrent pain in the feet or legs
- Your child constantly trips and falls over

6 steps to self-serve

If you are buying shoes without a professional fitter assisting, use the following list to help choose the right size.

- 1 Measure feet if possible, but use only as a guide as sizes can vary between different brands and styles

- 2 Check inside the shoe for tissue paper in the toe and for lumps or lasting tacks protruding from the insole
- 3 Check length – there should be about a thumb's width between the end of the big toe and the end of the shoe, when standing
- 4 Check depth – press down on the shoe around toe area – there should be room for movement
- 5 Check width from the big toe joint across to the little toe – it should be firm, but allow movement
- 6 Check shoes don't slip at the heel, gape around the top or rub the ankle bones

In a lifetime your baby will probably walk the equivalent of four times around the world. Their adult feet will contain a quarter of their body's bones and will produce about a cup of sweat a day.

a child's foot," says podiatrist Peter Lumb. "It is very important not to restrict the foot's growth."

Learning to walk

Babies start walking anywhere from eight months to 18 months of age and bare feet are best. Being able to feel the walking surface and spread the toes helps your baby develop balance, coordination and posture. It also allows the complex interactive system of bones, ligaments, muscles, tendons and nerves to develop in the correct way.

However, if your baby needs foot protection at this stage, Peter says it must have excellent midsole flexibility and a flat outsole.

Most babies learning to walk are flat-footed or turn their feet inwards, but they'll improve as their feet strengthen.

First shoes

The Australian Podiatry Association (APA) says children don't need shoes

it should be the same with their feet." But don't worry – professionally fitted does not necessarily mean expensive – most speciality children's shoe stores and department stores, staffed by qualified fitters, carry a wide range of styles and prices.

Foot growth

Children's feet continue to grow rapidly, about two sizes a year in the first four years, one-and-a-half sizes between four and six years, then about one size per year until mid to late teens. Because children's feet are well padded, the bones soft and the nerves not fully developed, they do not feel pain like adult feet, so children won't notice if shoes are too tight. You need to check their socks and shoes for fit every few months.

Foot problems

The APA recommends having your child's feet checked if you notice any of the following:

- Uneven shoe wear

FIRST SHOES SHOULD

- Have flexible, flat soles
- Have soft uppers
- Have adjustable fastenings
- Support the back of the heel
- Match the foot shape
- Not be too long or your toddler will trip



DO

- Allow baby to go barefoot as much as possible, especially when you're at home
- Only use socks or soft foot coverings when necessary for warmth
- Ensure socks, booties or all-in-one suits are not tight or they could your child's restrict growth
- Allow baby plenty of time to kick freely without the restriction of tight wrapping or bedclothes

TIP
IF ONLY THE FEET OF ALL-IN-ONE SUITS ARE TOO SMALL, YOU CAN CUT OFF THE FEET AND STILL USE THE SUITS.