

## GOOD BYE STROLLERS!

When is it time to stop using your stroller? This is a difficult question in New York where walking is our chief means of transportation. Over the years, we have noticed children staying in strollers longer and longer. We are concerned about the impact that strollers have on children's physical development and self-esteem, and we encourage parents to think about ways of getting their children out of the stroller and into walking.

Strollers are convenient for parents. Strollers help you get to school (or wherever else you need to go) faster. Putting your child in a stroller means you don't have to wait while she peers in a store window or nag her to walk faster. If your child is in a stroller she can eat on-the-go or even nap on-the-go. The newer streamlined double strollers mean that you no longer have to take your older child out of the stroller to make room for the new baby.

Letting your child walk is harder. He may dawdle or ask to be carried. Even if he walks purposefully, he will always walk more slowly than you. If you are pushing a baby in a stroller, your older child has to learn to walk near you or hold on to the stroller, and he may resent having to walk while his younger sibling rides. Without a stroller you may need to plan differently for naps and mealtimes.

But keeping your child in a stroller for too long creates a range of other problems, many of which are self-perpetuating. Children who are often in a stroller develop less endurance and are therefore more likely to be tired when they are asked to walk. Strollers deprive children of essential exercise. Children for whom walking is a novelty are more likely to dawdle and stall since they are unused to that kind of freedom. Strollers, like bottles and diapers, are associated with babies, and riding in a stroller can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of an older child.

When children start school, and as they move from the 2s to the 3s to the 4s, we encourage them to be more and more independent. They move through growing-up milestones like weaning, toilet-training, and moving from crib to bed. They begin to make independent choices about what clothes to wear, what games to play and which friends to have. Children who have younger siblings are encouraged to think of themselves as big brothers or big sisters with more sophisticated skills and privileges. It can be confusing and contradictory for the child who works to meet these expectations to be buckled into a stroller at the end of the school day, often along with an infant sibling.

We strongly suggest that parents start weaning children from the stroller as early as practically possible. The stroller does not have to be eliminated entirely—parents can make choices about when a stroller is a real necessity and when it can be left at home. Even for children in the 2s and 3s classes, it is not too early to think seriously about leaving the stroller at home at least some of the time.

**By the time children are in the 4s class, with rare exceptions, they should not be coming to school in a stroller.**

Some things that can make the transition out of the stroller easier:

- 1 Think about issues of time and scheduling. Leave more time to get places, enough time so that you can do as little nagging as possible. Nagging makes many children simply dig in their heels more. As your child gets stronger and more used to walking, you will gradually get places more quickly.

- 2 If possible, stop using your big, heavy stroller and get an inexpensive umbrella stroller instead. This has the practical benefit of allowing you to carry the stroller and let your child walk. If she gets too tired, you have the stroller

as a backup. Umbrella strollers have a psychological benefit as well—it is less infantilizing for your child to climb into a simple umbrella stroller than it is for her to be lifted into a more luxurious stroller where she reclines, is covered with a blanket and shielded with a plastic cover, etc.

**3** Avoid the “carry me” trap. The goal of walking is to increase your child’s physical strength as well as his emotional independence. If the problem is that you are late or in a hurry, it is better to work on scheduling than to start a hard-to-break pattern of carrying your child.

**4** If possible, get your child something to ride on or something to push. Younger children can be very motivated by having a toy baby stroller to push while they walk or even a wheeled dog on a string to “walk.” Older children can ride a scooter or tricycle. If you have a younger sibling in a stroller, your older child can ride a “skateboard” attachment if he is too tired to walk.

Even though your stroller might seem indispensable, a well-timed transition from stroller to walking can often be a relatively easy one. Many children are thrilled to leave strollers behind. However, other children might feel ambivalent about this new challenge and resist being asked to walk. As with any other kind of limit that you set, parents and caregivers should have a plan about how to help the resistant child transition out of the stroller and how to handle any opposition. We are always available to help you make a plan that will work for your family.

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