



Chiropractic Newsletter Well-Being

Shed Those Shoes!: How Being Barefoot Benefits Brain Development

It drove my mother crazy when I went barefoot as a kid. It still does—because I'm in stockinged feet in the fall and winter, and barefoot the rest of the time! I can't stand the confinement of shoes. And I've long been an advocate for children to go without them. As I wrote in the very first edition of my textbook:

Children have been moving in sneakers for physical activity for so long we seem to have forgotten that feet do have sentient qualities. They can be used to grip the floor for strength and balance, and their different parts (toes, ball, sole, heel) can be more easily felt and used when bare. Furthermore, there is evidence indicating that going barefoot strengthens feet and improves body alignment. Young children feel a natural affinity for the ground that can be enhanced by removing all the barriers between it and the feet.

Nothing really startling there. But you might be surprised to learn that there's scientific evidence that barefooted is better. Among other things, bare feet are important to the development of the nervous system and the brain! Turns out the feet are the most nerve-rich parts of the human body, which means they contribute to the building of neurological pathways. Covering them in shoes, therefore, means we're eliminating all kinds of opportunities for children's brains to grow new neural connections.

Of course, worry keeps parents and teachers from setting children's feet free. One common concern is that kids will contract germs by going barefoot.



(That's my mother's issue.) But our skin is designed to keep pathogens out. We're much more likely to become ill from touching something with our hands, which are in contact with so many things (including our mouths) during the course of a day, than we are from going barefoot. I'd hate to think we'd keep kids in gloves all day to prevent germs!

There's also concern about injury. But being barefoot actually toughens up the bottom of the feet, so unless children are walking through a construction site, the likelihood that they'll injure themselves is slim.

The truth is, many podiatrists contend that shoes can be much more harmful to little feet than barefootedness can. Feet should be allowed to develop naturally, not conform to the shape of a shoe. Also, shoes can often constrict movement of the feet, and can negatively impact walking, balance, sensory development, and proprioception (the understanding of our body's orientation in the space around us).

If you're worried about the potential chaos of

many children shedding shoes and socks at the same time, you can establish and practice routines for removing and retrieving footwear. Socks should be put inside shoes, and shoes lined up against a wall or placed in each child's cubby. And should you have children who are reluctant to remove shoes and socks, you can encourage them with concepts like "barefoot time" or, for toddlers, "tippy-toe time." They'll also become more enthusiastic about bare feet if you remove your shoes and socks as well.

If you still face reluctance (and even if you don't!), offer them unique sensory experiences to enjoy. You can fill plastic bins with a variety of different textures, including water, soapy water, sand, leaves, grass, and more. There are videos online that show examples of this; I've posted a few on my Facebook page. It would be the rare child who'd pass up temptations like those!

—Rae Pica

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