

Q. Hi. I have been reading your column since the first issue, so I know you are not a big fan of making kids walk if they don't want to. And I agree that wheelchairs are more practical most of the time and that we should all examine our stigmatization of wheeled mobility and our obsession with walking ... BUT our daughter wants to walk! We can tell by the way she tries (and fails) to cruise between furniture. We've tried a couple of gait trainers but haven't exactly had a defining moment yet. What do you suggest?

A. First, thanks for the caveat — I do appreciate a keen reader — and, second, you raise an excellent question. The desire to walk is innate, and generally kids with even a marginal ability to get around on two feet will try it and keep trying it until the rewards have diminished to near-nonexistence. So, in other words, this is a good time to keep testing different models of gait trainers. Every disability is different — and every child is different — so one kid's clunker may be another's Rolls-Royce.

Kristin Mackey of Fresno, Calif., learned that a new model may be the answer when a rep brought a KidWalk to her daughter Emily's therapy program.

For two years Emily, 5, had used a gait trainer with extensive strapping and hardware. Emily has multiple neurological, orthopedic and developmental disabilities and is on the autistic spectrum. Mackey says that Emily's autism led her to fixate on the straps and rarely used the device to walk. When she did move in it, she couldn't interact much with the world because of the way the hardware blocked her reach.

Enter the KidWalk. "Instantly, our therapist knew this would be perfect for Emily," Mackey says. "It is so basic, but it works. She can get up to the table, she can interact with us. I got my first hug."

Emily's world was immediately richer, her mom says. "She was



Emily Mackey covers a lot of ground with the KidWalk, according to her mom.

able to get to her toys. She was able to independently get what she wanted. Since she's nonverbal, that's huge — because we have no idea what toy she wants."

The Mackeys have ordered their own KidWalk (covered entirely by Medi-Cal and California Children's Services) and are looking forward to expanding Emily's world further. "This has just completely changed our way of thinking about her future," Mackey says. "We now think we can do all these different things. She can play with her peers. When she goes to the zoo, she can actually interact with the hands-on exhibits."

There are several specific things Mackey likes about the KidWalk. Emily walks more naturally, for one, which she attributes to the design of the supports. The previous gait trainer "just had that pelvic support that kind of clipped on," she says, "but this one, it fits her like we would like to hold her and walk with her if we had the stamina to do it. Even the pelvic support swivels back and forth how she moves it. And she stands up much straighter in this."

The other big plus in Mackey's case is the ease of adjustment. "We don't have to keep taking her in and out," she says. "It's a one-person operation, which is important because I have another baby. So if I'm getting them in and out of the car, I can get her into the KidWalk and make any adjustments very quickly."

Their plan is to phase in the KidWalk for more and more activities as Emily's strength grows. "She does not like being in the wheelchair," Mackey says. "After

being in the KidWalk at therapy, she does not want to sit in her wheelchair to go to school. It's like her brain is understanding, 'I'm supposed to be upright, I'm supposed to be walking.' So our goal — since she's letting us know that she wants to walk — is to build her stamina and use the KidWalk more often."

Any advice for other parents? Just look for something your child actually likes to use, she suggests. "She hates it when we have to take her out, which makes me feel as a parent like she must be comfortable in it. And the fact that as soon as she sees it, she wants to get in it.

To me, that makes me think this is a good thing, especially with her being nonverbal — we have to read those kind of cues."

The KidWalk is manufactured by Prime Engineering, 800/827-8263; info@primeengineering.com; www.primeengineering.com



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