


# Assume the Position

Just about everyone and their mother hates tummy time. Yet, there are worthy benefits to the downward-facing practice. We equip you with a few tips and tricks.  KAREN STEWART

The American Academy of Pediatrics has long advocated for tummy time – the practice of placing infants on their bellies while awake and alert – since the early 1990s when the “Back to Sleep” campaign kicked into full gear. Intended to counteract the negative indications associated with too much time spent on the back (most notably positional plagiocephaly, or flattened head syndrome), tummy

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time “helps develop muscles that will lead to other foundational skills, such as pushing up, rolling over, sitting,” says Molly Shaw Wilson of Training Wheel Occupational Therapy in Portsmouth, “and, one day, holding a pencil and writing their names.”

But the practice – which, for many parents, evokes the image of a crying baby, face down and furious – is certainly not met with squeals of delight. Especially since a 2013 study published in *Early Human Development*, a peer-reviewed academic journal on early human growth, suggests

that tummy time may be irrelevant (see “The Tummy Time Debate,” right). “Being stretched out on their bellies isn’t a natural position for babies,” concedes Wilson. “But if it becomes part of their routine, they will eventually

start to enjoy it,” she says. And while Wilson may just sound like another doctor who has drunk the tummy time Kool-Aid, she’s also a mom of a 7-month-old, Reid, who recently went through the experience. Utilizing her

pediatric background and her own bag of tricks, she shares the top techniques that ensured her own healthy developed baby... with a perfectly shaped head.

Read on 

## THE TUMMY TIME DEBATE

If you Google “tummy time,” you’ll be bombarded by a rash of mommy forums speculating on whether you should or shouldn’t practice this activity – largely a result of a May 2013 study published in the academic journal *Early Human Development* that suggested that the practice may be irrelevant. But that doesn’t mean this one study should be taken as the tell-all truth. Plus, there are no studies that show that tummy time, when practiced properly, does damage, so what’s the harm? Our suggestion: Talk to your doctor about how much tummy time your baby needs, and don’t feel too guilty if you miss a day or two.



# 1

## Easy Does It

Wilson recommends taking it easy on your baby – and yourself – during your first forays into tummy time. One good starting place is holding baby on your chest, skin to skin, while talking or singing to him. Another gentle approach is carrying or rocking your baby using the “football hold” with one hand under the belly and another between the legs.



# 2

## Give Props

If your baby doesn't have the strength to hold herself up, a rolled towel or nursing pillow under her armpits can do the trick. Equally fun, says Wilson, is holding your baby belly-down on a large yoga ball and gently rolling her back and forth.



# 3

## Double Time

Reid was a particularly gassy baby, which meant Wilson spent a lot of time burping and soothing him. But she quickly realized that the act could also double as a way to get valued tummy time in when she opted for the burp position of laying him face down across her lap perpendicular to her body. To help entertain him, she also began placing black and white flashcards or toys on the seat next to her.

# 4 Peer Group

Wilson took advantage of mothers' group gatherings where several babies were on their bellies in a circle facing each other: "I remember quite a few surprised moms whose little ones lasted longer [on their tummies] than they ever had before." At home, pets, siblings, and parents can be equally compelling attention-grabbers.



# 5 Change It Up

Turning and repositioning the head is important, too, says Wilson, who suggests promoting neck strength and flexibility by placing the baby's head at alternating ends of the crib and changing table (left side or right side), and diligently changing sides for bottle feeding.



## Play Date

Consider these types of play to stimulate gross motor skills, language, and more.

» Since babies don't have fine motor skills yet, building towers with blocks, sorting shapes, and crawling through tunnels are great for focusing on gross motor skills.

» Rhyming, singing, reading books, and narrating activities ("you are petting the doggie..." "you are clapping your hands...") help stimulate language (well, at this point, what is babble and cooing).

» To encourage self-expression, make "music" (like wooden spoons on pots and pans) and "art" (whipped cream on high chair tray), and have him spend time in front of the mirror every once in a while.

» Work her imagination by playing with dolls (put baby to bed, etc.), doing chores (your baby will love imitating these familiar jobs), and playing peekaboo (teaching object permanence).

# 6 Take Flight

Once baby has neck stability, lay down on the floor on your back with your knees bent at a 90-degree angle. Place your baby on your shins facing you, and hold on to baby's arms or trunk for added support. Then gently raise her up and down in this "modified airplane" position—you'll see that baby will raise head up and down to follow your face, therefore, providing a little workout for the neck muscles. Plus, the added ab workout for you is a bonus.

