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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

One Ride Forward, Two Steps Back

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ARE forward-facing strollers having a negative effect on babies' language development? British teachers have for some time been observing a decline in the linguistic abilities of many children, and some have wondered whether this might be one contributing factor.

There may be something in this idea. Babies who face ahead cannot see their parents or caregivers and thus have difficulty interacting with them. On loud city streets, babies may have trouble even hearing parents talking to them.

Neuroscience has shown that brains develop faster between birth and age 3 than during any other period of life, and that social interaction fosters such neurological development. So, if babies spend a significant amount of time during their early years in forward-facing strollers, might it impede their language learning?

Britain's National Literacy Trust commissioned my research team to look into this question. No previous research had been carried out, and strollers, or "buggies" in British parlance, haven't always faced forward. In the 19th century, they were designed so that infants faced the person pushing them. It wasn't until the late 1960s that collapsible strollers emerged, with engineering constraints causing them to face forward.

We observed 2,700 families with young children walking along main streets in cities and villages throughout Britain. We found that forward-facing strollers were by far the most common, but that babies in them were the least likely to be interacting socially. When traveling with their babies in forward-facing strollers, caregivers were observed speaking to infants in only 11 percent of cases, while the figure was 25 percent for those using toward-facing strollers, and even higher for those carrying children or walking with them.

Could it be that parents who buy toward-facing strollers simply talk more? Probably not. In a follow-up exploratory study, we gave 20 mothers and infants aged 9 to 24 months a chance to try out both stroller types, and recorded their conversations. Mothers talked to their children twice as much during the 15-minute toward-facing journey, and they also laughed more. The babies laughed more, too.

Of course, infants do not spend all their time in strollers, but anecdotal evidence suggests that babies can easily spend a couple of hours a day in them. And research tells us that children's vocabulary development is governed almost entirely by the daily conversations parents have with them. When a stroller pusher can't easily see the things that attract a baby's attention, valuable opportunities for interaction can be missed.

Ours was a preliminary study, intended to raise questions rather than to provide answers. It is now clear that future research on the effects of stroller design would be worthwhile.

Meanwhile, the findings already encourage us to think again about how babies experience stroller rides — and other forms of transportation like car seats, shopping carts and slings. Parents needn't feel worried, but instead curious about the elements of the environment that attract their children's interest. The core message of our findings is simple: Talk to your baby whenever you get the chance — and whichever direction your stroller faces.

For their part, stroller manufacturers should keep in mind how much their products are likely to shape children's development. Let's give an award to the first one who can produce an easily collapsible stroller that faces both ways — and is affordable for all parents.

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