



## Are walking rings safe?

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Eleonora Lozano, Chair of the South African Society of Physiotherapy Paediatrics Special Interest Group, provides food for thought.

A baby walker or infant walker, most commonly referred to as a walking ring in South Africa, is a familiar sight. We've all seen them at the homes of family and friends, or used them for our own children. But are they safe?

A walking ring is a wheeled base-supported rigid frame containing a fabric seat with openings for the infant's legs, accompanied by a plastic tray top which may have additional activity toys for entertainment.

The idea behind the design is to support babies who are not yet walking, with their feet touching the floor so they can scuttle around while learning to walk. Walking rings have been in use since the 17<sup>th</sup> century; however over the past 30 years – due to the increasing injuries associated with the use of walking rings – many questions have been raised regarding their safety. The American Pediatric Association recommended a ban on the manufacturing and use of all walking rings, and in Canada walking rings have been banned since 2004.

In 2018, research showed that the babies' increased mobility often exposes them to hazardous situations: falling down the stairs while in the walking ring is common, resulting in head injuries, concussions and in some cases skull fractures. The second most common accident is when the infant falls out of the walking ring, again resulting in head injuries, concussion and soft tissue injuries to the head and neck. Babies are also exposed to situations where they can sustain injuries like burns, or drown during unsupervised walking ring activity.

Contradicting long-held beliefs, studies have found that walking rings show no benefit in speeding up the skill of walking. Many paediatric experts and therapists are of the opinion that walking rings in fact delay the skill of walking and result in gross motor developmental delay.

And if you want to keep your baby occupied while you take those few minutes to yourself to get something urgent done, well... walking rings can give parents a false

sense of security. Babies in walking rings can travel at speeds of up to 1metre/second so you have very little time to respond to dangerous situations.

What to do?

Recommendations to parents and therapists

- Due to the high risk of injury associated with walking rings they should not be used in, hospitals, child care centers and/or homes
- Safer alternatives are stationary activity centres, which should be promoted over the use of walking rings
- Infants should spend as much time as possible exploring their environment prone, and on their tummies.