

## From Heel to Toe

### *A foot-care primer*



**T**EN-MONTH-OLD KATHLEEN HAD JUST learned to walk when her mother, Sascha Armour, noticed her daughter's feet turned in, tripping her up and frustrating her fragile progress. At the time, they were living in the remote community of Kilemb, Uganda, where her husband was engineering a hydro project for some new copper mines. Medical help was scarce and specialists unheard of. So Armour, well-versed in "bush" practicality, followed her instincts and laced up Kathleen's shoes on the wrong feet. The home remedy worked and for Kathleen, herself now a mother of three, that early impediment is a memory as distant as the Mountains of the Moon region where she was raised.

Today in Canada, we can turn to a podiatrist or paediatric orthopaedic surgeon to advise us on our children's foot ailments. What has endured over time and space, however, is the important role parents play observing their children's gait, foot alignment and, as they grow, shoe wear, for potential problems. "Early examination is important," says Robert Chelin, a Toronto podiatrist and president of the Ontario Podiatry Association. "Fortunately, parents notice everything."

It's true. From the time we first meet our babies and count their toes, we are enamoured with their feet, "wee wee weeing" them all the way home, clapping with delight at their first step and mending a myriad of stubbed toes and blistered heels. Before they finish growing, around their 13th birthday, the 120

moving parts of the foot, including bones, ligaments, muscles and tendons, will hop, skip and jump your child over 15,000 kilometres and wear through some 30 pairs of shoes. They support and balance a body that sprouts disproportionately large and, if not kept finely tuned in the early years of development, can lead to shin, knee, hip and back pain in adult life. To help your child develop a lifetime of healthy feet, here are the answers to some frequently asked questions on kids' foot care.

#### *When should my infant start wearing shoes?*

"In our culture," says Orillia, Ontario, paediatrician Edward Cormode, "we wear foot protection because of our cold weather." So, once your child starts to walk, she should don shoes outside to guard against the elements and injury. Indoors, however, it's best to leave a child barefoot or in non-slip socks so that she can develop good toe gripping and leg muscles. When you buy shoes, look for flexibility in the upper and the sole, a firm counter (the portion that wraps around the heel) and a toe box that is both wide and high enough for the toes to spread. Laces will prevent slippage better than Velcro. Leather or a man-made material that allows the foot to breathe is preferable to vinyl or rubber. A high-cut boot is not necessary for ankle support, but does offer the advantage of being difficult for your child to

remove. Until children are about six years old, their feet grow rapidly, so shoes should be checked for wear and size every two or three months. And always take your child with you when fitting new shoes to ensure that there is a half-inch clearance from the end of the longest toe to the tip of the shoe.

#### *What about my school-age children who need different shoes for different occasions?*

Look for the same qualities in an older child's shoe: flexibility, support in the counter, uppers that breathe and sturdiness in construction. You should be able to find all of these in a multi-purpose, high quality running shoe. Remind your child to bring home their school shoes every six months so that you can check for size. Do not hand down shoes, advises Chelin, "because each foot is different and having the same size does not mean, for example, having the same width." Obviously, if finances are a problem, you're going to recycle the shoes. But, says Chelin, when you're faced with the high cost of shodding your kid's feet, "remember, the important part of the shoe is not what it looks like, but that it is the right one for the child."

#### *Is it true that bulky diapers can cause in-toeing?*

There are several reasons why children in-toe or out-toe. But, says Dr. Cormode, bulkiness in diapers is not one of them. The problem may be in the foot itself, in the ankle region where the leg meets the

BY KATHARINE PARTRIDGE