

## SHOES ARE NOT JUST AN ACCESSORY

Making sure your child has shoes that fit correctly is probably one of the most important things you can do to protect your child as a parent.

Now it is 'back to school' parents are rushing to find appropriate footwear and normally they hope as cheaply as possible. Parents complain about the cost of school wear, but what they don't realise is that shoes are the one item of clothing that can seriously damage health long term. Buying clothing too small or too large will simply feel uncomfortable, but if footwear is too large or small then feet become painful and balance is distorted, you adjust the way you walk and in turn this throws out and distorts other parts of the body. It is hardly surprising there are so many knee, hip and back problems in maturity.

Looking after your child's feet when they are young is quite a responsibility. It doesn't need a lecture, but gently informing children of the importance of their footwear and how important it is for their feet to be comfortable and safe, should start early, and reminding teenagers is important too. Health education is now the responsibility of the public, but it is very unfair as parents cannot possibly know the dangers of fitting their own children's shoes.

The bones in a child's foot are not fully formed (ossified) until they are nearly 18 years old. There are 26 bones in the foot, but several do not develop until middle childhood. These bones are like small sapling plants, soft, pliable and easy to bend out of shape. A baby is usually born with perfect feet; therefore, it is interesting to see how feet develop into maturity and the problems that are suffered.

Some companies provide gauges and fitting advice online to help their online buyers, but too few state the most important fact that gauges are calibrated differently, and no two pairs of shoes will fit the same, therefore having shoes fitted by a professional is worth the time and effort involved. Online may seem quicker, but if shoes need to be returned, what will their child wear in the meantime? Re-measured and fitted instore and the problem is instantly assessed and resolved, and a parent has peace of mind they have had best advice. The difference in cost may be one branded coffee, or packet of cigarettes.

A measuring gauge is merely the starting point and a guide to a trained or qualified shoe fitter who see numerous shapes of feet during a working day. Because gauges are calibrated differently from one another, having feet measured in one shop and buying elsewhere is not a good idea. The box end label may state the size on the gauge, but the shoes do not necessarily fit the same. Some children have short wide feet, others long and narrow, sometimes their second or third toe is longer than their big toe (Hallux). Sometimes they have a bony protrusion at the ankle or forefoot, sometimes they pronate or supination. Everything needs to be assessed to find the right fit. Comparing several styles or brands of the same size and fitting proves this point, but if a parent is in a fashion store/self-service store, or buying online, how can they see the difference between a good and bad fitting shoe?

The biggest concern is tiny children as they cannot say how they feel, and if they like the shoes, or think their parents will be cross if they complain, then they will suffer in silence.

Back to school is known as 'blister season'. Over the summer children are going barefoot and wearing footwear of loose construction i.e. sandals, slip on clogs, jellies, flip flops, canvas etc. therefore, feet spread and become flaccid. When they return to wearing supportive and sturdy school shoes, they can rub. Best advice is to wear them with socks for short periods indoors the week leading up to the new term.

Leather shoes gradually mould to the foot as the leather warms up, and they retain the shape of the wearer therefore become even more comfortable after wear. Leather is a natural bi-product of the food industry and is healthy for feet because the leather will allow perspiration to evaporate

naturally. Synthetic footwear performs differently. It is like putting feet in a plastic bag. Feet can become hot, slippery and moist and the perspiration cannot escape. Athletes' foot, verrucae and various other conditions enjoy this environment.

It is important to look after children's shoes and give them some TLC. When children get home, ask them to undo their shoes properly (or they will stretch the fixings), open them up (for air to circulate around them) so they dry out naturally. Do not put them over artificial heat or the leather will dry out and crack, and plastic will become misshapen. Once dry teach your children to give them a brush off and then polish thoroughly. Leather polish is best applied with a small brush and rubbed in, and then use a soft cloth to remove any excess polish and buff up into a shine. Plastic shoes will also look better with a spray of polish and soft cloth. The shoes will look good for longer, the polish will nourish the leather and allow it to remain flexible and it will repel the autumn/winter showers.

Patent leather isn't ideal for school shoes (it was originally used for party shoes and best) as it is less durable. Now many children only have school shoes or casualwear and will choose shiny shoes for school wear, but once the outside shiny skin of patent is broken, it cannot be fixed, you will see the leather underneath. There is nothing wrong with the wear of the shoes, and they cannot be returned if your child scratches the surface, they just don't look as good.

If you want more information you can always go to the Society of Shoe Fitters website: [www.shoefitters-uk.org](http://www.shoefitters-uk.org). So, to sum up:

- **Find a 'proper' shoe shop where they are prepared to measure and fit your child and happy to give professional advice about foot health and the shoes you are buying.** Both feet should always be measured for size and width, because one foot may be different from the other. The larger foot should be catered for and orthotic materials added to the shoe to fit the smaller foot, not squash the larger foot into shoes too small!
- **Please note a fitting gauge is merely a guide. No two gauges are the same (as no two pairs of shoes or feet are the same); gauges are all calibrated differently to the manufacturers 'Lasts' (for form the shoe is made on).** There is no standardisation of shoe sizing in the U.K. which is why a qualified shoe fitter is so important to interpret the correct shoe for the shape of the foot.
- **Children's feet have growth spurts** with the majority of shoes being bought in the formative years – infant to school age. Make sure they are checked every 4-6 weeks in infancy and every 8-12 weeks when at school.
- **School shoes should have an adjustment** – lace, buckle, 'hook and loop' fastening across the instep, allowing for finer adjustment without restriction, giving a better overall fit. Children claw toes to hold slip-on shoes on the foot, and if they come off when playing it can be dangerous.
- **'Back to School' time is known as 'blister season'** particularly the start of the new school year following the summer holidays. Children's feet have been in flip flops, plimsolls, trainers, rubber clogs not 'constructed' footwear that holds the foot from spreading. Parents buy new shoes and expect children to wear them on the first day, all day, and then worry they are not the right size and fitting if the child gets a blister. Children are more active than adults and feet get hot. Ask children to wear new shoes at home INDOORS for short periods on the week/weeks leading up to school time.
- **Buy footwear made of natural materials e.g. leather, cotton etc.** as these materials breathe. Man-made materials e.g. plastic, make feet perspire, causing fungal infections and abrasions.
- **Inspect your children's shoes after purchase.** If you don't you won't notice if they are becoming misshapen, heels broken down, heels worn one side and not the other – all of which will show if a

child is walking incorrectly and the problem can be rectified freely and in time. Shoes should be polished regularly and then problems noted so that a trip to the shoe shop to check their fit, or visit to the cobbler to have shoes mended can be arranged – prevention is always better than a cure!

- **Inspect your children's feet regularly too – even when they are in early teens!** Once your child showers or bath's alone you are less likely to see their bare feet unless at the pool or on the beach. Ask to look at their feet and check their toe nails are correctly trimmed, that toes are growing nice and straight and there are no bumps, blisters or calluses' appearing. Cut toe nails straight across (file off sharp corners, shape should resemble a TY screen) – if shaped like fingernails they can become ingrown. A problem picked up before the age of 18 might be reversible – but the sooner the better.
- **Never hand shoes down**, they take on the shape of the previous wearer and will rub and not support in vital areas. They may also hold fungal diseases which can be passed on to the next wearer.
- **Monitor your child's sock drawer** whatever age and discard outgrown or misshapen socks. Cheap socks are like cheap shoes; don't hold their shape very long. Cotton socks in the summer and wool socks in the winter are the healthiest option as they wick away perspiration. Stretch socks are more likely to shrink after continual washing. Check toe seams for a "casting-off" knot that can rub toes – particularly for a diabetic. Socks and Baby-grows that are too small will restrict growth. Best advice is to think new shoes = new socks.
- **Plimsolls are usually left at school.** If school shoes are outgrown then the likelihood is their P.E. footwear is outgrown too. These are not expensive items of footwear and should only be worn for sport/playtime not all day as there is very little support in them, but can quite easily distort toes if worn too small. Ask your child to bring home their PE bag when you know you are off to the local shoe shop.
- **Wear the right shoe for the right occasion at any age.** Shoes are manufactured for certain purposes and cannot be expected to perform properly if abused. The leather of a child's school shoe needs to be flexible but will often be more durable than other footwear; this does not mean they are indestructible. If your child's has new shoes and the toes are scored through or soles worn through quickly, they have used them as a brake on a swing, bike, scooter or ride-one. The upper should not be in contact with the playground and this is their responsibility, not the shoes or the shops responsibility.
- **Always consult your G.P. or Podiatrist/Chiropodist if you should have any foot health concerns** or your Shoe Fitter for shoe related queries. Feet continue to change in volume and size throughout our lifetime and should not be neglected at any age. Stay mobile – stay happy!

The Society of Shoe Fitters is a registered charity (no. 1178413) and assists thousands of people annually educating the footwear industry and giving the public foot health and footwear advice freely via website, leaflets etc. National Shoe Fitting Week was set up in 2013 and is endorsed by the College of Podiatry/The Society of Chiropodists & Podiatrists. The organisation works with Diabetes U.K., the Lymphoedema Society, Restricted Growth Association and many other charities.