Chiropractors have been caring for children for more than 100 years. Many common childhood ailments will respond to this safe, natural form of health care. More and more parents—especially those who are already chiropractic patients themselves—are seeking chiropractic care for their children.

This article attempts to answer the questions asked by many parents about their children’s spinal health.
What is chiropractic?

Chiropractic is based on the important relationship between the spine and the nervous system. One of the most basic ideas in chiropractic is that dysfunction in the spine and its joints can lead to dysfunction within the nervous system—and since the nervous system controls and coordinates all of the systems of the body, spinal dysfunction can have wide ranging effects on the body’s health. Chiropractors are trained to evaluate and adjust this spinal dysfunction.

Why do my kids need chiropractic?

A child encounters many physical stresses during their growing years. The resulting problems in children’s spines can occur at almost any point in their development and growth.

The earliest challenge a growing spine faces is the position it is forced to adopt in utero. Many women will have heard of foetal positions that can cause problems with labour (brow, breech, transverse, posterior, ascyncillic, etc). What is less well known is that these foetal positions can also cause problems in the baby’s spine as well. Spinal segments can be pushed out of place or jammed by the position of the baby in the womb. If this position is less than optimal, it can result in a longer and more difficult trip through the birth canal, which can compound the spinal problems. In this way, even natural birthing methods can stress an infant’s spine and nervous system—not to mention interventions such as induction, forceps, vonteuse suction, or ceasarean section. The latter (which account for an alarmingly large percentage of births in Australia), while appear to offer a less traumatic birth for the child, can actually create additional traumas and compromises to the infant’s future health and well-being.

The cause of many newborn health complaints such as colic, reflux, breastfeeding difficulties, sleep disturbances, allergic reactions, and chronic infections can often be traced to nervous system irritation caused by spinal and cranial misalignments.
Since significant spinal trauma can occur at, or prior to birth, many parents elect to have their newborn’s spine checked right after birth. Many developmental milestones such as learning to hold up the head, sitting upright, crawling, and walking are all activities that are affected by spinal alignment and are important times to have a child checked by a chiropractor. Additionally, falls, sports injuries, playground bumps, heavy school bags and sitting all day in the classroom are all physical stresses to the growing child’s spine and nervous system.

What does chiropractic care involve?

The first thing a chiropractor will do is to conduct a thorough history of your child’s health and any complaints. This is followed by a complete physical examination of the child’s spine. Most chiropractors are trained to evaluate paediatric spinal problems, and will use gentle, specific skills to find and adjust any involved spinal areas.

When I tell people that I care for many children and babies in my practice, their initial reaction is often one of surprise, as they assume that I use the same techniques on children as I do on adults. Chiropractic care is ‘tailored’ to the individual and their particular spine, and children are no exception. We offer specific, gentle adjustments appropriate to the infant and child’s spine and cranium.

Spinal adjustments for infants and young children involve very light fingertip pressure to correct spinal misalignments. This amount of “force” is often not more than a finger touch. This is usually sufficient to restore mobility to spinal joints which have become locked and are causing interference to the normal nervous system function. Occasionally, the adjustments will make a ‘popping’ sound when the spinal joints are moved; however, this is not always heard when children’s spines are adjusted. Other techniques involve the use of hand-held instruments which offer specific and gentle correction.

Does it hurt?

In general, chiropractic care for children is painless, except in cases where the child has an actual injury. In these areas, the child may be sensitive to touch; however, once the adjustment
has been made and the area can heal more effectively, the sensitivity is alleviated. Overall, most parents report that their children enjoy their spinal adjustments, and that they look forward to their next visit.

How long will it take?

A child’s spine will generally respond much faster than an adult’s spine to chiropractic adjustment, and will often require only a few adjustments to restore normal function. The actual number of adjustments will vary depending on many factors such as the length of time the problem has been present.

Is it safe?

The risks of a child suffering notable injury from a spinal adjustment are extremely minimal. Chiropractors have been adjusting children’s spines for more than 100 years and have an excellent safety record.

A recent study done by the International Chiropractic Pediatric Association (ICPA) in the United States, Canada, and Europe showed that only a few children (out of more than 10,000 visits) experienced minor discomfort and fussiness. The remaining children in the study had no adverse reactions to the adjustment. These preliminary data tells us that chiropractic care for children may be one of the safest forms of health care available. Australian ICPA chiropractors will be participating in a similar study as well.

How can I tell if my child has spinal problems?

Unless a child has an obvious problem it can be difficult for a parent to recognise when a child’s spine is not working correctly. There are some signs which can indicate spinal problems. These include:
- disturbed sleeping patterns
- breastfeeding difficulties in the very young
- restricted head or neck movement to one side
- one shoulder higher than the other

Common childhood disorders can also be linked with spinal dysfunction, these include:

- recurrent ear infections
- persistent sore throats and colds
- colic/reflux
- asthma
- scoliosis
- headaches
- bedwetting and/or constipation
- growing pains
- ADHD

One of the most common reasons for parents to seek chiropractic care for their child is physical trauma from an injury of some sort. The spinal misalignments that may occur at the time of the injury will not necessarily result in immediate pain or symptoms. In addition to physical stress, parents should be aware that emotional and chemical stress affect the child's nervous system and may also warrant a spinal check up.

Regular chiropractic checkups can identify potential spinal dysfunction resulting from these stresses, and chiropractic adjustments may help to enhance future function and well-being.
Chiropractic Care for Children

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