

## Barefoot on the Beach - one of life's joys

We have eight tarsal bones and five long metatarsal bones, then fourteen bones in toes on each foot, with the potential to be almost as mobile as our hands. However keeping feet enclosed in shoes of various styles severely restricts that mobility. As children our feet have the potential to perform all the movements available, as long as they can do them often enough. The variable softness of sand, with changing textures available, is one of the few places the muscles and joints in the feet and toes really come into their own.

As I have described last month, toes perform an important role in maintaining our balance. By splaying the toes, spreading them sideways, it is also possible to achieve more side to side balance and we can see that looking at the feet of adults who have rarely worn shoes, e.g. some Pacific Islanders.

Walking, and especially running, on sand also provides us with the opportunity to develop the most efficient style. Again, this is best achieved by starting as a child, when the way of moving occurs naturally. Like all skills, they need to be practiced and playing games like beach cricket and volley ball are excellent ways to do that, as long as the child has enough general strength and fitness. By having to focus on the game, the body will move the feet and legs in the optimal way.

Walking on wet, then dry sea weed gives another experience, this one mostly sensory. First it is soft and enfolds the foot, then the dry is crisp and crackles as we walk on it. An occasional rock hidden in the seaweed might cause a slight stumble, triggering balance reactions of the whole body. And even if we fall, it is onto a soft landing. Where seaweed has been piled into stacks it can be fun to run and jump into them, relying on that softness.

Then there are the activities we do in the water. Standing with waves coming in and out the feet gradually sink into the sand, as long as we don't wriggle the toes to bring them up. Or in still, shallow water, gently doing a flat footed twist will have a similar effect, the feet gradually sinking into the sand. This last activity is particularly good for using all the small muscles of the feet.

Now is a great time to make the most of these opportunities on beaches, especially for children, who can make up and play all sorts of games, as well as building sand castles, which teaches other skills. I apologise to those who don't enjoy being barefooted on the beach, but for others I hope it offers fond memories and might even prompt another visit.

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