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Providing Occupational Therapy Services for Children Birth to 21+

What are Retained Primitive Reflexes and what do they do?

Primitive reflexes develop in utero initially for the purpose of aiding the baby out of the birth canal during labor. A reflex is an automatic motor response that is triggered by a stimulus. After birth, these primitive reflexes assist the baby in their developmental milestones, such as, helping them with breastfeeding, rolling, crawling, developing visual hand regard and higher motor skills. Some of the primitive reflexes also act to protect the baby's head when learning to sit and crawl.

But if the reflexes don't integrate (transition into higher motor patterns and go away), they can hinder and affect a child's development. Retained reflexes can cause:

- Sensory sensitivities
- Balance and Motor Coordination issues: clumsy, struggles with sports, runs into furniture
- Freezes or is in constant fight or flight mode
- Poor impulse control, easily distracted, severe mood swings
- Can't cross the midline, trouble with hand-eye coordination, struggles with fine motor
- Has difficulty tracking when reading and writing
- Poor posture, attention issues, wraps legs around chair, wets the bed after age 5
- W-sitting, poor muscle control, toe walking