

# Little ninjas learn safe play

By [Jamie Morton](#)

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Nanaia Mahuta's son Waiwaia became more confident. Photo / Christine Cornege

Training babies to become shoulder-rolling "little ninjas" could reduce the rate of children seriously injuring themselves in homes and playgrounds, new research suggests.

The findings of a government-funded study have prompted calls for subsidised courses that use challenging play equipment to teach infants vital balance, safety and motor development skills before they can even walk.

Over nine weeks, Massey University researchers observed the development of children aged between 1 and 2 as they hung from trapeze bars, crossed beams and climbed over obstacles in courses offered by developmental programme Jumping Beans.

The government-funded trial found the training brought improvements in a range of safety skills, particularly after the children learned ninja-style shoulder rolls and climbing up and over A-frames.

The findings have prompted the programme's director, Sophie Foster, to ask the Government to make the courses more affordable for parents.

ACC spokeswoman Stephanie Melville said the agency would be happy to consider the programme, but needed more time to review the study and seek more information.

Recent figures showed that each year, 1036 preschoolers were injured severely enough from falls to be admitted to hospital.

Children under 5 accounted for half of all fall-related injury deaths between 2003 and 2007 and they were predominantly injured by falls in and around the home. But falls from playground equipment were the most common specific cause of injury, accounting for a quarter of hospital admissions.

"Most playgrounds aren't really designed for under-2s," Ms Foster said. "So what we are doing at Jumping Beans is teaching them safety skills in an environment which is suitable, so when they do go to playgrounds, they are safe."

Those who have already enrolled their children in the community-based courses include Olympic rowing couple Rob and Sonia Waddell and former All Black Mils Muliaina and wife Hayley.

Labour MP Nanaia Mahuta said she had seen a big improvement in her son Waiwaia, now 4, since she enrolled him as an 18-month old.

"I've found him a lot more confident when taking him to the park ... I was able to teach him how to take safe risks, like climbing and rolling. So I think he's become a lot more confident at a much younger age."

### **The study**

\*The Massey University thesis study examined the effects of a child-centred physical activity programme on overall development, safety skills and balance in New Zealand children aged between 1 and 2.

\*The study was conducted at a Jumping Beans course on the North Shore and its main finding was a nine-week intervention was successful in improving a range of safety skills. In particular, the children's ability to climb up, over and down a small-runged A-frame and perform a safety roll down a foam wedge were "significantly" improved.

\*The study, however, found no effect of the exercise intervention on cognitive ability, overall development and static balance, and said further controlled trials were needed.

- [NZ Herald](#)