Going Up and Down Stairs

There are many ways for children to go up and down the stairs from crawling to alternating feet without holding onto a railing. Typically the stages of going up stairs are crawling, walking up sideways with two hands on a railing, walking up forwards step-to-step with one railing, alternating feet with a railing and then alternating feet with no railing. The same sequence is repeated for down. You can always best support your child by standing behind them on the downhill step on the way up or in front of them on the downhill step if walking down, to prevent them from falling down the stairs. In other words, the downhill step is where you always want to be standing whether or not they are ascending or descending stairs. You should use this as a guide and start off your child where he/she is developmentally.

Sideways:

Walking up:

Start at the bottom step and have your child hold the railing with two hands so they will be sideways. If the railing is too high for your child to reach, have them put two hands on the wall. It is best to find a lower railing and not a railing with spokes.

- With your child holding onto a railing with two hands and standing sideways have them lift one leg up onto the next higher step putting it down with enough space to bring up the other leg. (If your child has a stronger side, have that leg go up the stairs first.) Then make sure their hands come with them up the railing as they go up the stairs.

Walking down:

You may want to find a short flight and/or just have your child practice only the last few steps of the flight.
• Follow the steps as above except have your child begin by stepping down with his/her weak side because that way the stronger side is doing the work of lowering. The expression that helps to remember this is “up with the good and down with the bad.”

Forward

Step-to-step up:

Place their hand on the right-sided railing. They should step up with their preferred leg. Have your child bring their other leg up to meet the leg on the stair. Then bring their hand higher on the railing and repeat one foot going up and then the other. Try to get into a rhythm and eventually increase speed over many days. Watch which foot always steps up and encourage them to step with the other leg (weaker side). This is the precursor to alternating feet.

Step-to-step down:

Walk down the stairs the same way as above. The most important hint here is that your child should keep his/her hand in front of him/her on the railing. If kids have trouble walking down the stairs, it is usually because they do not remember to slide their hand down as they step.

Things to do: In the community or in your house, practice stepping onto steps of various heights. You can use blocks or books to step up on. Make a path of stepping-stones at home. Outside step onto various heights at the playground and onto curbs. Look for small heights to step onto first and hold one or both of your child’s hands as needed. Again follow the progression of support by offering two hands, then one hand, and then no support.

Alternating feet with the railing:

Walking up:
Once your child can easily go up stairs using a step to step or marking time pattern while holding onto a railing with either side leading, they can begin to try using an alternating pattern while holding the railing.

- Start at the bottom step and have your child hold the railing. Tell them to place one foot on every step or tell them that every foot gets its own step. Their feet should not be on the same step together. Then have them place one foot on the step above. If they need a cue as to what to do with their other leg you can physically move it to the step above the other foot or you can tap it gently forward when they want to place their foot on the same step as the other foot. This may be all they can do at first. They may stop here. Have them try to bring the other foot one step above. Some children can alternate one leg easily but not the other leg. Gently tap the leg they are having difficulty with as a reminder to bring it forward onto the next step. Remember to make sure your child brings their hand with them up the stairs. Sometimes all they need is for you to help slide their hand up the railing as they move their feet.

It may be a slow process at first. Just do a few steps if your child is having any difficulty. Come back another time and try again. You can model going up stairs alternating your legs for your child. Exaggerate your foot movements and tell your child that every foot gets its own step as you move your foot to the step above.

**Walking down:**

Practice as above. When your child is stepping down, it might help for you to tap the stair that he/she should step to. It is also helpful if you make sure he/she is sliding his/her hand down the railing as they step. Often when they begin learning how to alternate down you need to cue them to first slide their hand in front of them and then step. There is then a pause while they slide down again and
reach with the other foot. Eventually progress to stepping while sliding the hand at the same time.

**Alternating feet up without the railing:**

If your child has good balance going up stairs and is going up stairs at a good speed, you can have him/her try and walk up a few steps without a railing. They can start with a step-to-step pattern and move to an alternating feet pattern.

- Start 2-4 steps from the top of the flight of stairs instead of starting at the bottom of the stairs. This will allow your child to master a smaller portion of the stairs and not be overwhelmed by having to practice going up a full flight of stairs. Progress to the full flight when they are ready. DO not forget to stand behind your child in case he/she loses his/her balance.

**Alternating feet down without the railing:**

Reverse the process above. Allow him/her to walk down to the end of the flight holding the railing and then encourage him/her to move to the middle and let go for the last 2-4 stairs. Remember to stand in front of your child for safety. Start very slowly. Tell him/her to take a step and then pause before moving the other leg.