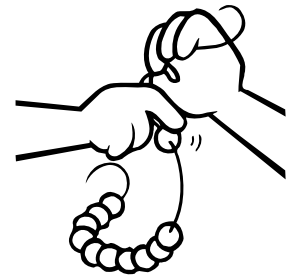


Help Your Preschool Child Develop Fine Motor Skills

by Tara Calder, ORT/L

What Are Fine Motor Skills?

Molly is working hard in her kindergarten classroom. She cuts out pictures from a magazine and glues them on paper. She colors and writes her name on her paper. During art, she strings beads to make a necklace. At snack time, she opens her milk carton. Later, before going to the playground, she buttons her coat. Throughout her entire school day, Molly uses fine motor skills.



Fine motor skills are activities that require the use of the small muscles in the hand. These activities include grasping small objects like beads, holding a pencil correctly, cutting, and buttoning. It is easy to see how critical fine motor skills are to every area of a child's life! Fine motor skills can directly affect a child's self-esteem and success at school.

Why Do Some Children Have Problems with Fine Motor Skills?

With today's emphasis on technology such as video games and computer skills, children are spending less time playing with fine motor manipulatives. This leads to an underdevelopment of the small muscles in the hand. Underdevelopment of these muscles can lead to handwriting difficulties when your child enters school. Some children may show delays in fine motor skills due to developmental delays or medical diagnoses such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy.

How Can I Improve My Child's Fine Motor Skills?

Some important hand skills children need to develop include:

- Being able to cup their hands (palmar arching).
- Using the index finger and thumb to hold an item, and using the ring and middle fingers to stabilize the hand (hand side separation).
- Making a round shape with the thumb and index finger (an open web space).

Activities for Developing Hand Skills

- **Vertical Surfaces** — Vertical surfaces help develop the small muscles in the hand and wrist as well as the larger muscles in the arm and back. The large muscles are necessary for providing stability while performing fine motor tasks. Think about how hard it would be to thread a needle on a rocking boat! Drawing and coloring on an easel or a piece of paper taped to the wall is the easiest way to use vertical surfaces. Other activities include drawing and playing with shaving cream on tile surrounding the tub/shower during bath time, "painting" your backyard fence with water and a paintbrush, or removing and placing magnets on the refrigerator. The only limit is your imagination.



- **Tearing and Crumpling** — Tearing and crumpling paper develops the small muscles of the hand – the same muscles we use for handwriting. Have your child tear newspaper with his/her fingers and crumple it into balls to stuff craft projects (such as a scarecrow or a snowman), or simply toss it into the trash can to make a basket. Once your child masters this task, have him/her crumple paper with only one hand. Finally, have your child crumple tissue paper into a tiny ball using just the fingertips. Glue these tiny paper balls onto cardboard to make pictures. A similar activity is to have your child tear colored paper or tissue paper and glue onto various materials to make a mosaic picture. Glue tissue paper onto waxed paper to make pretty sun catchers.
- **In-Hand Manipulation** — In-hand manipulation requires the use of all the fine motor skills outlined above. We depend on in-hand manipulation many times throughout the day. One example is when we place coins in a vending machine. We hold all the coins in the palm of one hand (palmar arching). As we place coins into the machine, we bring one coin out to the tips of the thumb and index finger, one at a time (web space), while at the same time keeping the extra coins secured in the palm of the hand with the ring and pinky fingers (hand side separation). Your child can work on this skill by placing coins into a bank. Make a game to see how many small items, such as coins, cotton balls, or small game pieces your child can manipulate into his/her palm. Moving items into the palm is easier than moving items out of the palm. Start with one item and increase in number as your child becomes more skilled.
- **Drawing and Coloring** — Often children are using pencils, crayons, and markers before their hands are ready for these items. This can result in the learning of inefficient pencil grasps that may become problematic. To encourage the development of proper grasp patterns, give your child writing tools that promote the development of fine motor skills. Short crayons, no more than 2-inches long, require your child to use his or her skill side of the hand rather than the entire hand. Egg-shaped chalk (often available at drug stores in the spring) requires your child to use an open web space. Finally, coloring and drawing on a vertical surface places the wrist at the correct angle to promote palmar arching.

Where to Go for Help

If your child appears to be having difficulties developing fine motor skills, an occupational therapist may be able to help. Visit the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org for more information and a list of occupational therapists in your area.

Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. www.aota.org

Mary Benbow (1999), *Fine Motor Development*, Columbus: Zaner-Bloser, Inc.