



Easy Activities to Improve Fine Motor Skills

Rachel Leatherland, Occupational Therapist

Fine motor skills require precise movement of the hands and fingers. They are necessary for children to do everyday things such as use a spoon, thread beads, write with a pencil, or roll play dough to make fun objects. There are many activities you and your children can engage in, that will help in the development of fine motor skills. Some suggestions are provided below, but many others are possible. Have fun inventing new activities, but be sure to keep safety and choking potential in mind when deciding whether a child is ready to try any activity.

Strength

Strength in the muscles of the shoulders, arms, and hands is necessary for fine motor skill development. Encourage your child to play in ways that make use of these muscle groups.

Younger Children: Build arm and shoulder strength by encouraging your child to spend time crawling on all fours, using their arms to pull themselves to a standing position, and playing on their tummies while propped on their elbows and forearms.

Older Children: Older children can build arm and shoulder strength by wheelbarrow walking, swimming, playing tug of war games, pulling toys in a wagon, throwing large balls, and using their hands and arms to climb on playground equipment. Older children can also develop hand and grip strength by wringing out sponges or dishcloths to help at home, using a spray bottle to water plants, using toys that push together and pull apart, ripping and scrunching paper for crafts, and by stirring, squeezing, and forming cookie dough or play dough.



Use of The Fingers

Being able to use each finger by itself, or using a few fingers separately from the others, can be important when using the hands for fine motor activities. To develop control of the fingers, try the following:

Younger Children: Help your child learn to isolate fingers through pointing games, pushing buttons with the fingers, and, when not a choking hazard, pinching with the fingers to pick up and eat small pieces of cereal.

Older Children: Older children can develop finger control by squeezing clothespins, threading small objects to make a necklace, placing pegs to create a picture, using stickers or an eye-dropper to decorate a picture, popping bubble wrap, or by dressing dolls or stuffed animals in clothing equipped with large buttons, snaps, and/or easy zippers.

Use of Two Hands Together

Being able to use two hands together in a coordinated way is also an important skill when using the hands.

Younger Children: When young, children frequently use each hand in the dominant role at different times until hand preference is established. Younger children can use two hands through clapping games, stacking large blocks or objects that must be held with two hands, winding a jack in the box, or opening jars or containers with lids to find surprises hidden inside.

Older Children: Older children can learn to use two hands together by stringing beads onto a string, playing with construction toys that fit together, turning the paper while cutting with scissors, and lacing string through holes.



Pre-printing and Printing Skills

Having good fine motor skills will help your child begin to learn the drawing skills needed (scribbling, drawing lines and shapes) before learning to print letters and numbers. While printing and drawing, children must use their fingers to hold a marker or pencil. As they become more skilled, they must control their fingers precisely to create desired lines and shapes. Later, good pencil control is important for printing on the lines.

Younger Children: Younger children naturally progress through different ways of holding a writing tool, but their immature grasps may make it difficult to use small tools. Give your young child thicker tools such as fat crayons, washable markers, paintbrushes, or chalk, so that they can express their creativity.

Older Children: Encourage correct pencil grasp in older children by giving them very short pieces of chalk or crayon (requiring a proper pinch grip). Having them draw at eye level on a vertical surface, such as an easel (or on a wall with something to protect the wall), will also promote a correct pencil grip. Mazes, dot-to-dot activities, tracing, and colouring are all good ways to work on control of the pencil.

Scissor Skills

Using scissors to make precise cuts is another activity that requires fine control of the hands and fingers.

Younger Children: Young children may not be able to safely use scissors. Before they are ready, there are many activities that can be used to encourage the opening and closing motions of the hand needed to operate scissors. Try having your child use tongs, tweezers, clothespins, a turkey baster, a handheld hole-punch, or a spray bottle.

Older Children: When your child is ready to try scissors, use stiff paper such as index cards or construction paper, as this will improve control. A typical progression is to begin with random snipping, and then progress in sequence to cutting on a short line, cutting on longer lines, turning the paper at corners, cutting curved lines, and finally, cutting a circle. Encourage your child to cut away from the body, with elbows relaxed at the side, and to turn the paper, rather than the scissors, when needed.

There are many creative ways to work on fine motor skill development while having fun. Regular "practice" through play will prepare your child for many of the activities they will engage in when they go to school. If you or your child's teacher feel that your child is struggling, assessment and intervention by an occupational therapist may be helpful.