

Hand Dominance in Young Children

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One of the most interesting developments to monitor in your children is the emergence of hand dominance. In our society, close to 90% of the population are right handed, while the other 10% prefer to complete tasks such as writing and throwing, with their left hand.

It is normal for most children to be five or six years old before they show a true preference for one hand over the other. Although some children develop consistent hand dominance by the time they are three years of age, for some children this may not occur until seven or eight years of age.

With newborn babies, typically doctors will check to make sure that movements on both sides of their bodies are equal. At this early stage, babies should move both arms with little control. By the time a baby is four to six months old, however, they may show a preference for holding a rattle in one hand over the other. By six to nine months of age, they may begin reaching for objects with one hand more often than the other.

As children get older, their movements become more complex and generally one hand will complete the more complex movements, while the other acts as a stabilizer and positioner. Over time, watch your child for consistency with things like spoon use and buttoning. To test which hand may be dominant, you can try handing objects to your child, or place objects for your child to pick up, to the middle - that is, directly in front of them. You can then observe if there is a trend favouring one hand over the other depending on which hand a child reaches with. Most children will use their right hand, however, whatever hand a child chooses, they should be encouraged to do whatever feels the most comfortable and natural.

For children who show signs of being left handed, it is important to acknowledge their differences and be aware of some of the difficulties they may encounter when learning new skills, especially when they enter

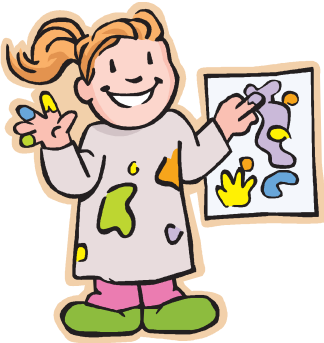
preschool or kindergarten. Tools used every day by right handed people, may pose a problem for left handed people. Items such as a school desk, scissors, a pencil sharpener and even a computer mouse can be awkward and difficult for the left handed person. Also, developing pre-reading skills, such as scanning from left to right, are more difficult because left handed people may naturally scan from right to left.

Some strategies for parents and teachers of left handed children include:

- Using pencils with harder lead to decrease smearing on the page
- Encouraging children to orient their paper or notebook to the right (even placing a piece of masking tape on the desk as a cue for where to line up the top of the page)
- Having a left handed adult teach new skills such as tying shoes
- Make sure that left handed students are sitting so that the light comes from the right side of their desk
- Acquire left handed tools such as scissors and pencil sharpeners

Finally, the most important strategy is to encourage your left handed child and to create positive attitudes around being left handed. Tell them about famous people who are left handed such as Albert Einstein, Julia Roberts, Keanu Reeves, Nicole Kidman, Oprah Winfrey and former US president Bill Clinton. Celebrate "International Left-Handers Day" on August 13 and remind children that being left handed is an advantage when playing certain sports.

While it is not always known why some children take longer to establish hand preference, some contributing conditions could include paralysis or weakness on one side of the body, amputation of an arm, a learning disorder, neurological immaturity and limited learning experiences. If you have concerns about the development of your child's hand dominance you may want to consult an occupational therapist.



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