

Improving Fine Motor Skills in Children

Fine motor skills are small muscle movements of the fingers in coordination with the eyes. When teaching fine motor skills try to be patient and understanding with your child. Fine motor skills take more time and practice to develop than we adults might think. Sometimes we forget just how many of these skills need to be learned - thinking instead that our child should automatically know how to do these tasks. It's definitely worth taking the time to practice these skills with our children. The more developed our children's fine motor skills become, the easier they will be able to learn to write. By developing his fine motor skills we will be encouraging the muscles in his hand, wrist and shoulder to develop and then this will support his writing.

Like gross motor skills, fine motor skills develop in a consistent manner but at an uneven pace. At times, your child will pick up skills rapidly, and at other times their skill development will be delayed.

It is more fun for your child to learn while they play. Try to incorporate activities like dress-up to teach zipping and buttoning; making cards to practice writing or tracing skills; cutting and pasting to make a project other than just a writing on a plain piece of paper, etc.

Here are some suggestions for developing fine motor skills and some activities to allow your child to practice them:

Cutting - When scissors are held correctly, and when they fit a child's hand well, cutting activities will exercise the very same muscles which are needed to manipulate a pencil in a mature tripod grasp. The correct scissor position is with the thumb and middle finger in the handles of the scissors, the index finger on the outside of the handle to stabilise, with fingers four and five curled into the palm.

Use a thick black line to guide cutting the following:

- A fringe from a piece of paper
- Cut off corners of a piece of paper - the offcuts from this can be used to a tile picture – see section 6.
- Cut along curved lines
- Cut lines with a variety of angles
- Cut figures with curves and angles
- Cut clay/playdough/plasticine with blunt scissors – I have a recipe for playdough if you need it. I like adding black colouring and glitter.
- They could 'help' you by cutting up anything that needs to be shredded before being binned.

Placing and Pasting

- Place a variety of forms (eg. blocks, felt, paper, string, yarn, cereal, cotton) on outlines – jigsaws.
- Match shapes, colour, or pictures to a page and paste them within the outlines

Tracing and Colouring

- Use a thick black line if needed
- Trace and then colour shapes, increasing the size and complexity gradually – this could be circles, squares, etc or robots or whatever!

Self-Care Skills

- Buttoning and unbuttoning
- Lacing
- Tying
- Fastening Snaps
- Zipping
- Locking and unlocking a door
- Winding a clock
- Opening and closing jars
- Rolling out dough or other simple cooking activities
- Washing plastic dishes

Finger Tracing

- Many times when a child is unable to do a handwriting worksheet, it helps to trace the pattern with the finger before using a pencil.
- Have the child trace a pattern in sand, baby cream, finger paint, etc. The textures give the child kinaesthetic feedback – I've found this to be quite effective and keeps the child's interest too. To contain the mess you could use a roasting tray.
- Practice letter formations in the air and in front of your child's eyes (arm outstretched) with the finger. You can also encourage them to 'write' on their hand with their finger or trace the letters on your back. You could try and guess which letter they are writing. You may need to model how to these first.

Other activities...

- Dot-to-dot drawings of pictures, objects, shapes, numbers, letters, etc.
- Typing exercises – searching for items in google can work well for this. Not only will they have to concentrate on the letters they need to make the words but they will also have to concentrate on putting their fingers on the correct keys.
- Playing with finger puppets and making them 'walk' and move along. – you could make these with your child.
- Tile and mosaic work
- Time your child to see how quickly they can completely scrunch up a sheet of newspaper using only one hand – this is really good for building up muscle strength.
- Folding activities – origami?
- Fine colouring
- Playdough
 - Use cocktail sticks to make designs in it.
 - Encourage them to make balls with the playdough – their hands need to be palms facing each other and fingers slightly curved inwards.

Activities to Develop Handwriting Skills

There are significant prerequisites for printing skills that begin in infancy and continue to emerge through the school years. The following activities support and promote fine motor and visual motor development:

Body Stability

The joints of the body need to be stable before the hands can be free to focus on specific skilled fine motor tasks.

- Wheelbarrow walking, crab walking, and wall push-ups.
- Toys: Silly putty, and monkey bars on the playground.

Fine Motor Skills

When a certain amount of body stability has developed, the hands and fingers begin to work on movements of dexterity and isolation as well as different kinds of grasps. Children will develop fine motor skills best when they work on a VERTICAL or near vertical surface as much as possible. In particular, the wrist must be in extension. (Bent back in the direction of the hand)

- Attach a large piece of drawing paper to the wall. Have the child use a large marker and try the following exercises to develop visual motor skills: Make an outline of a shape or letter one at a time. Have the child trace over your line from left to right, or from top to bottom. Trace each figure at least 10 times. Then have the child draw the figure next to your model several times.
- Play Dot to Dot. Again make sure the child's strokes connect dots from left to right, and from top to bottom.
- Trace around stencils - the non-dominant hand should hold the stencil flat and stable against the paper, while the dominant hand pushes the pencil firmly against the edge of the stencil. The stencil must be held firmly.
- Attach a large piece of felt to the wall, or use a felt board. The child can use felt shapes to make pictures. Magnetic boards can be used the same way.
- Have the child work on a chalkboard. Do the same kinds of tracing and modelling activities as suggested above.
- Paint at an easel. Some of the modelling activities as suggested above can be done at the easel.
- Magna Doodle - Experiment making vertical, horizontal, and parallel lines.

- When a writing tool is introduced, letters which involve similar strokes should be taught first moving from simple to more complex.

★ c a o s curved shape

★ i r n u m short letters

★ l t tall, straight letters

★ h d b k straight and curved

★ v w x z diagonals

★ y p q g j f letter shapes beneath the line - In class we refer to these as 'hanging

letters' or letters that have a tail like a monkey sitting on a tree.

Ocular Motor Control

This refers to the ability of the eyes to work together to follow and hold an object in the line of vision as needed.

- Use a flashlight against the ceiling. Have the child lie on his/her back or tummy and visually follow the moving light from left to right, to bottom, and diagonally.
- Find hidden pictures in books. (There are special books for this.)
- Maze activities.

Eye-hand Coordination

This involves accuracy in placement, direction, and spatial awareness.

- Throw bean bags into a hula hoop placed flat on the floor. Gradually increase the distance.
- Play throw and catch with a ball. Start with a large ball and work toward a smaller ball.
- Practice hitting bowling pins with a ball. (You can purchase these games or make your own with pop bottles and a small ball.)
- Play "Hit the Balloon" with a medium-sized balloon.