

Pencil Grasp

The manner in which a child holds a pencil is called "pencil grasp." It involves the positioning of their fingers on the pencil & the position of the pencil within their hand. Usually by age 5, most children have developed a mature & efficient pencil grasp. An efficient pencil grasp is one that allows the greatest amount of finger movement and is the least fatiguing for the muscles of the hands. It is characterized by an open webspace (the space between thumb and index finger), and a not-too-loose but not-too-tight grip as well as good stabilization of the writing wrist and forearm on the desk or tabletop.

Ways to teach an efficient pencil grasp:

- "Drop it in, thumb and pointer pinch the sides, middle goes underneath"
- "Mom & Dad in the front, kids in the back" (mom & dad are index and thumb, kids are the last 3 fingers).
- OK: have them make an OK sign, open their pinchers for the pencil and drop their other fingers
- "Flip the tip" - put the pencil on the table with the tip pointing away, pinch the pencil's point where it meets the wood, grab the eraser with your other hand and flip it around your hand to be in the right position
- Handwriting Without Tears and Dr. Jean have pencil grip songs and youtube videos on the topic

Generally, if a child is having difficulty with pencil grasp in preschool or Kindergarten, we will suggest crayons broken into halves or thirds, broken pieces of chalk, and small golf pencils as the size is more appropriate for small hands and facilitates the appropriate grasp pattern. For older elementary children, we often explore pencil grips. Other ways to help children hold a pencil more efficiently are to have them hold a small object (eraser, chenille pom, paper wad, etc) in their flexed ring & pinky fingers while they write, or having them wear a rubber band around their wrist and loop it over their pencil to help them learn to pull pencil back into the webspace.

Often, a "warmup" before handwriting can help as it gets bloodflow to the small muscles of the fingers. Start whole body and progress to shoulders, arms and then fingers. Some warmup ideas include animal walks, chair/desk pushups, windshield wiper arms, shoulder shrugs, pretend to prep baseball glove & throw, pretend doorknob turns, pretend pull on winter gloves, put on lotion/hand sanitizer, use hands to open and close to make Mickey Mouse ears, cat/owl eyes, snap, count/tick with fingers, finger aerobics, sign language, object manipulation, rain sounds, fingerplays, or use the pencil: twirl it, pencil pushups, twist it and tap each end.

Many skills are required to develop an efficient pencil grasp. These include the ability to move fingers in isolation of each other, adequate hand muscle strength, & good wrist stability. Here are some activity ideas.

Wrist Stability/Shoulder Strength

- Drawing/writing on a chalkboard or other surface that is above eye level
- Paint, draw, color, etc on an inclined or vertical surface such as a tabletop or freestanding easel, sliding glass door, chalkboard, shower wall, mirror, etc. A tabletop easel can be as easy as a large 3 ring binder lying on its side.
- Position games and toys on an inclined or vertical surface
- Wall push ups or chair push ups
- Lots of "tummy time" doing activities while holding self up with shoulders lying on floor or on all 4's
- Bear walk, crab walk, donkey kicks, yoga, etc.

The arches of the hand (general hand development)

- Color, draw and write with broken crayons and chalk.
- Roll objects such as a small ball or silly putty with the palm
- Roll a pair of dice within cupped hands
- Activities that require weight bearing through open hands such as wheelbarrow walking and imitating animals by crawling on all fours
- Line up a row of several pennies and turn them over as quickly as possible using finger movements
- Open and close zip lock bags using fingertips only

Small muscles of the hand (muscle strength)

- Play tug of war with small diameter objects such as elastic bands, coffee stir sticks, etc.
- Insert pegs into a pegboard such as light bright, etc.
- Wring out wet clothes or a sponges
- Playing with clay, putty, playdough. Try a treasure hunt and hide small objects for them to find.
- Use a spray bottle with water to water plants, erase chalk off of the sidewalk or outdoor wall
- Games and toys that involve grasping or squeezing things, using tongs, tweezers, clothespins.

Separation of the sides of the hand (hold something in your palm while using your fingers)

- Squeeze the trigger on a spray bottle with the pointer and index fingers, while the thumb and other fingers stabilize the bottle
- Roll small balls of playdough between the thumb and index finger
- Give the child a number of small items such as coins, beads, or bingo chips to hold in one hand. Then ask them to sort and place the items into a container one at a time using only their thumb and index finger. Can do with games such as Connect 4, Don't Spill the Beans, etc.
- Keep beads in one hand while stringing onto lace held by opposite hand.
- Hide a small bead or object in the 4th and 5th finger while holding a crayon or marker with the other 3 fingers to color.

Precision Rotation (the ability to spin objects with your fingers)

- Activities that require rotating an object in one's fingertips
- Spinning tops and playing jacks
- Hold a flat object such as a book or plastic plate on extended fingers, and ask the child to rotate the object on their fingertips
- Removing/replacing screw-top lids from bottles and jars
- Threading nuts on/off of bolts (progress from large to small)
- Hold two small balls in one hand and attempt to rotate one ball around the other

Delicate Touch (the ability to use different amounts of pressure)

- Paint with an eye dropper
- Pick up fragile objects (cornflakes, mini-marshmallows, small pieces of foam) with tweezers, tongs or fingers, without breaking them
- Drawing or tracing on tissue paper
- Line up dominos on their end or on their sides
- Release and count drops of water from an eyedropper one at a time