

Motor Skill Builders

Many skills are required to be a good writer other than knowing how to form the letters. Some of these skills include good shoulder, elbow and wrist stability, adequate hand strength and the ability to move fingers in isolation of each other. Usually between ages 4 and 5 children have developed a mature, efficient grasp on the pencil with the thumb, index, and middle fingers. This "tripod grasp" allows for the most finger movement and is the least fatiguing. Here are a list of fun activities that work on these important skills with your child and to give them a great jump start.

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

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

- Activities that require rotating an object in one's fingertips (bottle cap)
- 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

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.

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.

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.

Drawing Shapes, Letters

Here are some multi-sensory ideas for practicing drawing shapes, copying pictures and letters (remember to have them start their letters at the top!) at home other than just with pencil/paper:

- small chalkboards and chalk
- sidewalk chalk, bath and window crayons
- writing with finger in sand or shaving cream
- paint with finger, qtip or paintbrush
- with finger on top of a sealed ziplock bag filled with hair gel or paint
- rolling and laying out playdough snakes then pinching in the right formation
- placing small beads, rocks or magnets over letters in the correct formation
- big in the air with whole arm movements using streamers or toilet paper
- driving cars in the correct formation, etc...
- Practice lots of diagonal lines such as in a triangle and an X as these tend to be the hardest since you have to cross the middle of your body.

Tips on Developing Scissor Skills:

- Generally a child first learns to snip, then cut on a straight line, cut on corners, cut on curved line, and then cut out shapes.
- Start with cutting on thick diameter lines and progress to smaller width.
- Practicing with thick paper such as construction paper, cardstock, or even snipping playdough or straws gives more sensory feedback and helps with scissor control.
- If your child has difficulty knowing where to put their thumb in scissors, or remembering that their thumb goes up, mark the handle of their scissors on the thumb side with a small sticker or draw on a smiley face with a permanent marker.
- If your child has a hard time knowing where to start cutting, extend the starting point out to the edge of the paper, or draw a dot where they should start and arrows or stickers that show which direction they should go. (They should cut towards the direction of their dominant hand.)
- Remind children to use their dominant hand to cut, and their non-dominant hand as a “helper” to hold the paper and make paper turns.

Crossing Midline:

You can tell there are problems with crossing the body's midline if the child:

1. Switches hands when writing, drawing, painting and colouring
2. Uses left hand for activities on the left side of the body and right hand for activities on the right hand side.

Ways to work on this include

- Draw a large circle, oval, horizontal line or any picture that requires a left to right reach. Position your child in the center. Have your child place stickers or a stamper along the lines of the picture using the same hand.

- Coin flipping: line up a row of coins, placing the child at the center. Flip coins one at a time with the same hand from one end to the Other.
- Deal cards to a group using one hand to hold the deck and the other to deal to everyone around the table.
- Bean bag toss: place target containers to the left and to the right; instruct the child to use the same hand for a full round, may switch to the other hand for alternating rounds if desired.
- Catch balls thrown, or rolled, to the right and to the left of center, encourage catching with both hands together
- Floor play: when playing on the floor, encourage your child to lean on one hand or elbow. Place the toys or games on the side being leaned on. This forces the child to cross the middle when playing.
- Play sorting games: place objects to sort on the left side and containers to place them in on the right side: sort coins, cars vs. trucks, pompoms, marbles, bingo chips, etc.
- Setting up a puzzle with pieces on left side and having child reach across body with right hand to bring puzzle pieces to puzzle that is in front of their body (don't let them turn their body when they reach). You can repeat this task with the opposite hand (puzzle pieces placed on right side, reaching with left hand to get puzzle pieces).