Home Activities to Improve Fine Motor Skill Development

Young children learning to write benefit from experiences that support the development of fine motor skills in the hands and fingers. Children should have strength and dexterity in their hands and fingers before being asked to manipulate a pencil on paper. Here are some fun activities children can do at home to develop these important skills.

Fine Motor Activities

The following activities involve the use of manipulatives to support young children's fine motor development, and will help to build the strength and dexterity necessary to hold a pencil appropriately.

1. Mold and roll Play-Doh® into balls—using the palms of the hands facing each other and with fingers curled slightly towards the palm.

2. Roll Play-Doh® into tiny balls (peas) using only the fingertips.

3. Use pegs or toothpicks to make designs in Play-Doh®.

4. Cut Play-Doh® with a plastic knife or with a pizza or tracing wheel by holding the implement in a diagonal grasp.

5. Tear newspaper into strips and then crumple them into balls. Use the balls of paper as stuffing for scarecrows, puppets, or other art projects.

6. Scrunch up one (1) sheet of newspaper in one hand—great for building strength!

7. Pick up objects using large tweezers such as those found in the Bed Bugs® game. This can be adapted by picking up Cheerios®, small cubes, small marshmallows, pennies, etc., in counting games.

8. Shake dice by cupping the hands together, forming an empty air space between the palms.

9. Use small-sized screwdrivers like those found in an erector set.

10. Use lacing and sewing activities such as stringing beads, Cheerios®, macaroni, etc. Also, if available, plastic-coated string—S'getti String®—works great with cut up drinking straws.

11. Use eye droppers to "pick up" colored water for color mixing or to make artistic designs on paper. Turn coffee filters into an art project!

12. Roll small balls out of tissue paper, and then glue the balls onto construction paper to form pictures or designs.

13. Attempt to turn over cards, coins, checkers, or buttons, without bringing them to the edge of the table.

14. Make pictures using stickers or self-sticking paper (O) reinforcements.

15. Play games with the "puppet fingers"—thumb, index, and middle fingers. At circle time, have each child's puppet fingers tell about what happened over the weekend or use puppet fingers in songs and finger plays.

Scissor Activities

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 hold a pencil correctly, that is, between the thumb and index finger with the pencil resting on the middle finger. 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 stabilize, with fingers four and five curled into the palm.

1. Cut up junk mail or magazine subscription cards.

2. Make fringe on the edge of a piece of construction paper.

3. Cut Play-Doh® with scissors.

4. Cut straws or shredded paper.

Sensory Activities

The following activities ought to be done frequently to increase large muscle strength and endurance. These activities also strengthen the child's awareness of his or her hands.

1. Wheelbarrow walking, crab walking

2. Clapping games (loud/quiet, on knees, together, etc.)

3. Catching (clapping) bubbles between hands

4. Draw in a tactile medium such as wet sand, salt, rice, or "goop.” Make "goop" by adding colored water to cornstarch until you have a mixture similar in consistency to toothpaste. The "drag" of this mixture provides feedback to the muscle and joint receptors, thus facilitating visual motor control.

5. Pick out small objects like pegs, beads, coins, etc., from a tray of salt, sand, rice, or putty. Try it with eyes closed too. This helps develop sensory awareness in the hands.

Midline Crossing

The establishment of hand dominance may still be developing. Until it does, a child may switch hands at the midline when doing certain activities. The following activities are intended to help facilitate midline crossing:

1. Encourage reaching across the body for materials with each hand. It may be necessary to engage the other hand in an activity to prevent switching hands at midline.

2. Refrain specifically from discouraging a child from using the left hand for any activity. Allow for the natural development of hand dominance by presenting activities at midline, and allowing the child to choose freely.

3. Start making the child aware of the left and right sides of his body through spontaneous comments like, "kick the ball with your right leg." Play imitation posture games like "Simon Says" with across the body movements.

4. When painting at an easel, encourage the child to paint a continuous line across the entire paper. Then also one from diagonal to diagonal.

Activities for the Development of Handwriting Skills

There are significant prerequisites for writing skills that begin in infancy and continue to emerge through the preschool 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. Activities include:

1. Wheelbarrow walking, crab walking, and wall push-ups

2. Using Silly Putty® and outside play with playground equipment like monkey bars

3. Throwing a ball through an old tire or at a cardboard target

4. Dancing or marching to music

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. (i.e. chalkboard, whiteboard, 3" desk binder). In particular, the wrist must be bent back in the direction of the hand.

1. 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 a letter, number, or letter part (stroke) model— one per sheet of paper. Have the child trace over your line from left to right, or from top to bottom. Have them trace over each figure at least 10 times. Then have the child draw their figure next to your model several times.

2. Play "Connect the Dots." Again make sure the child's strokes connect the dots from left to right, and from top to bottom.

3. 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**.

4. 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.

5. Have the child work on a chalkboard doing the same kinds of tracing and modeling activities as suggested above.

6. Paint at an easel. Some of the modeling activities as suggested above can be done at the easel.

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.

1. Use a flashlight against the ceiling. Have the child lie on his or her back or tummy and visually follow the moving light from left to right, top to bottom, and diagonally.

2. Find hidden pictures in books or magazines like *Highlights for Children.*

3. Practice maze activities.

Eye-hand Coordination

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

1. Throw bean bags/ Koosh® balls into a hula-hoop placed flat on the floor. Gradually increase the distance.

2. Play throw and catch with a ball. Start with a large ball and work toward a smaller ball. (Koosh® balls are easier to catch than a tennis ball.)

3. Practice hitting bowling pins with a ball. (You can purchase these games or make your own with soda bottles and a small ball.)

4. Play "Hit the Balloon" with a medium-sized balloon.

Recommended Resources

Books and Articles

Hammet, C.T. (1992). *Movement Activities for Early Childhood*. Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics.

Useful resource highlighting different types of movement activities that can assist young children with physical development.

Kristensen, N. (2001). *Basic Parenting Focus Issue: Motor Development.* Minneapolis, Minn.: Family Information Services.

Very useful set of materials and handouts summarizing key points related to a young child's physical growth and development.

Mayesky, M. (1999). *Creative Activities for Children*. Thomson Publishing.

Useful resource highlighting activities that can be done with young children to stimulate growth and development.

References

Berk, L.E. (1989). *Child Development*. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.

Clare, L., and H. Garnier. (2000). Parents' goals for adolescents diagnosed with developmental delays in early childhood. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 20(4), 442-446.

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Malina, R.M., and C. Bouchard. (1991). *Growth, Maturation, and Physical Activity*. Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics.

http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Supporting_Physical/