

Pre-writing skills for children under 5



All too often young children are given writing tools to use before they are ready for them. Young children from three to five years of age use their hands to explore and learn about the environment and themselves. By developing good hand skills and other pre-writing skills you will prepare your child for the next step, which is writing. Working on hand skills will also assist older children who are experiencing writing difficulties.

What are the pre-writing skills?

Hand skills refer to the strength and the dexterity (how well we can handle small objects) in our hands. Both depend on how we use the small muscles of our hands. However, we also need the muscles in our forearm to provide strength and stability. In fact, we often must coordinate and use both types of muscles to do things such as holding and using a pencil, using scissors, managing buttons, handling coins and using various utensils for eating. The thumb, index and middle fingers carry out the skilled movements while the ring and baby fingers provide stability and increase strength. It is also important to develop strength and control in the upper body and shoulders so we can steady ourselves. This gives us the freedom to use our hands to manipulate and control objects in a very precise manner.

Good sensory information is important for hand skills, as it tells our brain what we feel, how we move and where

our hands are as we do a task. The brain must coordinate these sensations with what we see so we can make small changes for precise coordination and muscle control.

Imagine you are wearing a pair of heavy gloves and blurred glasses while you try to do your work. You would have difficulty coordinating your movements for most tasks! Children need to receive and coordinate accurate sensory information when developing pre-writing skills.

Here are some suggestions to help your child develop good pre-writing skills:

General tips

Tabletop activities

The table and chair should be the right size for your child. His feet should be flat on the floor and forearms should rest comfortably on the tabletop (at approximately elbow level). Use a phonebook or box so his feet do not dangle or swing.

Teach new skills

Show your child how it's done, repeat the movements over and over again, and provide some physical guidance so he can feel how to perform the necessary movements. Have your child imitate you instead of copying from a book or paper.

Play and draw on vertical surfaces

Place the toy or paper at or above eye level. This will bring the wrist and hand into a better position to practise and it

will strengthen the movements and control that will be needed for printing, etc.



Develop body awareness and directionality

- Play Simon Says and use terms such as “up & down,” “back & forth” and “front & back.”
- Sing action songs such as Hokey Pokey, This Old Man, The Wheels on the Bus and Itsy Bitsy Spider.

Ways to strengthen the shoulder, arm and wrist

- Use tabletop easels or bookstands so your child can do the activity while seated. Flannel boards, chalkboards, sticker games, and letter and number magnets on the refrigerator can be used to strengthen the upper body while standing.
- Try tummy-lying on the floor with arms propped on forearms to read books, colour or do puzzles.
- Play games such as tug-of-war, wheelbarrow walking or animal walks.
- Use the playground equipment, such as the climbers and monkey bars, at your local park.

Provide opportunities for sensory input

- Hide pennies, beads or other small objects in Play-Doh, sand or rice tubs for your child to find.
- Draw shapes and lines on sandpaper or carpet squares.
- Put everyday objects such as a key, toothbrush, spoon, eraser, paper clips, etc. into a bag. Your child identifies the objects by feeling them.

Develop hand skills

- Change how activities are done to encourage finger use. For example, when playing with Lego® have your child rest his forearms on the table so that he uses his fingers to put the pieces together.
- Lace large beads with strings that have small plastic tips on the ends or use easy lacing cards.
- Put pennies into a piggy bank, play with finger puppets and spinning tops.
- Use small tongs to pick up cotton balls, pom-poms, blocks, etc.

Develop eye-hand coordination

- Roll, throw and catch large-sized balls.
- Play balloon volleyball, scarf toss and catch.
- Draw and scribble.
- Colour simple shapes, use Paint with Water books (the colours magically appear).
- Pour, ladle and spoon soapy water into different sized containers at the kitchen sink.

Pre-writing activities (no pencils required)

- Make lines, shapes and letters by: finger painting, painting with pudding or shaving cream, painting with water on the sidewalk and even with your fingers in the sand.
- Play shape and letter matching or recognition games.
- Play with puzzles, magnetic letters and Play-Doh.

Above all, have fun with your child and remember that for a child, play is his/her work!!

These activities are general in nature and are not intended to replace the intervention that may be provided by an occupational therapist. If you find that your child is struggling with these skills, you may wish to contact an occupational therapist in your area for assistance.

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Ask an OT is made possible by Dianne and other members of the Canadian Occupational Therapy Association (CAOT) who volunteer their time to answer questions to assist people to understand how occupational therapy can help them with their day to day challenges. Ask An OT now at www.otworks.ca.



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