

Top Ten List

Supporting Fine Motor Development

1. Do gross motor and upper body strength activities before fine motor tasks.
Motor development is typically proximodistal, meaning that we develop skill from closest to our body to further out (e.g., shoulders before hands). Wheelbarrow walking, pushing/carrying something heavy, or playing tug-of-war before sitting down to do fine motor activities can help to strengthen and stabilize those shoulder and elbow muscles to support finger control. Bonus: It helps calm the body for better attention, too!
2. Work at a vertical surface (easel, chalkboard, wall).
Again, we're developing control and stability in those shoulder muscles to help support fine motor control in our fingers. Working at shoulder height or above also promotes wrist extension, which is necessary for skilled finger use.
3. Use a variety of small writing tools.
No chance of using a fistful grasp on a broken crayon, small piece of chalk, or colored pencil that has been sharpened to only a few inches! Using small writing tools helps to promote a functional (usually tripod) grasp on writing tools.
4. Beef up your "writing center."
In preschool, the writing center doesn't need to be only construction paper and crayons or markers. Some ideas to make it more fun and build skills: recipe cards, old checkbooks, junk keyboard, postcards, junk mail, crayons/markers/colored pencils/chalk, hole punch, label stickers, folders, wrapping paper...
5. Color!
Coloring helps to develop essential pre-writing skills of coordination, grip, and strength. By observing how a child colors, we can start to determine handwriting readiness. Some of the skills we look at include:
Attention, Crayon grip, Control, Posture/strength/endurance, Use of helping hand
Watch for the different crayon strokes used – up/down, side to side, little circular motions, and staying in the lines or following the direction of the lines.
6. Watch what you cut.
Be aware of the progression of cutting skills (see Scissor Skills handout), and plan or modify activities accordingly!

EASY	—————▶	DIFFICULT
Snipping strips of paper Index card weight paper	Cutting along short, straight lines Construction paper Copy paper	Cutting out shapes Magazines
7. Be conscious of posture, but be flexible with positions!
For challenging fine motor activities, make sure feet are planted on the floor, and check table height (see Posture handout). But...there are a TON of other great positions for fine motor activities! Lying on belly propped on elbows or lying on back to color on piece of paper underneath table both promote that shoulder strength/stability. Side-sitting on the floor also promotes weight-bearing and midline crossing.
8. Use all of your senses!
Use your whole body and all of your senses for pre-writing and literacy activities. Using multiple sensory systems promotes better learning and of course, is more FUN! Tracing letters or shapes in salt/sand/pudding, cutting pieces of spaghetti, making finger shapes...all promote fine motor development by also addressing other underlying skills.
9. Make it meaningful...to the child.
Themed art activities are neat, but remember to be aware that the product is not as important as the process! The most skill development is seen when the child takes the lead and makes choices of her own. Let go of your expectations about the finished product.
10. Structure success!
Try your best to find that "just-right challenge" to support fine motor skills (ANY skills, really)! Choose or modify activities so that they're just difficult enough to make a child stretch their skills, but easy enough to allow for success and a feeling of accomplishment. As skills improve, you can step up the challenge to further build skills.
Often, those children who avoid fine motor activities do so because they're too difficult. Try something easy, provide lots of praise, and see what happens!