



Everyday Play

by Christy Isbell

Illustrated by Chris Wold Dyrud

Dedication

For Caroline and Elizabeth—I love you!

Acknowledgments

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Everyday PLAY

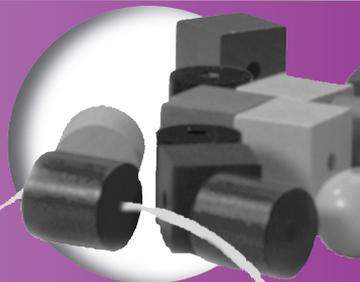
Fun Games to
Develop the
Fine Motor Skills
Your Child Needs for School



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Chapter 1

The Finer Points of Fine Motor Play

Your child is naturally curious. One of the ways he learns about the world is by exploring objects and materials with his hands. These hand skills are called fine motor skills. During the early years, your child learns to use his hands for important skills, such as feeding and dressing himself, as well as for play, work, and self-care skills he will need for the rest of his life. As a responsive parent, you help establish your child's sense of trust and security; a child who feels nurtured and supported is more likely to try new things. This book will help you understand and observe how children develop fine motor skills, and how you can join in your child's everyday play to help him grow in new directions.

Your child uses her fine motor skills when she is at home, at school, and in the community. At home, she may use her hands to eat dry cereal, feed herself with a spoon or fork, drink from a cup, zip up her coat, snap her pants, or unbutton her shirt. At preschool, your child may use her hands to clap along with music, do fingerplays, put on dress-up clothes, wash a doll, build with blocks, draw, cut with scissors, or put together puzzles. Your child may use her fine motor skills in a variety of ways when she is out and about in her environment. She may use her hands to push the button on an elevator, open plastic bags of snacks, turn on a faucet, and wash her hands.

You can build those skills every day by playing the games and doing the activities in this book. Now is the time for playful learning.



What Fine Motor Skills Should My Preschooler Learn?

By the time your child is six years old, she should be able to perform the following basic fine motor actions:

- **Reach:** Move her arm forward to grasp or touch an object.
- **Grasp:** Use her fingers to get an object into her hand.
- **Carry:** Use her hand to move an object from one place to another place.
- **Release:** Let go of an object she holds in her hand.
- **In-hand Manipulation:** Use her fingers to adjust an object inside her hand.
- **Bilateral Hand Use:** Use her two hands together in an activity.

How Can I Help My Preschooler Develop Fine Motor Skills?

Give your child a wide variety of materials to explore in new and different ways. Paper, pens, markers, crayons, glue, clay, and small blocks spark your child's imagination and invite her to create things that are interesting to her. She will enjoy this open-ended exploration and, at the same time, it will help her develop her fine motor skills.

When you and your child do the fine motor activities in this book, remember that the product of the activity is not as important as the process. Giving your four-year-old child a blank piece of paper, a choice of several different paintbrushes, and a set of watercolor paints will provide more interesting ways for him to practice his fine motor skills than offering him a coloring book and crayons.

When your child is learning to use a new tool such as an eyedropper or a hole punch, show her the proper and safest method to use these tools.



Keep your instructions simple and brief. Clearly demonstrate the basic ways to use the tool or material, and then give her time to explore how she can use the tool.

Before you begin an activity, talk to your child about safety precautions. Generally, one or two “safety tips” are all that your child will be able to remember. Simply explain how your child can use the tool or material safely. Here are some examples:

We use a stapler to staple paper together.

Watch your fingers! Keep them on top of the stapler.

We use scissors at the table.

Several factors may influence your child’s fine motor development, including muscle tone, body build, temperament, and even gender. Frequently, girls are more competent than boys of the same age at performing fine motor activities, such as drawing, handwriting, and cutting with scissors. Every child will develop fine motor skills at her own pace.

The Foundations of Fine Motor Skills

Here is a list of the foundations necessary for fine motor skills:

Developmental Readiness: Building, stacking, and putting things together fascinate young children. Preschoolers begin to understand shapes and sizes and begin to differentiate between the “part” and the “whole.” Activities that give your child the opportunity to build and construct using blocks and other similar objects will help him become developmentally ready to participate in activities such as drawing, cutting, and stringing beads.

Good Posture/Balance: Fine motor activities are easier to complete when a child sits with her feet firmly on the floor and with her back straight.



Your child should be able to use her arms to manipulate objects rather than using them to hold herself steady at the table.

Shoulder Strength: Your child's shoulder strength provides a stable base of support for his hand function. Young children who do not regularly participate in large motor activities such as climbing, crawling, pushing, and pulling may not develop good upper-body strength.

Grasp: Your child should be able to hold a writing tool (for example, a crayon, marker, or pencil) before you begin helping her learn pre-writing skills. The grasp ought to be strong enough that your child can hold the writing tool, but flexible enough to allow her to move the tool across a paper surface. Most three-year-olds hold a crayon with all of their fingers, and the majority of five-year-olds use their thumb, index, and middle fingers to hold the crayon. By the time your child reaches first grade she should have a mature grasp.

Forearm and Wrist Control: Your child should be able to swivel his forearm so that his palm is up and then down. Your child's ability to hold his wrist firm while moving his fingers is particularly important for activities such as cutting and lacing or stringing. These skills will improve dramatically between ages three and five.

Bilateral Hand Use: Using two hands together to complete an activity is essential for success in fine motor activities. By age three, your child should learn to stabilize an object with one hand and move her other hand. For example, she should be able to hold down a piece of paper with one hand and draw on that paper with her other hand. By age five, your child should begin developing **reciprocal hand use**. This means she can cut with one hand and turn the paper with the other hand to create large, simple shapes.

Eye-Hand Coordination: Your child needs to develop strong interaction between his visual and hand skills. He needs to be able to use his vision to coordinate the movement of his shoulders, elbows, wrists, and fingers as he learns to use a new tool or participates in a new fine motor activity.



Writing

In addition to the foundations of good fine motor skills, your child must be able to scribble independently on paper before beginning pre-writing activities. Most young children follow this progression:

- Copy a horizontal line.
- Copy a vertical line.
- Copy a circle.
- Copy a cross.
- Copy a right-to-left diagonal.
- Copy a square.
- Copy a left-to-right diagonal.
- Copy an "X."
- Copy a triangle.
- Copy a diamond.

Note: "Copy" here means that the child can look at a picture or drawing of a particular form, and without a demonstration of how to make the line or shape, be able to create an imitation of the drawing.

In general, this progression begins sometime around age two. Most children will be able to copy a triangle and a diamond by the time they are four-and-a-half years old. Once your child can copy all forms and shapes, she should be ready to begin writing letters.

When It Comes to Writing, Don't Rush It

Your child should spend more time playing with manipulatives than practicing writing skills. Avoid the temptation to begin formal handwriting, such as making specific letters, before your child is developmentally ready. If you push your child to write before his hands are physically ready, he may become less interested in writing. In addition, practicing these higher-level fine motor skills before your child is ready puts him at risk for developing poor pencil grasp, illegible handwriting, and slow handwriting (see page 121).



Developmental Steps for Learning How to Write

Your child will learn pre-writing skills best by playing and by taking part in daily life activities. The developmental steps that children typically follow in learning to write are below.

Modeling/Imitating: You show your child how to draw a line or shape, and your child imitates it.

Tracing: Your child traces over a line or shape. Some children are able to skip the tracing step, as they will be able to copy a shape after modeling/imitating.

Copying: The child looks at the completed line or shape and copies it.

Creating: The child creates her own lines and shapes.

The time that each child spends in each developmental step varies. Each time your child attempts a new form or shape, he will most likely need to go through these same steps. Expose your child to a wide variety of print (for example books, magazines, and cards), art, environmental designs (for example traffic signs or labels), and markers, crayons or pencils during play so that he will have many opportunities to imitate and model pre-writing.

By age four, many children will spend more time creating shapes and drawings of their own and less time imitating and tracing. During this stage, engaging in open-ended activities that use blank paper and various writing tools will allow your child to practice her new pre-writing skills. Labeling a child's drawing or writing her story on paper is a great way to demonstrate letter formation.

Some children are ready to begin writing at age five. Most children will start by writing their first names. Some children will be interested in writing letters that are not in their names and may begin to participate in inventive spelling. The best way to promote your child's handwriting skills is to provide a



literacy-rich environment that includes a variety of opportunities for him to observe, attempt, and master pre-writing activities first and then follow with letter-writing activities.

Cutting

Your child will follow these general developmental stages of learning to use scissors:

- Hold scissors appropriately (one hand, thumb on top).
- Open and close scissors.
- Snip paper.
- Cut forward through a sheet of paper.
- Cut in a straight line.
- Cut out a square or triangle.
- Cut out a circle.
- Cut non-paper material (such as yarn, tape, or fabric).

Note: A child begins by cutting large simple shapes and progresses to cutting smaller shapes.

This sequence typically begins when children are about two-and-a-half years old. Many young children first attempt to hold scissors with their thumbs down or using two hands.

By age three, your child may be able to hold a sheet of paper in one hand and manipulate the scissors in her other hand to snip the paper. By age five-and-a-half, she may be able to cut out simple shapes and use scissors to cut non-paper materials for creative activities.

These descriptions of how children develop their writing and scissor skills are guidelines. Each child will have his own interest and skill level. As a result, children will progress through the sequences differently as they develop these fine motor skills.

Making Room for Fine Motor Fun

You may want to designate a small area in your home where your child can explore fine motor play. Your fine motor learning space may be a small area or corner of a room. This space will work best in a spot where the floors are easy to clean. If your entire floor is carpeted, you may want to cover the floor with a shower curtain or sheet to protect surfaces.

Once you've decided where to set up the space, begin collecting objects and materials that will stimulate your child's fine motor development. See the list of developmentally appropriate materials and tools for your child to use (on pages 18–20) for suggestions. Stock the area with the right materials and welcome your child into her new space.

Now it's time to play! Simply find the chapter that matches your child's developmental level and choose the activities you think he will enjoy. Have fun, be a good observer, and enjoy this amazing time of growth and development with your child.



Chapter 2

Just the “Write” Size: Selecting Fine Motor Tools and Materials

Give your child the right tools and materials that provide the “just right challenge.” A tool that is too difficult for your child to manipulate may discourage him and he may give up. An activity that is too simple for your child may cause your child to quickly lose interest in the task.

Preschoolers work best with tools that fit easily into their small hands. Select tools that will make it easy for a child to be successful so that the she can see her hard work pay off. For example, plastic scissors may appear to be a safe and appropriate option for some children, but plastic scissors are difficult to use when cutting thin paper. Using plastic scissors may frustrate your child. Being a careful observer as you watch your child play will help you gauge her interest level and skill and modify the activity so she can be successful.

The “Write” Stuff

Writing and Drawing Utensils: Your child’s grasp of a writing utensil is important because it has an impact on your child’s handwriting skill. By the end of kindergarten, most children will have established a particular method for grasping their writing tools. These grasps are habit-based and are very difficult to change once a child practices it long enough. Using the appropriate size and type of writing utensil will help your child develop and practice an efficient pencil grasp that will carry over into elementary school.



For three-year-olds or inexperienced preschoolers, provide large writing tools, such as thick chalk, pencils, crayons, and paintbrushes; bulb paintbrushes; and easy-grip (round-top) crayons. These “thick” utensils are easier for children to grasp in their small hands. Large markers are especially effective for beginning writers because large markers move smoothly across the paper and are easy to hold.

Some four-year-olds and most five-year-olds have developed enough foundational skills for writing that they are ready to use standard-sized writing utensils. Adult-sized pencils, golf pencils, thin markers, and small paintbrushes will encourage a more effective grasp. This means children will start to hold the writing tool with fewer fingers, as well as start to separate their thumb and index finger while writing. Do not throw away short pencils and broken crayons; use them to help a more mature preschooler use his thumb, index, and middle finger to grasp a pencil.

Scissors: Small, round-tipped scissors are typically the best choice for preschoolers. Select scissors that have small holes for a young child’s fingers and that are not longer than 5”. School-style scissors, which both right- or left-handed children can use, work well. Make sure that the scissors are sharp enough to cut paper easily and open and close smoothly.

Cutting Materials: For beginning or less-skilled cutters, use heavyweight paper, such as index cards, magazine inserts or junk-mail cards, construction paper, or paper bags. Heavier paper is less floppy, more stable, and will allow the child more control for cutting.