



Play and Learning 11

Hand skills

Children develop hand skills – also called fine motor skills – **by using their hands** to explore, play, stack blocks, thread beads, play with puzzles, scribble with crayons, and make shapes with playdough.

This type of play builds the skills needed for more complex fine motor activities, such as writing, cutting, using a mobile, tying shoelaces, using a knife and fork, or playing an instrument.

When it comes to hand skills:

- **babies** enjoy learning to coordinate their eyes and hands from around 4 months, such as bringing everything to their mouth!
At around 9 months, most babies can pick up small objects with their thumb and index finger, transfer objects from hand to hand, and begin to place objects accurately.
Babies first enjoy marking a page and scribbling at around 12 months – they also enjoy eating crayons if you don't keep an eye on them!
- **toddlers** can use a spoon, stack blocks, post shapes, turn pages, string beads, pour from one cup to another and begin to draw. There is less scribbling and more use of lines.
As they grow and develop, they decide which hand they prefer for fine work and which hand becomes the helper.
- **young children** develop more control over tools, such as pencils, at around 3 or 4 years. As a child's pencil grip improves, they will try to copy letters, shapes, and numbers. They will also be able to eat with a knife and fork and use scissors to cut accurately.

What you can do

- To use their hands well, children need good posture and balance and strong back, stomach and shoulder muscles. Provide opportunities for your child to do **lots of fun, active play** like throwing, catching, climbing, and playing on playground equipment.
- **Develop your child's hand skills** with a range of different activities – building blocks, threading, playdough, nuts and bolts, puzzles, finger rhymes, action songs, and craft activities such as stickers, collage, and stamping.
- **Make things simpler to help your child succeed** – Make lines thicker for cutting or colouring. Start with tubing or thick cord and beads with large holes when threading. Use puzzles with only 2 or 3 pieces at first.
- **Allow time for repetition** – your child will want to try a new skill over and over again. This builds confidence.
- Let your child **enjoy the sensory experience and the fun** of just messing about with paint and colours – where the activity is more important than the end product.



Some activities to try

For baby – encourage finger feeding, play hand/finger rhymes, provide soft squeeze toys and rattles, and show baby how to drop wooden blocks in a box and bang them together. Try drawing with your baby by taping a large sheet of paper to the table and showing them how to scribble.

For toddlers – show your toddler how to draw lines down and across the paper and scribble circles. Encourage them to copy your marks on paper.

Cutting – you can introduce scissors and cutting activities when your child is around 3 years. For the correct scissor hold, teach your child 'thumb's the boss on top'. Begin by snipping thin strips of card into small pieces to practise the open and shut action.

Drawing – use a variety of materials and surfaces. Try painting and finger painting – drawing in shaving cream, sand, or flour – using chalk – or drawing on a 'Magnadoodle'. Sometimes try upright surfaces such as easels, blackboards or paper taped to a wall.

Cooking – let your child help you with opening jars, measuring, mixing, pouring, and rolling.

Threading – try stringing pasta, cut up straws, cardboard rolls or ring-type breakfast cereals onto thick shoelaces, wool, string, or plastic tubing.

Sand and water play – use some old kitchen tools such as containers, measuring cups/spoons, a muffin tin, colander, funnel, or plastic jug.

Dress ups – are a fun way for your child to practise buttons, laces, and zips.

Musical instruments – have a basket of instruments available, or make your own drums, shakers, and tambourine together.



Keeping your child safe

- Supervise your child closely at all times especially around water, play equipment, or when using objects such as scissors, pencils, glue or paint. Avoid flammable or toxic materials.
- Babies, toddlers and young children can choke on small toys and objects. Regularly check toys to make sure they are safe and in good condition.
 - Toys should be bigger than a 20 cent coin.
 - Strings on toys should be less than 20 centimetres long.
- Do a safety check and make sure your home is safe for your child to actively explore..

Find out more

For more information on play, learning, and a range of other topics, visit:

- playgroupwa.com.au
- bringingupgreatkids.org
- raisingchildren.net.au
- cahs.health.wa.gov.au/childhealthresources

For more information about the metropolitan **Child Development Service** phone 1300 551 827 or visit cahs.health.wa.gov.au/childdevelopment

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

This publication is provided for general education and information purposes.
Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

© State of Western Australia, Child and Adolescent Health Service – Community Health June 2023 CAH-000930

