

Fine Motor Skills

What are fine motor skills?



Fine motor skills involve the use of the smaller muscles of the hands, such as when doing up buttons, opening lunch boxes or using pencils or scissors. Fine motor skill efficiency significantly influences the quality of the task outcome as well as the speed of task performance. Efficient fine motor skills require a number of independent skills to occur simultaneously to appropriately manipulate the object or perform the task.

Why are fine motor skills important?

Fine motor skills are essential for performing everyday skills like self care tasks (e.g. clothing fastenings, opening lunch boxes, cleaning teeth, using cutlery) and academic skills (e.g. pencil skills of drawing, writing and colouring, as well as cutting and pasting). Without the ability to complete these every day tasks, a child's self esteem can suffer and their academic performance is compromised.

They may also be unable to develop appropriate independence in life skills (such as getting dressed and feeding themselves).

What are the building blocks necessary to develop fine motor skills?

- **Bilateral Integration:** Using two hands together with one hand leading (e.g. opening a jar lid with hand while the other hand helps to by stabilising the jar).
- **Crossing Mid-line:** The ability to cross the imaginary line running from a child's nose to pelvis that divides the body into left and right sides.
- **Hand and finger strength:** An ability to exert force against resistance using the hands and fingers that allows the necessary muscle power for controlled movement.
- **Hand eye coordination:** The ability to process information received from the eyes to control, guide and direct the hands in the performance of a task such as handwriting.
- **Hand Dominance:** The consistent use of one (usually the same) hand for task performance which allows refined skills to develop.
- **Hand division:** Using just the thumb, index and middle finger for manipulation, leaving the fourth and little finger tucked into the palm not participating but providing stability for the other 3 fingers.
- **Object Manipulation:** The ability to skilfully manipulate tools (such as the ability to hold and move pencils and scissors with control) and the controlled use of everyday tools such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, and cutlery.
- **Body Awareness (Proprioception):** Information that the brain receives from our muscles and joints to make us aware of our body position and body movement, so we can accurately control our movements.

How can I tell if my child has problems with fine motor skills?

If a child has difficulties with fine motor skills they might:

- Have an awkward or immature pencil grasp for their age.

- Have messy, slow or laborious drawing, colouring or writing skills.
- Fatigue quickly when typing or using a mouse on a computer.
- Have difficulty (or achieves a messy/choppy outcome) when using scissors.
- Have difficulty performing precise manipulation tasks (i.e. doing up buttons, threading, or tying shoelaces).
- Dislike precise hand and eye coordination tasks (e.g. construction).
- Have difficulty performing age appropriate self-care tasks independently.
- Have difficulty mastering new fine motor tasks.
- Tire easily when engaged in fine motor tasks.

What other problems can occur when a child has fine motor skill difficulties?

When a child has fine motor skill difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Behaviour:** They may avoid or refuse to participate in fine motor tasks.
- **Frustration** with precise eye and hand coordination tasks.
- **Avoidance of these tasks:** Preferring to get others to perform fine motor tasks for them under their direction, rather than actually doing themselves (e.g. “Daddy, draw me a house”, or “build me a rocket”, with refusal to do it themselves).
- **Showing academic ability:** Being verbally very skilled but having difficulty showing this on paper (i.e. writing, drawing or colouring).
- **Self esteem:** when they compare their own skills to those of their same aged peers.
- **Academic performance:** The ease with which a student is able to complete academic tasks.
- **Computer skills:** The ability to competently use a computer for the purpose of academic tasks.

What can be done to improve fine motor skills?

- **Hand dominance:** Determine which is the dominant hand and reinforce

its more frequent use in precision task performance.

- **Bilateral Integration:** Practice using both hands to perform tasks, not just one (e.g. use the 'doing hand' to place the block and the 'helping' hand to hold the block construction steady).
- **Finger Isolation:** Practice tasks that use just one or two fingers - not all the fingers at once (e.g. 'poking' games).
- **Hand and Finger Strength:** Enhance finger strength by using pegs and/or clips in play.
- **Experience:** Encourage enjoyment in activity participation instead of focusing on a 'successful' outcome (e.g. rewarding pencil to paper attempts, not whether the drawing actually looks like a car or a house).

What activities can help improve fine motor skills?

- **Threading and lacing:** with a variety of sized laces and beads.
- **Tongs or teabag squeezers:** to pick up objects (e.g. put marbles down a marble maze).
- **Manipulation games:** such as 'Pick up Sticks' and 'Connect 4'.
- **Play-doh:** Using the fingers, not the hands as whole; working with the Play-doh up in the air, not flat on the table.
- **Construction:** that requires pushing and pulling with fingers (e.g. 'Mobilo', 'K'nex' or 'Lego').
- **Storing construction materials** in jars with screw lids that need to be opened and closed as the materials are needed and when packed away.
- **Craft:** Make things using old boxes, egg cartons, wool, paper and sticky or masking tape.

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with fine motor skills in my child?

Therapeutic intervention for a child with fine motor skills difficulties is important to:

- Improve their ability in, and persistence with, fine motor tasks that are required for academic, play and life skills.

- Increase school readiness and academic performance of: colouring, drawing, writing, cutting and pasting skills.
- Help my child develop age appropriate mastery of self-care tasks, such as doing up buttons and zips, opening lunch boxes, tying shoe laces.
- Avoid my child becoming disengaged in an academic environment due to difficulties completing fine motor activities (e.g. writing, cutting, drawing).
- Avoid frustrations experienced by parents, teachers and children when the child is struggling to remain engaged in academic activities.
- Help maintain and develop a positive sense of well being that is related to school confidence as well as fine motor play skills with peers.
- Ensure that my child doesn't fall behind their peers in development of handwriting as this is a common reason for academic under-performance.

If left untreated what can difficulties with fine motor skills lead to?

When a child has difficulties with fine motor skills, they might also have difficulties with:

- Meeting academic criteria due to poor handwriting skills and/or rapid physical fatigue.
- Mastering letter formation, which slows writing and reinforces dislike of the task.
- Excessive pressure and anxiety in a school-aged child due to difficulties 'keeping up' in class.
- Completing exams due to difficulty answering all written questions within the allocated time.
- Poor self esteem when the child compares their abilities with their peers.
- Developing efficient typing skills.
- Manipulating items for construction (puzzles, lego).
- Completing self-care tasks (e.g. doing up shoelaces, buttons, zips, using cutlery).

What type of therapy is recommended for fine motor difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with fine motor skills, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

