

Building Fine Motor Skills

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com; InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Let them Explore

In order for children to learn fine motor skills, they have to be allowed to use them! That means they need to be allowed to explore small items that they have to use the pincer grasp to pick up. Some of that happens with eating finger foods – peas and cheerios and slippery diced peaches all provide lots of pincer grasp practice. But children also need to be able to practice things like threading beads onto a pipe cleaner and once they've mastered that, threading beads onto string. They can practice things like dropping pompoms into a water bottle or putting buttons into slots cut in a plastic lid. When I do developmental screenings, many children are behind on these skills because they've never tried them.

What about choking?

Yes, it is well worth being aware of the [risks](#) of leaving your child unattended with small items they could choke on. And, yes, it's a good idea for all caregivers to be familiar with choking rescue. (Here's a [video](#).) And it's good to know infant and child CPR too. (Videos of [infant CPR](#) and [child CPR](#).) But worries about choking doesn't mean you should never let a child touch anything smaller than their fist.

Introducing Fine Motor Activities

Toddlers can do all sorts of fine motor activities with small objects. Just do a really good and intentional job of introducing the item under close supervision. Use role modeling and demonstration to be sure they know what to do with the items, and if they start to do inappropriate things with the items (like put a bead in their nose or in their ear), then we correct that. (Note: I do sometimes count how many of an item I put out, so that when I clean up I make sure I can account for all of them – if not, I search the floor to see if one just rolled away.) After they've interacted with an item safely multiple times, you can let them play with it more independently.

I also do this approach with food – I don't slice up grapes for my child. Instead, the first time I introduce grapes, I sit down with them and show them a grape and carefully show them how I take one little itty bite out of the grape and chew it up, then take another itty bitty bite... Once we've practiced this multiple times, they can eat grapes independently. Spending that few minutes of teaching will save you lots of time in the long run and keep them safer with all foods in the future.

Why Fine Motor Skills Matter

If we don't let our children have this fine motor practice, then they're going to be missing important development. Children need fine motor skills and finger strength to be ready for kindergarten tasks like writing, using scissors and turning pages in a book. They need them for self-care tasks like: buttoning a shirt, tying shoes, eating with a spoon, and opening food packaging. They need them to play with toys at preschool and not be frustrated by their inability to do things other children can do.

Fine Motor Development

- 3 to 6 month olds – offer small toys that they can practice passing from one hand to another or hold and shake. Hold your baby and place a toy in front of you they need to reach for.
- 6 to 9 months – demo how to clap hands or give high fives, take toys out of a container, they start “raking” things toward them, so try whiffle balls or baby toys or finger foods.
- 9 to 12 months – continue to offer finger foods, encourage them to pick up a block and put it in a cup, try picking up a string or a noodle, show them how to bang toys together, wave bye-bye
- 12 months – build simple towers by stacking two or three items, let them scribble, practice eating with a spoon, turning pages in a board book, take off socks and shoes
- 2 years – practice using a fork and drinking from a cup, put on lids and take them off, string beads on yarn, show them how to draw a line, build a tower 8 blocks tall
- 3 years – button and unbutton clothes, use scissors, draw shapes, make a cheerio necklace, place coins in a piggy bank, put together puzzles or Legos

Ideas for Activities for Toddlers to Preschoolers

- Play with playdough: they start by smushing it with their hand or poking it with a finger. Then pulling it apart into smaller pieces. Then you can introduce tools to squish it flat (rolling pin), or cut it (plastic knife, cookie cutters). Hide small toys inside the playdough they have to unearth.
- Shape sorters and puzzles: start with big and simple shapes, get more complex over time.
- Build with megablox, then Duplos, then Legos.
- Twist pipe cleaners into shapes. Insert pipe cleaners into the holes on a colander.
- Dress-up clothes: put on gloves, zip zippers, fasten snaps, button buttons.
- Stringing Beads (or pasta or cheerios): first, putting BIG beads on a stick or dowel, then medium beads on a pipe cleaner, then small beads on a string.
- Drawing: first scribbles, dots, lines. Later: Draw pictures, trace letters, color inside the lines.
- Collage: For a one year old, use Con-Tact paper – take off the backing and leave paper sticky side up – they stick on pompoms, feathers, small pieces of paper... Later, you put tape loops on paper – they stick things on, then you put on the glue, then they put on glue, then tape.
- Painting – first, just glop paint (or shaving cream or an edible substance like pudding) onto paper or a plate and let them smear it around with their whole hand. Later show them how to paint with one finger. Then with a brush with a large handle, then a small handle.
- Filling containers: choose any small item (baby socks, pompoms, cotton balls, plastic lids, clothespins, dried beans, straws, q-tips, raw spaghetti, etc.) and a container to put it in (muffin tin, ice cube tray, jar with a big opening, water bottle, boxes, an empty Kleenex box, a container with a lid with a slot cut into it). Start with larger items a baby can grasp with their whole hand, move on to things that require pincer grasp, then things that require tweezers.
- Pick berries. Pull weeds or pick carrots – you need to pull just hard enough but not too hard, so it’s good for practicing how much strength to use.
- Sensory play – read my [Ultimate Guide to Sensory Tables](#); and my [Ultimate Guide to Water Tables](#)
- Just go to pinterest or Instagram or google and search for “fine motor activities for toddlers” and you will have thousands of ideas.