

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN MOTOR AND SELF-HELP SKILLS

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How do we get good at something? We practice, practice, and practice some more. The same is true for children's ability to use their hands and fingers (fine motor skills) and arms and legs (gross motor skills). If we want them to run smoothly, write well, and eat neatly, children need a chance to learn and practice. Here are some ideas for things that help build motor skills. All require allowing extra time for children to explore dressing and undressing, cooking, eating, and so forth. Some activities are messy so you will need to spend time watching and encouraging your child, especially when very young, when they play with crayons, paints, play dough, and other materials; but, all these activities are fun for children, help them learn, and can be fun for parents as well. While you do these together, be sure to talk with your child about what he or she is doing. This teaches names for actions and objects.

DRESSING

Getting dressed and undressed is a good time to encourage children to practice using hands and fingers, as well as arms and legs. Allow extra time for dressing and undressing so that children can practice and help. Try letting them do part of a skill (you start the zipper, and then they finish up). You start the button through the hole, and let them do the rest.

Let one- year-olds (with elastic waist pants) help pull them up and down.

Two- year-olds are ready to learn to put on a pullover shirt and can probably already take off their shoes. Put their socks on part way and let them pull them on.

Three-year-olds can probably get on a shirt or coat, if you help get one arm in. They can also help with Velcro buckles.

Four-year-olds can put on shirts and start using small buttons and regular buckles.

Five-year-olds have the strength to snap, work separating zippers, and will need, by the time they get to kindergarten, to be able to put on and fasten shoes (not many are good at shoe tying but let them practice).

BATHING AND TOILETING

This is a great time to practice pouring, filling, and dumping pails of toys and water, scrubbing, working a soap or shampoo dispenser, and squeezing squeaky toys. This also is a good time to name body parts so that your child learns these pays attention to washing carefully. Let your child help dry off, press the handle on the toilet, comb and brush hair, rub on lotion, and so forth. You will need to help with tooth brushing, wiping, and nose-care but let children do more and more on their own. Be sure there is a low mirror or a step-stool so your child can see how he or she is doing.

COOKING

Helping cook is a great for children at all ages.

One-year-olds love to play with pots and pans and can get them out and help put them away. They can also stack plastic tubs.

Two-year-olds can help scrub fruits and vegetables, and then dip them in sauces. They can also help clean the dishes (plastic ones are better for this).

Three-year-olds can try tearing lettuce, wrapping vegetables and cheese in plastic, and pouring liquids (although start in the bathtub with this messy activity).

Four-year-olds can try spreading butter or jelly, stirring and mixing things, and rolling dough.

Five-year-olds are ready to practice cutting (dull knives only), using a cheese grater (provide careful supervision), whipping eggs, and so forth.

EATING

This is one of the best times to build the skills needed for writing and drawing.

Let your one-year-old try using a spoon (they will usually turn it upside down but quickly learn to turn their wrists and spill less). Finger foods (peas, raisins, small crackers, cubes of cheese) help children learn how to pick up things with the tip of the thumb and first finger (pincer grasp).

Three-year-olds can try using a fork.

Four-year-olds need to learn how to hold a fork just like a pencil (because this improves writing). Practicing with chopsticks is also fun. You can put a rubber band on the end so the sticks stay together.

ART AND WRITING

Even one-year-olds love to draw (even though they are not good at staying on the paper). Sit with them and let them try. Use the back of wrapping paper to give them lots of space. By age two, children can usually make a circle and after a while, learn to add eyes and a mouth. They also love to talk about what they are drawing. Be sure to say, “Tell me about your picture,” rather than “what is that?” so there are no hurt feelings when it does not look like something you recognize. It is OK if trees are purple and the sky is green! Write your child’s name on each paper so he learns to recognize it. Older children draw more detail on pictures with ears, legs, arms, and eventually learn to add a neck, body, fingers, and toes. If your child does not like to draw, keep up interest with markers, paints, glitter pens, and so forth. Soft play dough is good for building hand strength. By age four, children want to learn to write their names. Let them trace the letters (be sure to encourage top to bottom strokes on letters like “L,” “H,” and “A” and counter-clockwise strokes for “O,” “C”, and so forth. Five year olds need to know how to write their first name so they are ready for school.

OTHER KINDS OF PLAY

Blocks, puzzles, dolls, small trains, and so forth are offer good opportunities to learn motor skills. It is best to rotate your child’s toys so not too much is out at once. Public libraries sometimes have toys you can check out for a time. Be sure to teach your child to put toys away, too. This practices motor skills and helps children learn to plan and organize. (It is a good idea for adults to help often with this task and works best if you make it a fun game. Try singing a tune with words you make up like “pick up your toys, pick up your toys, everybody knows you’ve got to pick up your toys.”)

USING ARMS AND LEGS

Children need many chances to run, jump, climb, slide, seesaw, kick and throw balls. Be sure there is plenty of time for physical activity every day. Toddlers need at least 30 minutes a day, and preschoolers need at least an hour. Free play is important too (like playing on a playground or taking a walk). Toddlers and preschoolers should have at least an hour of free play every day; older children even more. Be a good role model and move around with your child: dance, jump rope!

RESOURCES

Parenting Me

www.parentingme.com

Medem and the American Academy of Pediatrics

www.medem.com

The American Dietetic Association and Wellpoint

www.wellpoint.com/healthy_parenting/index.html