Supporting Fine Motor Skills in the Preschool Classroom

by Sue O’Donnell

Children arrive in preschool classrooms with a repertoire of experiences that have strengthened the development of their fine motor skills. Infants and toddlers are just beginning to work on skills which will emerge later during the preschool years. It is important for early childhood professionals to understand the progression of motor development in order to provide an environment which stimulates the child without causing frustration or anxiety.

The progression of motor skills occurs as a baby bats at a toy, then later grasps or transfers objects from one hand to the other. It is necessary for the joints of the body to develop stability before the hands can be free to focus on specific tasks.

The hand and forearm are comprised of more than 25 different muscles. Finger, wrist, and elbow movements are controlled by forearm muscles. The more refined muscles in the thumb and fingers are controlled by smaller muscles in the palm of the hand.

When a child has a strong hand grip it may appear that the muscles in the hand are well developed. However this type of a grip is more closely associated with forearm muscle development. The smaller muscles in the hand only play a minor role in this type of grip strength.

Close examination of hand strength should include understanding the small muscles in the hand. During infancy when hand muscles are not developed babies will grip and squeeze objects, but are unable to coordinate the movement of individual fingers.

It is critical for educators and families to understand how children’s fine motor skills develop and to acknowledge that skills will emerge when children are ready. If children are given certain tasks before they are ready it could cause more damage than good. Children must progress through certain large motor milestones before the hand muscles can coordinate specific movements that require fine motor skills.

Throughout the day, children are involved in a variety of routines that encourage them to develop their self-help skills. Many of these activities also allow children to further develop their fine and gross motor skills. Children are more willing to initiate the task when they have developed the necessary motor skills needed to be successful. Many self help skills introduced in the classroom setting also involve sequential steps that children must be ready to perform independently. Teachers can provide children with sequential charts using picture/word instructions to guide their actions and motivate them through the activity.

Intentional practice and observation of children’s skills allow teachers to plan environments that provide children with opportunities to strengthen fine motor skills. Children maintain focused attention on activities they find interesting. As teachers reflect upon their understanding of developmental skills for children in their class, they are able to create meaningful experiences that broaden and strengthen skills.
Creating a Classroom Environment to Support Fine Motor Skill Development

**Activities for the Easel**

**Attribute Blocks**
**Procedure:** Fill easel tray with a variety of attribute blocks. Place contact paper on the easel. Children will sort and make designs.

**Small Stickers and Markers**
**Procedure:** Place small stickers and markers in the easel tray. Using stickers and markers, children will create on paper.

**Drop through the Slot**
**Materials:** Empty tennis ball container, poker chips
**Procedure:** Teacher will prepare container top prior to the activity. Cut a small slit in the top of a tennis ball top with a utility knife. The Wilson brand has the easiest tops to cut. Place chips in a basket on the floor or table. Children will fit chips through the slot. Preschool children often sort the chips by color or size while filling the can.

**Sponge Painting with Small Sponge Squares**
**Materials:** Sponge cut into small squares, paint in small containers
**Procedure:** Children will use small sponges for painting. Hands will be positioned into the pincer grasp while using the sponge to paint.

**Newspaper Snowman**
**Materials:** Newspaper, three white trash bags, construction paper, scissors
**Procedure:** This activity will begin by discussing the sizes needed for the three snowballs used to make a snowman. Children will crumple newspaper in their hands. See if children can make a snowball using only one hand – this really strengthens their hand muscles! Once all three balls have been made, pile the snowballs on top of each other to create a snowman. Children will use construction paper to cut free form facial features.

**Getting Dressed Game**
**Materials:** Make cards with pictures of different body parts — feet, hands, head, arms, legs — and a laundry basket with different types of clothing — socks, gloves, pants, shirt, coat, hat, etc.
**Procedure:** At small group time, children will choose one body part card and find an article of clothing to wear on that part of their own body. Next, they will put on that piece of clothing.

**Cutting Collages at Small Group Time**
**Materials:** Pieces of colored construction paper, scissors, contact paper in middle of circle with sticky side up
**Procedure:** Children will cut paper using scissors. Cut pieces will be placed onto contact paper. Teacher can encourage children to cut different size pieces. This activity provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to observe children’s cutting skills throughout the year.

**Pipe Cleaners and Colanders**
**Materials:** Pipe cleaners, colanders turned upside down
**Procedure:** Children will push and thread pipe cleaners through the colander.

**Stone Designs**
**Materials:** Line designs created on paper (made by teacher prior to activity), polished stones or glass jewels
**Procedure:** Design pattern cards will be placed on the table or floor. Jewels and polished rocks will be presented in a basket. Children will place rocks or jewels on designs.

**Pipe Cleaners and Markers**
**Procedure:** Place small stickers and markers in the easel tray. Using stickers and markers, children will create on paper.
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Diana Wehrell-Grabowski, Ph.D. is the chief executive officer and principal owner of Mobile Science Education Consulting Services, a science educational consulting company. Dr. Wehrell-Grabowski brings more than 30 years of experience as an educator of children and adults. Throughout her career, Diana has been a classroom teacher and has provided thousands of hands-on science programs to children of all ages. She has provided hundreds of teacher training and family science workshops, and she has taught science education methods courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Diana travels throughout the nation and world year-round conducting hands-on minds-on professional staff development to teachers and administrators at public and private educational institutions. Additionally, she has been a presenter and keynote speaker at more than 70 education-based conferences.

Over the years, Dr. Wehrell-Grabowski has worked collaboratively with clients in writing grants that were awarded, and has been listed as the primary consultant for many grants. She has authored numerous curriculum manuals that are used during the professional staff development trainings she conducts, and has written articles that have appeared in educational publications. Diana is an active member of the following professional organizations for educators: National Science Teacher’s Association, Florida Association of Science Teachers, National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Head Start Association, North American Association for Environmental Education, No Child Left Inside Coalition, American Society for Engineering Education, Coalition for Science After School, and the Florida Reading Association.

Dr. Wehrell-Grabowski holds a B.A. and M.Ed. from the University of Guam, and a Ph.D. (1994) in Science Education from Florida Institute of Technology.

When not on the road or in the air, Diana enjoys exploring nature, which includes searching for pill bugs, snails, and earthworms in her backyard.

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Keynote Speaker
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