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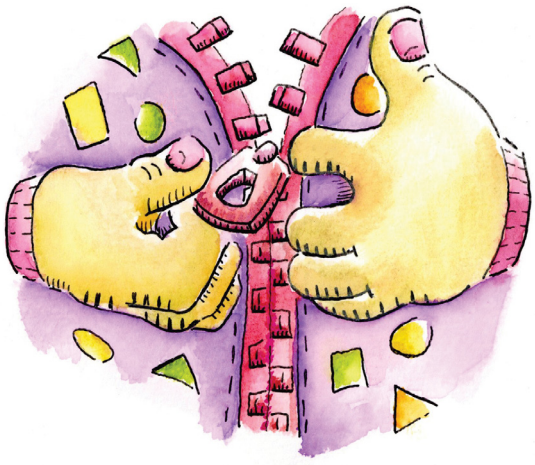
Building Fine Muscle Skills in Young Children

Parents want their children to grow up to succeed in life. They want their children to feel like they can do anything they put their minds to. This ability grows from everyday experiences early in life. You can do many things to notice and encourage their efforts.

Fine Muscle Skills

Young children need to be able to control the small movements of their hands and fingers. Control of these small muscles is important for children's handwriting skill development. Children use fine muscle skills when they grasp, touch, and feel objects of different sizes, textures, and weights. These skills also develop when children are given the chance to feed themselves finger foods—cereal, crackers, and toast—or to practice using a spoon.



Learning how to manage buttons, snaps, zippers, and other clothing fasteners also helps children learn to control these important muscles. Artistic play helps children develop both creative and fine muscle skills. These skills develop best when adults allow children to try things without being pressured to do them a certain way.

Ways for Children to Develop Small Muscle Skills

- **Hold** and **use** crayons, pencils, markers, and paintbrushes.
- **Cut** paper with child-sized scissors.
- **Glue** together paper, leaves, fabric, or other objects to make pictures or collages.
- **Work** puzzles.
- **Pour**, **fill**, and **empty** containers of water, sand, or other materials.
- **Trace**, **copy**, or **draw** basic shapes, designs, and figures.
- **Match** and **sort** objects.

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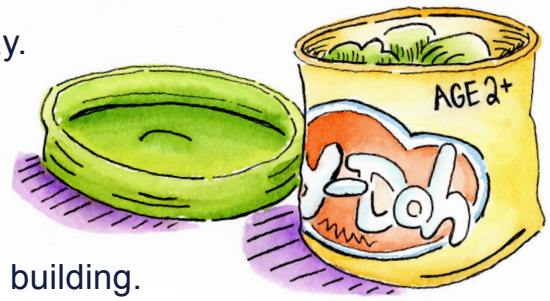
For children with difficulty performing art and craft activities, you can cut out pictures together, help them stick the pictures on a board or paper, or break down the tasks in other ways. Use bigger items such as crayons and chalk that they can hold in their fists. Make it easy for them to choose how they want to do activities.

Supplies

Household items are great to use, but always be cautious that young children do not put small items that they might choke on in their mouths.

- Water-based **paints**.
- Thin water-based **felt pens**.
- Plastic **tablecloth**.
- Ingredients for **play dough** (find recipe).
- **Macaroni** pasta (like elbow macaroni tubes).
- Big sheets of **paper** or **paper bags**.
- **Straws**.
- Things for gluing: **seeds** (nontoxic), **yarn**, **buttons**, or other things to make pictures.
- **Containers** to hold water or paint.
- Stacking **containers**.
- Cheap, soft **paintbrushes**.
- **Clothes pins**, **magnets** (big enough not to choke on), or clips to hang art.

Activities for Developing Small Muscle Skills



- Bath time play.
- Boat races.
- Play dough.
- Puzzles.
- Stacking and building.
- Arts and crafts.
  - Drawing, coloring, and painting.
  - Making pasta necklaces or stringing cereal.
  - Gluing things together.
- Dress-me dolls or play kitchens.
- Stamping with homemade vegetable stamps or sponges of different shapes from the kitchen—be sure to put down a plastic tablecloth.

Ask your child to help you collect things.

Make it easy to make a mistake, such as spilling water, by being prepared with a rag, vacuum, plastic tablecloth, or tray to keep things organized.

Outdoor Small Muscle Skills

Remember that the outdoors is a great place to practice too.

Children can do the following:

- Pick up and collect small things like rocks, pine cones, and natural objects.
- Play with shovels, dig things, and stack items.
- Play in water like a shallow pool, puddle, or at a water table.

You can also provide painting and decorating supplies:

- Sponge paintbrushes with watercolors for painting walls or rocks.
- Sidewalk chalk to draw pictures on washable surfaces like rocks and driveways.

Children can draw circles or hopscotch lines to make jumping games or catch balls using small and large motor skills.

Children might like to make a picture. Ask them to draw what they see, smell, hear, or feel. They might like to use leaves and flowers or make pictures with glue and sand.

As children grow older, their pictures and play will look more and more realistic. But celebrate whatever they do—it is their artistic expression and experience. They are developing as they play!

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