Teaching Strategies That Support Fine-Motor Skills

Preschoolers are gaining dexterity, hand-eye coordination, strength, and flexibility as they use their hands and fingers to work with all kinds of objects and materials.

to their own expectations and internal motivation, not to meet the possibly unrealistic standards set by adults.

Provide materials and activities that require the use of fingers and hands

Remember that children have different interests. Some gravitate to the art area, while others like to build with blocks, use construction tools, turn the pages of a book, do puzzles, dabble at the sand and water table, or play with cooking utensils and dress-up clothes. Note the variety of fine-motor materials these children need to carry out their intentions:

At greeting circle, Paul turns the pages of a book while Helga provides a narrative for each page. After a few minutes, they switch roles.

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At work time in the toy area, Ibrahim makes a row with Cuisenaire rods of increasing size, making sure they are level at the bottom.

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At small-group time, Celia uses a magic wand to “fish” for magnetized letters in a bowl of rice.

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At outside time, Joshua uses a scoop to fill a dump truck with sand. He holds a pail under the bed of the truck to catch the sand as he tips it up and empties it.

To enable preschoolers to exercise their small muscles regardless of their diverse interests, make sure there are appealing materials in each area that entail the use of children’s small muscles, such as scissors (art area), thin rods (block area), magazines (book area), small figures (toy area), eggbeaters (house area), measuring spoons (sand table), and chalk (outdoor playground). Provide hard and soft materials that children can transform with their hands and fingers and that require different sets of muscles.
and varying levels of effort. This might include wooden toys they can disassemble and reassemble or batches of play dough made with different amounts of flour to vary its thickness and moldability. (For more ideas for materials that fit the interests of your group of children see the list on p. 59.)

It’s also important to think about children’s different interests when you plan small- and large-group times. Vary both the materials and the content of these activities so all children can be engaged using their hands and eyes to make and build, transform, investigate cause and effect, represent (write, draw, sculpt), and so on. For example, children can go on a nature walk to collect objects such as shells, stones, and twigs, and do a sorting activity with them the next day at small-group time. They are exercising fine-motor skills when they pick up objects and put them in a bag, sort them into piles, and glue them onto paper.

Think of other ways to incorporate fine-motor skills throughout the program day. Here are some examples of children using their hands and fingers in virtually every part of the daily routine:

At arrival time, Penny hangs her hat on the book in her cubby and carefully writes the first two letters of her name on the sign-in sheet next to her letter link. Then she chooses a book, sits down, and turns the pages one at a time.
In a thoughtfully planned classroom, children with widely varying interests can find the small-motor materials they prefer to work with.
At message board, Colin draws a circle with two dots and says he wants to show everyone his new glasses.

At snacktime, Melvin writes his name on the snack chart to indicate it will be his turn tomorrow to pass out napkins.

At planning time, Dosia says she is going to make a card for her grandma who has just left after a long visit. “I’m going to write that I love her and I miss her.” When her teacher asks what materials she will use to make her card, Dosia says she will fold a piece of blue paper, and use the red crayon to write her message and draw a flower.

At work time, Noam makes a finger painting, Alyssa sorts beads by color, Clare and Ben wrap belts around the baby dolls’ clothes, and Sbyroze does a five-piece jigsaw puzzle.

Before cleanup time, Sami turns the dial on the timer to give a five-minute warning. When the time is up, Kendra flicks the lights. “I jiggled the switch,” she tells her teacher.

At large-group time, Hannah rubs two rhythm sticks together, while Lars holds the triangle in one hand and clangs the metal stick against each side in turn.

At small-group time, Shoshona cuts red and blue construction paper into small squares, and glues the pieces in an alternating border around her picture.
At **outside time**, Devon shovels sand into a pail without spilling any of it over the sides. When the pail is full, he uses the side of the shovel to level off the top.

Getting ready for **departure**, Rosie shows her teacher how she can fasten the Velcro strap on her boots. She demonstrates three times and comments, “My mommy says it drives her crazy!”

Provide similar objects in a range of sizes and shapes that children can handle

Young children need to experience success — on their own terms — as they hone their fine-motor abilities. One way to guarantee feelings of accomplishment among children with emerging skill sets is to provide the same types of materials in graduated levels of difficulty. These can include the following: Duplo and Lego blocks, knob puzzles with one to three pieces, jigsaw puzzles that vary in the number and size of the pieces, pegboards with large and small holes (and pegs of corresponding widths), large and small beads for stringing, people and animal figures in different sizes, paintbrushes with thick and thin handles and different width bristles, various pencils, fat and skinny crayons and markers, and doll clothes that fasten with Velcro, buttons, ties, and zippers. Encourage children to begin with the easier materials and, as they gain skill and confidence, to move up to more challenging levels and/or use comfortable materials in new ways.

For examples of how young children develop fine-motor skills and how adults can scaffold their learning at early, middle, and later levels, see “Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 17. Fine-Motor Skills” on page 58. The ideas in the chart will help you support and gently extend children’s learning as you play and interact with them during all parts of the daily routine.
## Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 17. Fine-Motor Skills

Always support children at their current level and occasionally offer a gentle extension.

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<tr>
<th>Earlier</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Later</th>
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**Children may**
- Use their small muscles with some control to manipulate objects (e.g., tear paper, poke and squeeze play dough).
- Do activities that require simple hand-eye coordination (e.g., put large pegs in a pegboard, stack wooden blocks, put on a hat).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Provide materials that exercise children’s small muscles (e.g., play dough, blocks in different sizes, sponges, squeeze bottles).
- Imitate children’s actions (e.g., put big pegs in the pegboard; put a hat on your head).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Label what children do with their small muscles (e.g., “You’re squeezing the play dough”).
- Call children’s attention to what others are doing with the same materials (e.g., “Tommy put some pegs in the pegboard. He also stacked some pegs on top of each other”).

**Children may**
- Use their small muscles with moderate control (e.g., cut with scissors, make lines and shapes with crayons).
- Do activities that require moderate hand-eye coordination (e.g., string large beads, stack Duplo blocks, pour juice).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Copy how children use their small muscles and describe the actions (e.g., while using the scissors, say, “I’m opening and closing my scissors just like you”).
- Provide materials that require the use of hand-eye coordination (e.g., large wooden beads, plastic knives, small animal and people figures).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Provide materials to extend children’s control of their small muscles (e.g., clay, tongs, colored pencils).
- Encourage children to try one hand and then the other when they use materials.

**Children may**
- Use their small muscles with strength, flexibility, andcoordination (e.g., use scissors to cut around a heart they drew, write letterlike forms).
- Use hand-eye coordination to carry out intricate activities (e.g., string small beads, build with Legos, zip a coat).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Acknowledge children’s abilities (e.g., “You wrote the first letter in your name”).
- Ask children to demonstrate how they carried out intricate activities (e.g., “Show me how you got this part of your Lego spaceship to stick out”).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Pose a challenge (e.g., “I wonder what other shapes you can draw”).
- Provide materials to extend children’s skills (e.g., beads with smaller holes and narrower string).
Materials for Fine-Motor Movement*

**Small building and sorting materials**
- Unit blocks
- Beads and strings (large and small)
- Buttons, marbles, corks
- Shells, stones, pine cones, seed pods
- Building cubes
- Parquetry blocks
- Attribute blocks
- Nesting cups, boxes, rings
- Cuisenaire rods

**Take-apart-and-put-together materials**
- Washers, nuts, bolts
- Pegs and pegboards (large and small)
- Stacking rings and post
- Small Tinkertoys
- Interlocking blocks
- Interlocking shapes
- Connecting straws
- Puzzles (including ones with images of diverse people)
- Magnets
- Shape sorters and shapes
- Scales, balances
- Gear sets
- Sewing boards
- Geoboards and rubber bands
- Dowel rods with Velcro connectors
- Small nonworking appliances
- Wood scraps
- Woodworking tools and fasteners

**Fasteners**
- Heavy-duty staplers, staples
- Hole punch
- Paste, liquid glue, glue sticks
- Masking tape, clear tape
- Paper clips, butterfly fasteners
- Rubber bands, elastic
- Pipe cleaners, wire
- String, yarn, ribbon, shoelaces
- Needles with big eyes, thread

**Pretend-play materials**
- Cooking tools
- Eating utensils
- Plates, cups
- Dress-up clothes
- Dolls
- Stuffed animals
- Counting bears
- Miniature animal collections
- Little people, gnomes
- Wooden village/city/farm sets
- Puppets (animals and multiracial people)
- Wooden train sets

**Games**
- Simple card games, such as snap, go fish, old maid
- Memory card games
- Dominos (picture, texture)
- Picture lotto games
- Simple board games, such as Candyland

**Art materials**
- Variety of papers
- Paintbrushes and paint
- Markers, crayons, pencils, chalk, and other drawing tools
- Glue, tape, other fasteners
- Scissors
- Inkpads and stamps
- Jars with lids, squeeze bottles
- Modeling and molding materials: clay, play dough, etc.
- Modeling tools: rolling pins, thick dowel rods, cookie cutters, plastic knives, hamburger or tortilla press
- Collage materials
- Used stationery, greeting cards, newspapers, magazines

**Reading and writing materials**
- Books
- Magazines and catalogs
- Storytelling props
- Wood, plastic alphabet letter and number sets
- Writing tools and materials
- Computer equipment, typewriter

**Music materials**
- Simple instruments
- Recording and music-playing equipment

**Fill-and-empty materials**
- Sand and water
- Variety of containers, scoops, funnels
- Alternative materials for scooping and pouring: gravel, buttons, bottlecaps, rice, uncooked noodles

*Check local licensing regulations and agencies and organizations such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission (www.cpsc.gov), the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org), and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education (www.nrckids.org) for current information on product safety.