

Fine Motor Skills...Write Out of the Box!

by Marianne Gibbs, EdD, OTR

Crossing Midline in Handwriting Starts with Brooms and Rakes!

Crossing midline means that the two sides of the brain are working together in activity and is first expressed through gross motor movements. Movements such as erasing the chalkboard, wiping off a table, sweeping the floor, raking leaves, or reaching across the center of the body for passing/retrieving objects are perfect, everyday activities that encourage crossing midline. Young children are one step closer to forming shapes, symbols, and letters such as a plus sign (+), x, N, and t when they use their hands and arms across the body in functional, gross motor activities. Gross motor development supports the fine motor development of young children!

Two wonderful crossing midline activities mentioned above are sweeping the floor and raking leaves—children love to be big helpers! But please remember, the perfectly swept floor or impeccable pile of leaves is not the goal when young children sweep and rake. Rather, it is understanding that the physical process of crossing midline activities facilitates high-level brain development needed for performing the skill of handwriting! Promote Crossing the Midline...Write Out of the Box!

The Vertical Surface and Fine Motor Development

What: The vertical (up and down) surface refers to the appropriate plane in which young children should perform fine motor activities in order to promote an efficient pencil grasp position. We usually think of having students work and play at fine motor tasks at the desktop level. The desktop or horizontal plane is more appropriate for older children and adults to work in.

Why: The vertical surface is the natural and preferred plane to play in for young children. The vertical plane best supports hand skill development of young children in three ways. It engages the shoulder against gravity, which promotes the development of the hand and arm for writing, it encourages an extended wrist position needed for writing, and finally it is most appropriate visually for young children.

How: There are a variety of easy to access vertical surfaces in the classroom or at home. Here is a list for you to consider using today!

Chalkboard

Wall: tape on butcher paper

Refrigerator

Table: tipped on its side

Easel: tabletop or stand-up

Filing Cabinet: instant magnet center!

Washer/Dryer

Paper taped to underside of desk or coffee table

Put the following activities into vertical and watch your children have fun while developing more efficient hand skills for writing!

Coloring
Stamping
Shaving Cream
Magnadoodle®
Velcro® matching games
Painting

Stickers
Play Doh®
Arts & Crafts
Magnets
Cutting: tape top side to surface
Experiential Writing

Writing by readingrockets.org.

Writing is a terrific way for children to express their thoughts, creativity, and uniqueness. It is also a fundamental way in which children learn to organize ideas. And learning to write well helps children to be better readers.

When engaging in writing, young children often mirror what they see around them — adults and older children writing lists, notes, text messaging. They are observing the way writing is used in our everyday lives.

Here are some simple things families can do to support young children's writing:

- Keep markers, pencils, and crayons available at home. Children develop skills that prepare them for writing through their normal play — like drawing, painting, and tracing objects. This kind of play helps prepare the brain and the muscles for holding a pencil and forming written words.
- Help them learn to write their name. This is an empowering experience, and allows them to begin to identify themselves as writers.
- Involve them in your writing activities. Make a shopping list together and point out the words that start with the same letter as the child's name.

And most of all...

- Read books with kids. Early and frequent exposure to letters, sounds, words, and stories helps kids learn to read and *write*.

Once children start learning letters, you can practice writing them on paper, in the air, or in sand or snow. These tactile experiences help them feel the shape and motion of the letter.

As your child begins to write letters, caption what they've written. Ask your child, "What does this say?" Write their words under their writing. This helps them learn more about letters and words.

As you read to your children, point out things the book author did to make the book so fun to read. "Wow! Listen to how the author describes the ocean. Don't those words make you feel like you're back jumping over waves?"

Show your children that you write too. Let your children see you writing thank you notes, composing an e-mail, or communicating with your child's school.

Suggestions for Fine Motor Development

Activities

- Count and place beans or bottle caps by picking them up with tongs.
- Use a dowel with palms flat or finger extended to roll out clay or dough.
- Write or draw on a blackboard or large piece of paper taped to the wall above eye level.
- Draw or write on a vertical surface. The fingers will fall into place for a correct grip.
- Play dough is great to build strength and dexterity.
- Cut straws and string them. Put tape on the end of a piece of yarn or string to make it stiff for threading through straws.
- Turn a row of pennies from heads to tails.
- Pick up small objects with tweezers or salad servers. Stack small objects with tweezers.
- Stack Jenga blocks into a square tower.
- Wind yarn into balls or thread onto a spool.
- Encourage child to cut coupons. This task can be made easier by outlining the cutting line in bold marker.
- Use spray bottles to wash vertical surfaces.

Toys and Games that Encourage Fine Motor and Visual Motor Skills:

Coloring books	Dot to dot books
Tracing books	Paint with water books
Sticker books	Maze/activity books
Pick-up sticks	Lite Brite or other peg sets
Puzzles	Etch-a-Sketch
Tinkertoys	Stringing beads or colored chili macaroni
Sewing or lacing boards	Stencils
Legos/Duplos	Construction/building toys
Cutting with scissors	Pouring with small pitcher or measuring cups

Scissor Skill Cutting Tips...Write Out of the Box

by Marianne Gibbs, EdD, OTR

Fine motor development is necessary for acquisition of scissor skills and handwriting by young children. Having a “Cutting Box” in your classroom or home is the perfect way for children to practice ripping, sniping and cutting. A “Cutting Box” can be a large cardboard box filled with a variety of media that children stand or sit around to practice their skills. If you have room, a baby pool is a fabulous way for children to “get into” ripping, snipping, and cutting - Fun! Here are some easy cutting tips strategies to increase proficiency when learning how to use scissors.

Sequence Progression: Rip, Snip, Cut

Ripping a variety of thick papers (i.e. construction, index cards, magazine inserts) is a pre-cutting activity for young children. The ripping action facilitates the tripod grasp with hands ripping the paper in opposite directions. Long Animal Grabbers, Bug Catchers, and Wooden Tongs help children experience the “open-close” movement associated with cutting before they actually use scissors.

Snipping with scissors means that one cut does the job. Children love to snip many different items other than paper (see media types on next page). Try Fiskars®, which are available at Wal-Mart, Office Depot, etc. Fiskars® are good for use with both right and left-handed students.

Cutting using multiple cut strokes is best practiced on thick paper types initially without lines. Next, incorporate bolded, straight lines to encourage cutting accuracy. Cutting on curves can start on round paper plates. Cutting on angles and complex patterns is most

challenging. Termination of cutting (knowing where to stop) takes practice. Your “Cutting Box” is the perfect place to practice cutting everyday and build skills.

Media Types: Thick to Thin and Short to Long

The increased stability of thicker paper (see examples above) helps children hold paper when ripping and hold/guide the paper while cutting. As they become more proficient in their cutting and bilateral coordination skills, thinner paper types may be introduced (i.e. copy paper) for practice. Start with short bits of paper progressing to larger sheets as skills improve. Snipping is fun on non-paper types of media such as Play Doh®, grass, sandpaper, straws, and Cheetos®. Using non-paper media is a great way to increase interest in learning how to cut with scissors!

Positioned for Success: Strategies to Try

Some students perform cutting practice better when they are seated away from the desktop or table surface. Often, scooting the chair back from the table will improve positioning and holding of scissors and/or paper automatically.

Positioned for success means that the thumb is facing up on the hand holding the scissors and that the arm is moving away from the body when cutting instead of toward it. Try these strategies when the hand or arm is curved or being used in an unorthodox position:

1. Color code thumbhole on scissors by wrapping it with tape in a contrasting color. Electrical tapes work well.
2. Tape paper to edge of desk or middle of easel so student can cut upwardly and make “fringe.” This is a great technique to correctly position the arm for cutting.
3. Have the child “hold” a small roll of paper towel or newspaper under the cutting arm to ensure that the arm stays in the correct position. This is a gem of a tip!

Special Note about Left-Handed Children

A reminder that left-handed children will often use scissors with their right hand, which is perfectly typical and appropriate.

Final Note: Safety Comes First!

Young children must be appropriately supervised when learning how to use scissors.