Tips to help Teachers

This handout was developed to support teachers in maximizing children’s fine motor skills in the classroom

What are fine motor skills?
Fine motor skills require the use of our small muscles to manipulate objects. Examples of such uses are cutting with scissors, manipulating small objects, printing and writing. Developing fine motor skills is an important part of every child’s early educational experience. Some children in kindergarten and the early grades have difficulty developing fine motor skills. Teachers can give them important support by incorporating into classroom activities, practices and exercises that encourage them to develop their fine motor skills.

Here are some tips that can be effective:

1. **Children need to be properly seated to promote good fine motor function.**
   - Feet flat on the floor or accommodated on a footrest
   - Hips and knees at a 90 degree angle
   - Table height just above elbow height in sitting (try to avoid shoulder shrugging)
   - Ensure that both arms are supported
2. **Some children benefit from alternate work positions**
   - Provide a vertical surface (easel, black/white board)
   - Provide a sloped work surface at the desk/table (e.g. Using an empty binder with the rings furthest from the child to create a slope)

3. **It is helpful for children to warm up their small hand muscles before starting printing or fine motor tasks.**
   - These ideas can be incorporated into an action song prior to activity/centre time
   - Alternately clenching the fists and opening the hands
   - Spreading and closing fingers
   - Wiggling fingers or drumming them individually on a table
   - Bending and straightening fingers one at a time
   - Clapping and rubbing hands together
   - Playing finger games (e.g. Itsy Bitsy Spider)

4. **Children benefit from doing activities to strengthen and develop hand muscles.**
   - Modeling with play dough, clay and plasticine
   - Building with interlocking blocks such as Lego, K’nex, and math cubes
   - Cutting straws, cardboard or Bristol board (variety of textures)
   - Cutting and pasting, paper tearing, crumpling paper balls
   - Using rubber stamps
   - Activities with clothespins or chip clips
   - Check out this website (www.prekinders.com/fine-motor-skills/) for more ideas
5. **Children need to develop a tripod pencil grip in order to print efficiently.**

Teachers can encourage a tripod pencil grasp by:

- Providing a variety of writing tools. Some children manage better with large diameter markers, crayons, and pencils. Some children work best with small, short pencils (such as golfing pencils).
- Teaching correct grip as early as possible, the older the child, the harder it is to change the pencil grip.
- Teaching the child to “pinch and flip,” lay the pencil on the table tip facing the child, pick the pencil up between the thumb and index finger, and flip the top of the pencil back.
- Using pencil grips to enlarge the grip area, particularly if the child wraps their thumb around the pencil.
- Providing visual cue on the pencil, using markers or stickers to indicate where the child should place their fingers and thumb.

![Right Tripod](image)

6. **Children need regular, consistent practice when learning to form letters.**

Teachers can encourage correct letter formations by:

- Teach upper-case letters before lower case.
- Group letters according to how they are formed. For example, capital letters C, G, O, Q and S all begin with a curved stroke to the left.
- Teach top-to-bottom and left-to-right strokes (left-hand dominant students may print top-down, right-to-left)
- Reinforce the directions by providing cues for starting and stopping points such as red and green dots (verbal cue: “green says go, red says stop) or highlighted margins on the left side of the paper.
- Provide clearly defined spaces (boxes) or clearly defined lines to help decrease oversized printing.
- Try a multi-sensory approach to printing: form letters in sand, rice, Kool-Aid crystals, sand paper letters, felt letters, hair gel in Zip-loc-bag – (trace letters), air letters, start with large strokes and gradually decrease size, describe form of letter as tracing them, cookie dough letters, play dough letters, finger painting etc.
Additional websites:
www.getreadyforschool.com
www.dltk-kids.com
www.first-school.ws
www.dotolearn.com
www.toolsforkids.ca
www.therapystreetforkids.com
www.fdmt.ca
www.hwtears.com

When is it time to refer a child to an Occupational Therapist (OT)

You may wish to consider referring students to an Occupational Therapist if their general fine motor skills are delayed compared to overall development (e.g. gross motor skills, academic abilities), OR if their fine motor difficulties are impacting on their ability to function in the classroom setting. Some fine motor difficulties may include; opening lunch containers, managing clothing, cutting with scissors, motor control with a pencil, heavy pressure when printing or colouring or aversion to completing fine motor activity etc.

What can an Occupational Therapist do to help with fine motor function in the classroom?
The role of the Occupational Therapist in the South East Local Health Integration Network School Program is primarily that of consultant. The OT will work with you to develop strategies and approaches to enable the child to function in the classroom. To get an understanding of the child's abilities, the OT may observe the child in the classroom and talk to the child's teacher and parents. The OT may use standardized assessment tools to determine the child's strengths and weaknesses and will discuss recommendations for goals and strategies with the child's teacher and parents.

How can a teacher make a referral to an Occupational Therapist?
After trailing these strategies if concerns persist you may request a consultation with an Occupational Therapist by sending a South East Local Health Integration Network (South East LHIN) Service Request form to your nearest South East LHIN office.