

Occupational Therapy Suggestions for Parents

There are many activities that can be done at home to support skills necessary for students to be successful in school. All children can use reinforcement in the areas below, even if they do not seem to be having any particular difficulty. The most important thing is that your child views these activities as fun, and not as work. The most effective activities are those in which a student will engage because they want to, and not because it's time to practice a particular skills. If you find that any of these activities become too frustrating for your child, skip it and try something else. It has to be fun for both of you, and be creative to make the activities more meaningful to you and your child. Most of the activities below use materials readily available at home.

To work upper body/trunk strengthening and control (These activities will help a child's posture when sitting, and will also increase endurance and help to improve fine motor activities)

- Have child lie on floor on his stomach to read or look at books, do puzzles, play board games, or do fine motor activities with his legs straight out behind him and arms propped up on elbows with head not resting in hands (this will also work on wrist and hand positioning for writing)
- Work on a vertical surface-tape paper on wall (above eye level) for coloring or painting, work at an easel, use magnets on the refrigerator (this will also work on wrist positioning and pencil grasp for writing)
- Animal walks (pretend to be a bear, crab, monkey, etc.), wheelbarrow walk
- Throw, catch, and kick different sized balls
- Pretending to be a statue
- Going to the playground!

Before Writing/Homework

- Pre-writing warm-ups such as pushing the table into the floor, pushing the chair into the floor, pulling up on chair, pushing hands together, wiggling fingers, and rubbing hands briskly together will get the child "ready to write" and organize and focus him before writing activities
- It is most important for a child to have good writing posture when doing homework assignments-not only to help with hand positioning, but it will also keep them from getting as fatigued during the activity. Some things to remember: make sure they are in a chair where their feet are flat on the floor and the table is at a good working height (shoulders should not be "scrunched up" for them to reach the table, and they should not have to hunch over to write). Their head should be relaxed and not bent over the page.
- For beginning writers, paper should not be tilted. However, when students begin writing sentences, paper should be tilted so that it runs in the same direction as the writing arm (right handed= tilted so that the right corner is higher, and vice versa for left-handed). The hand that is not doing the writing should be holding the paper (the "helping hand").
- The pencil should be pointed over the shoulder of the writing arm, not straight up and down.
- Keep a calendar at home to write down any long term assignments, and go over your child's daily homework assignments with him
- Set up a "homework spot" with your child, where they can work without interruptions or distractions, with you nearby for any questions they may have
- If your child has difficulty attending to activities, using a timer may help, telling them to "work

until the timer goes off, and then take a break" Breaks can be jumping, running in place, etc.

To work on pencil grasp

- Ideally, students should have only the thumb and index finger on the pencil, with the middle finger resting under the pencil and the ring and little fingers curled in palm. Other functional grasp patterns include the thumb, index, and middle fingers on the pencil barrel
- Make an OK sign with thumb and index finger, then pinch pencil between OK sign, rest 3rd finger under pencil and tuck 4th and 5th. It is most important that a round "O" shape is formed between the thumb and index finger during writing
- Playing with clay-pinching it between the thumb and index fingers
- Working on a vertical surface (wall, easel, chalkboard)
- If wrist is flexed (bent forward) try writing on a slantboard or an empty three ring binder turned sideways to encourage wrist extension.
- Purchase a pencil grip called "The pencil grip" or a stetro grip which will place the fingers in the proper position on the pencil
- If the child is putting too much pressure on the pencil when writing, have them do exercises, such as rubbing the hands together for 10-20 seconds or squeezing them together as hard as they can before writing. Also have them "ghost write," writing as lightly as they can. You can also have them write on a tissue, making them write lighter in order not to rip it. Another option is placing paper on a piece of cardboard-if there is increased pressure, the writing will show up on the cardboard, and this visual sometimes helps students realize they are pressing too hard.

To work on letter formation

- If practicing handwriting at home, it is better to practice in 3 or 4 10-15 minute sessions per week, rather than 1 30 minute session
- Writing on a chalkboard, dry erase board, etc is a resistive surface that requires whole arm movement patterns, which often reinforce the visual motor pattern
- Alternate writing with eyes open and closed to reinforce visual memory for letter formation
- Rainbow write letters, one color on top of the other, as repetition of the correct formation
- Copy letters in different textures such as shaving cream, sand, styling gel inside a ziplock bag
- Using the above strategies will also help a child who frequently reverses letters by reinforcing the proper formation. Verbal cues will also help, for example for the letter d "make a c first, and then continue up to make a d"

To work on hand skills/fine motor skills (These activities will work on coordination of the hands, both working together and individually, strength of the muscles on the hand, and grasp as well)

- Play-Doh, clay or silly putty play-roll a ball, make a hot dog, pinch it, flatten it into a pancake, hide small objects to find, use toothpicks to make designs

Play-Doh Recipe-(making it is always fun!) 2 cups flour, 1 cup salt, 2 tsp. Alum

(available from grocery store or pharmacy), add 1-1/2 cups HOT water, knead and mix while hot for about 5 minutes. You can add 2 pkgs. unsweetened kool-aid to add smell and color, or food coloring for color. Keeps up to 6 months in sealed container.

- Use many substances to draw in-shaving cream, sand, flour, rice
- Play with spray bottles full of water-using second and third finger to pull trigger
- Cutting different items such as cardboard, silly putty and Play-doh, construction paper (thumbs up in scissors)
- Tissue paper pictures by tearing little pieces and rolling it into little balls then gluing them onto paper (making a design and having the child fill in your design would also work on visual motor skills)
- Line up dominoes and let them fall
- Use different writing tools such as markers, Squiggle Writers, highlighters, colored pencils
- Building with legos or blocks
- Playing games such as Bed Bugs, Connect Four, Perfection, Candy Land, Cootie Bugs, Jenga, Memory, Checkers, Mastermind, card games (some of these will work on visual motor and visual perceptual skills as well)
- Using various tools for reaching/grasping such as tweezers, clothespins, salad tongs for activities around the house, such as picking up socks in the laundry room, obtaining plastic utensils, or picking up marshmallows, raisins, or coins with tweezers
- Popping plastic packing bubbles
- Pinching zip-lock baggies

To work on visual motor and visual perceptual skills (These activities help a child interpret with their hand what their eyes are seeing. Perception is the ability to recognize, interpret, and identify objects in the world around us)

- Visual work should be done when the child's energy is highest and he is not tired; make sure there is good lighting.
- Block designs, using 3-5 blocks. Have your child try to copy the same design you make. To make it more difficult, don't let them see you make it.
- Connect the dots, mazes, puzzles, word searches
- Books such as "Where's Waldo"
- Playing "I Spy", looking for all the square objects, or blue objects in the room, etc.
- Draw partially completed figures and faces and let him finish the drawing
- Bubbles-have your child blow and pop them or try to catch them on a spoon or wand
- Balloon volleyball, hitting a balloon with a wiffle ball bat
- Tracing and stenciling activities
- Flashlight tag-each of you should have a flashlight in a dark room and you point your flashlight to a spot in the room and have your child find your spot with their flashlight
- Games such as spirograph, lite brite, bed bugs, checkers, bingo
- Stringing beads

Coloring Within the lines

- Sometimes a darker border will help in this area. You can make the lines darker for your child, and give verbal reminders to stay within the lines
- Have your child trace the outline with the crayon, marker, etc. first and then fill in the rest of the shape
- Outline the coloring activity with glue, and when it dries it will give a border he can feel and stay within

Scissors Skills

- When using scissors, make sure thumb faces ceiling
- Ripping paper
- Pinching clothes pins
- Cutting various objects such as cardboard, sandpaper, play-dough, construction paper (cutting thicker objects, such as construction paper vs. writing paper, is easier and provides more sensory feedback)
- Start with cutting along a straight line, and work toward more difficult curved lines.

Balance

- Seeing how long you can stand on one foot
- Knee walking around house keeping trunk in line with rest of body
- Playing twister
- Walking on balance beam, street curb, or piece of tape on the floor/street, or chalk line on the street
- Play a game such as balloon volleyball while your child stands inside a hula hoop, or on a piece of paper

Why "W" Sitting is Harmful

- Many school aged children "W" sit when sitting on the floor. This position should be discouraged, as it negatively effects the motor movements of the child. It inhibits normal movements, and puts strain on the joints and muscles of the lower extremity. Alternately, a child should sit with legs folded in front (pretzel style), legs extended in front, kneeling, or lying on belly on elbows.

Tips for Left Handed Students

- It is harder for a left handed student to monitor what they write because they cannot see what they have just written since it is under their hand. This is often why they "hook" their wrist when writing-to see what they have written. The wrist should be slightly extended, and the writing hand should be below the writing line, not above it, so that the child can see what they are writing.

Paper positioning is very important. They should be taught to hold their pencil using the OK sign (see above section on pencil grasp).

- Some left handed people make horizontal lines from right to left, rather than left to right when making such letters as A, H, and T. This is natural, and not a problem. However, for E, L, and F it is believed to be best for children to use left to right strokes, starting from the big line.
- When working at home, put papers the student is working from above and to the right of the paper. This will make it easier for the child to see and work from the paper.

Of course these activities will not be appropriate for all students, but those activities that are of interest and challenging to the child should be used. Working just a few of these activities into everyday playtime can benefit a student's performance in school, and be fun in the process.

I would like to thank all of the Occupational Therapists whose ideas and collaboration went into this page, along with my own.



HOME

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