

Supporting Fine Motor Development

A practical, neuroaffirming guide for home, school, and everyday tasks

What Is Fine Motor Skill?

Fine motor skills are the small, precise movements of the hands and fingers used for tasks like writing, doing up buttons, using cutlery, opening packets, or typing. They rely on strength, coordination, and stability further up the arm and body, so difficulties in the hands often connect to broader postural or coordination patterns, not just 'weak hands'.

A Neuroaffirming Reframe

Fine motor differences aren't laziness, carelessness, or a lack of practice, they're a genuine difference in how movement is planned and coordinated. The goal isn't to force a task to look a particular way (like a specific pencil grip), but to support genuine participation and comfort, with adjustments where a task itself, not the person, is the barrier.

Everyday Signs Worth Noticing

- Avoiding tasks like drawing, cutting, or fastening clothing.
- Tiring quickly during handwriting or hand-based tasks.
- Using a lot of whole-arm or whole-body movement for small tasks.
- Difficulty with two-handed tasks, such as holding paper while cutting.

Practical, Everyday Supports

- Build in 'heavy work' for the hands and arms, kneading dough, carrying shopping bags, or using resistance putty, to build strength through everyday activity.
- Offer varied tools, such as chunky or triangular grips, adapted cutlery, or Velcro fastenings, so participation isn't dependent on a 'typical' grasp.
- Break fine motor tasks into shorter bursts rather than one long session, especially where fatigue is a factor.
- Let play lead the way, threading, playdough, construction toys, and drawing all build fine motor skill without it needing to feel like 'practice'.
- Adjust the task rather than only the person, angled surfaces, larger fasteners, or assistive technology like typing can support participation.

A Note on Handwriting

Handwriting is only one small part of fine motor development, and for some people, it may never be the most efficient way to communicate in writing. Typing, dictation, or other assistive technology can be entirely appropriate, valid ways to participate, not a 'last resort'.

When to Seek OT Support

If fine motor differences are significantly affecting participation in self-care, school, work, or daily tasks, or a task is consistently avoided due to physical difficulty or fatigue, an occupational therapist can assess further and recommend individualised, practical strategies.

working with self-managed and plan-managed NDIS participants. If you have concerns about your (or your child's) development, function, sensory needs, or wellbeing, please speak with your GP, paediatrician, or a registered health professional, or get in touch with our team to discuss OT support.

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