

Hand Strengthening Activities

Children need sufficient hand strength to perform daily tasks such as writing, getting dressed, eating, or coloring. Hand strengthening exercises don't have to be complex or fitness oriented. Activities that primarily use your hands, such as gripping, cutting, squeezing, or drawing, help strengthen your child's hands and improve dexterity. Encourage your child to perform some form of hand exercise using both hands each day to build strength in his hands. Take a break or choose a different activity if your child experiences muscle cramping or fatigue.

Playdoh, clay, or silly putty

- A good clay is Crayola Model Magic. Squeezing with the whole hand to soften the dough and increase hand over all hand strength. Be sure to switch back and forth between hands. Hide "treasures" that the child has to find (buttons, pennies, small beads, etc.).
- Roll the dough on a table to make snakes, using one hand and then the other, and then both together; Practice pinching off pieces of the snake, using your thumb and index finger. Roll dough into a ball, then squish it flat like a pizza between fingers and thumb. Poke holes in the dough using your index finger; Roll playdoh into a long piece, then practice cutting with scissors.

Movement Ideas

- Doing gross motor play while weight-bearing the hands is great for strengthening the shoulder, wrists, and hands. Some suggestions are wheelbarrow walking, tug-o-war (with a towel or blanket), crawling through a tunnel, holding "plank pose" (top of a push-up) while counting or saying the ABCs.
- Sustaining a grasp while hanging from monkey bars, climbing ladders/playground structures, rock climbing walls, and even biking and scooters can help with hand strength. Be sure that the thumb is played around the bottom of the bars and not beside the index finger.

Water Play

- Squirt bottles are great for strengthening fingers (fun in the tub especially!). They can also be used to mist household plants. Use it to make spray pictures on a chalkboard. Squirting shaving cream off the shower wall with a spray bottle filled with water colored by food color is a popular activity! It also works best for hand development, to teach your child to place the ring, and little fingers around the neck of the bottle and use the index and middle fingers to activate the trigger.
- Plastic turkey basters are good for strengthening the whole hand.
- Squeeze sponges or squeeze out a wet washcloth. Use a sponge to sop up water and then squeeze it to transfer the water to another container.
- Drop a specific number of drops from an eye dropper (can add food coloring to water; then use the dropper to "melt" a snowman made of shaving cream).

Games

- Don't Break the Ice
- Lite Bright
- Bed Bugs
- Operation
- Hungry Hippos
- Whack-a-mole

Paper Play

- Tear paper into little pieces (as part of a craft project) and/or wad paper into balls. • Cut thick paper (cardboard, index cards, several sheets of construction paper).
- Coloring in a confined space (the smaller the space, the harder it is, the more strengthening it is)
- Color with small pieces of crayon (broken crayons are great for this). Put the paper on a vertical or inclined surface (tape to a wall, use an easel, or attach to a large 3-ring binder to make a "slant desk"). Together, the incline and the small crayons will encourage a child to use a finger grasp and hand muscles, instead of relying on using the whole arm to color.
- Use a hole punch on various thicknesses of the paper. Fiskars makes a "Teeny Tiny Cassette Punch" with exchangeable cassettes that children find fun to punch out various shapes. They will keep punching until their hand is tired!

Other fun activities

- Play tug-of-war with small diameter objects such as straws, string, coffee stirrers, etc. • Wrap a rubber band or silly putty around the student's flexed fingers. As he straightens them, have him spread them apart against the resistance.
- Use a toy hammer and pound golf tees into the cork, fiberboard, Styrofoam, or other softwood (covering the Styrofoam with burlap will keep the Styrofoam chunks contained).
- Include your child in food preparation. Many tasks in the kitchen involve resistance and naturally improve hand strength. Even young ones can participate in meal preparation by tearing lettuce, washing produce, or rolling and cutting out cookie dough. Encourage your child to grip a spoon and stir batter, mash potatoes with a potato masher, grate cheese, and roll cookies into a ball. Tasks that require a squeezing motion, such as pressing garlic and juicing lemons, strengthen your child's grip. Making pizza engages several different muscles that help improve hand strength.
- Squeezing soft play dough, cookie dough, or flubber through a cookie press is great for hand strengthening. Be sure to adjust the consistency of the dough so it is soft enough that the child is successful but somewhat challenged.
- Bulb Launch Rockets - at dollar stores and therapy catalogs, there are rockets that are launched by air forcefully squeezed from a bulb to propel the rocket off the top. Children adore these and will give their hands quite a workout.