

# HOME ECONOMICS GUIDE



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## Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Small Motor Development

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To invent, Edison needed more than scientific ideas. He needed the physical skills to translate his thoughts into actions. All of us need to be able to pick up, hold and manipulate objects. These abilities are the result of small motor development. You can observe small motor progress in your child and, through understanding how this occurs, work to insure its continuation.

### Development of Small Motor Skills

The small motor skills described below give you an idea what to expect with your child. Children differ in the time they achieve these skills. Development occurs in stages with each new stage building on the previous ones. The fact that children progress through the stages in sequence and continue to progress is what's important, not the timing.

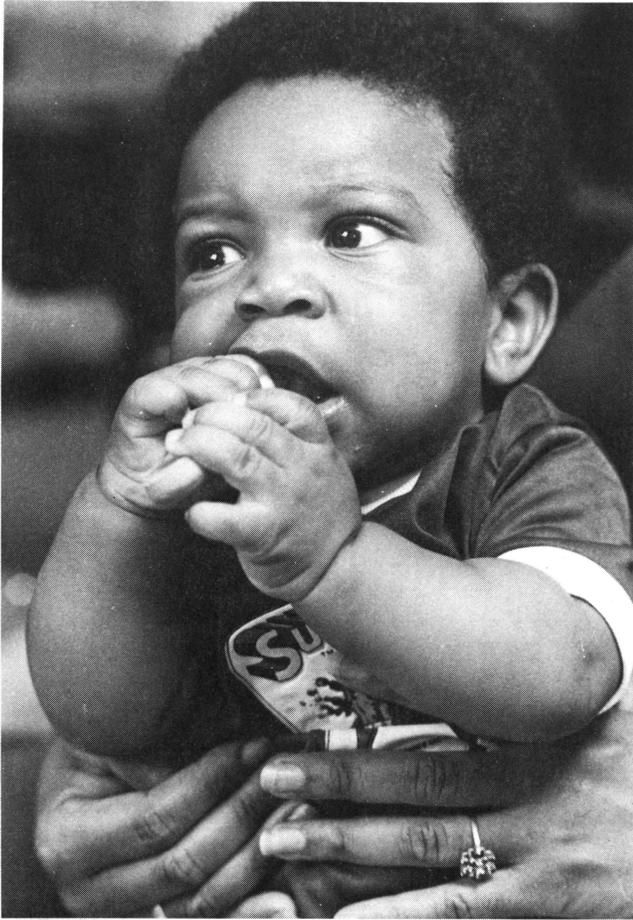
#### Birth to 12 months

By the time babies are a year old, they have made tremendous progress in learning how to control their hands and fingers. At one month babies look briefly at a rattle or other interesting object placed near them. At two months they look at interesting objects for longer periods of time and can follow moving objects with their eyes. Three-month-old babies begin to reach for interesting objects but are not yet able to close their fingers on the objects. At four months this small motor skill is developed and babies can close their hand on an object touching their hand. By six months babies can see an interesting object, reach for it and grasp it closing their fingers against the palm. Six-month-old babies inspect an object in their grasp by turning it over and moving it this way and that. At eight and nine months they have finger control that allows them to pick up smaller objects with their thumbs and the tips of their first two fingers. With this control babies can eat with their fingers. By ten months babies have more control and may begin to use a



*Puzzles give practice fitting pieces exactly where they belong.*

spoon. At eleven months they're likely to grab and inspect anything in reach. Since babies don't know the difference between safe and harmful things, close supervision is important. Small muscle control improves until, at twelve months, babies can hold and drink from a cup.



*Give finger foods frequently so your baby can have practice using small muscles.*

### **One to three years old**

Eighteen-month-olds continue to get better at feeding themselves but they still spill food. They can undress themselves, especially easy clothing such as hats and shoes. They can hold a pencil or crayon well enough to scribble and are able to turn the pages of a book although they are likely to turn several at a time.

At two years, children can completely undress themselves except for a difficult snap or buckle. They can turn pages in a book one at a time, string beads and cut with child-sized scissors. They can now hold a cup and drink from it using only one hand.

Three-year-olds feed themselves spilling only a little food. They usually like to draw, making recognizable figures such as a person or a house. They can pour liquids from a pitcher spilling only a little and can usually put on some items of clothing.

### **Four to six years old**

Four-year-olds can usually dress and undress themselves. When asked, they can use child-sized scissors to cut on a line and copy a simple figure such as a circle.

Five-year-olds may be able to tie shoe laces. They can dress themselves even in clothes with difficult fasteners. Their finger control is such that they can pick up very small objects and, when asked, copy alphabet letters.

Six-year-olds are skillful at cutting, pasting, molding and coloring. When asked, they can copy more complicated figures such as squares and triangles.

## **Some Ways to Encourage Small Motor Development**

The suggestions below are arranged in age groups. Depending on your child's ability, activities listed for a younger or older age group may be enjoyed.

### **Birth to 12 months**

- Provide a mobile for the crib. Attach a pole across the crib and, from the pole, hang objects your baby can handle, pull or hit such as a large ring, a bell or a ball of yarn.
- Provide toys your baby can use in various ways. It's essential that babies practice such skills as grasping, rolling, picking up, pushing and pulling.
- Provide small (larger than the child's two fists) objects for banging, throwing and squeezing.
- Provide finger foods so your baby can have daily practice in controlling small muscles.
- Provide picture books or old magazines to practice turning pages.
- Provide your baby containers, old shoe boxes or milk cartons as well as objects such as blocks or clothespins, to put into and take out of the containers.

### **One-to three-year-olds**

- Provide foods such as raisins that give experience in picking up very small objects.
- Provide your child with crayons and large pieces of paper for scribbling and drawing. Remember that making the picture is much more important than the finished product. Don't tell your child how it should look. Let the child do it.
- Provide blocks in a variety of shapes and sizes. Your child will likely begin by placing blocks on top of each other to form a tower. Later the blocks will be used in many creative ways.
- Provide puzzles for practice in fitting the pieces exactly where they belong.
- Provide opportunities for sand and water play. Encourage active use of the materials such as pounding, digging or pouring.

### **Four-to six-year olds**

- Provide drawing experiences with different kinds of paper such as newsprint, construction paper, wallpaper and cardboard. Try using these different kinds of paper both wet and dry. Vary drawing supplies and include ballpoint pens, colored pencils, poster paints, felt-tip



*Select toys that give your baby practice in several skills like grasping, rolling, picking up, pushing and pulling.*

- pens, soap paint and finger paint.
- Provide a chalkboard, chalk and an eraser. The practice your child gets while drawing and erasing builds small muscles. Some of the time can be spent copying figures.
- Provide small objects such as stones, breakfast cereal or macaroni for pasting on paper.
- Help your child make some hand puppets and use them to tell a story.
- Allow your child time to dress and undress. It will take longer but your child needs this opportunity to use small muscles.

### **When to Be Concerned**

To a great extent, the achievement of small motor skills depends on children having the opportunity to try and practice the skills. Children who have never used a pair of scissors cannot be expected to be able to cut with them without practice. If your child has had the opportunity to try and practice the above motor skills and still shows the following conditions, seek professional advice from your doctor.

- Babies show no interest in even brightly colored objects.
- Babies cannot grasp objects at eight months.
- Children cannot remove any of their own clothes at two years.
- Children cannot dress themselves at six years.
- Children cannot cut on a line using child-sized scissors at six years.
- Children cannot copy alphabet letters or shapes such as a circle or square at six years.

These are reasons for concern and indicate a need for professional attention.

Observation is the best way to discover whether or not your child shows healthy small motor development. Understanding what is typical performance for a child in a particular age range is one way to increase your ability to be objective about your child. Understanding typical performance is not enough to ensure progress. Parental interest and involvement are the keys to promoting healthy small motor development in young children.

For more information on your child's development see the following Home Economics Guides:

- 6111 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Speech and Language Development
- 6112 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Social and Emotional Development
- 6113 Understanding and Encouraging Your Young Child's Large Motor Development



*A sandbox gives the opportunity to build, dig and pour.*

## References

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