

Squish, squash, squeeze

These activities will help children to build strength and coordination...

Tennis ball buddies

Slit a tennis ball, add googly eyes, a nose and hair. Squeeze your ball buddy to open his mouth and feed him counters, pompoms or water beads for hours of fun. The smaller the mouth slit, the harder children must squeeze the ball to open the mouth.

Squirty bottles

Outdoors isn't just about gross motor development! Introduce a wide range of squirty bottles and containers to build up hand muscles. Add targets to floors and walls for lots of pump-action exploration. Add paint to bottles and water pistols for squirty creativity with a fine motor twist.

Spaghetti scissors

Before children can control a pair of scissors to cut something out, which involves strength and coordination in both hands at the same time, they need a lot of opportunities to repeat and build their snipping skills. Giving them access to lots of soft materials to snip builds the squeezing action and strength in hands. Try colouring spaghetti and adding scissors and superheroes for some fun cutting action.

Syringe painting

Exploring syringes of a wide variety of sizes helps children build their hand strength and coordination. Add measuring syringes (Calpol syringes) to coloured water play or fill them with watered-down paint to squirt some art. Fill with watery gloop (cornflour and water) or hair gel goo for a stiffer squeezing experience.

Clunk clips

Build up a collection of bulldog/stationery clips that children can clip to pots, string and paper to build hand muscles. Lots of different sizes and colours ensures an invitation to play that promotes strength and coordination development.

Pinch an inch

Pinching is an action key to so many everyday skills. Zipping up coats, doing up laces, buttoning shirts, opening tin cans and packets, sewing, holding cutlery and, of course, holding a pen all involve a pinching action and require the development of both strength and coordination.

Podding peas

This is a fun way to combine fine motor development with exploration of the natural world: try podding peas or beans. Once podded, moving them into small pots and containers again builds on that essential pinching action.

Cotton bud painting

Get creative and physical at the same time! Introducing tiny tools to your creation area will help promote fine motor pinching, and the spotty paintings you can create with cotton buds are great for introducing the work of artists such as Georges Seurat and Paul Signac.

Geoboards

There are many ready-made geoboards on the market that give hours of elastic band shape exploration whilst using and developing the pinching action in little hands. Why not try to make your own with log slices and nails for a more natural, outdoor feel?

Tongs and waterbeads

Handling waterbeads (available on eBay and Amazon) in general helps promote fine motor development. Add them to water play or shaving foam and encourage children to pick them out using finger and thumb movements. Add sugar tongs and bath mat shapes and the invitation to squeeze and pinch becomes irresistible.

Let's twist again

A skill essential to everyday survival in this world of packets, jars, buttons and knobs, twisting is a fine motor skill that is often overlooked...

Wind-up toys

Build a collection of inexpensive wind-up toys; they will build up that twisting strength and action and provide children with a great reward as the toy unwinds.

Nuts and bolts

Children love to tinker, so providing a tray of nuts, bolts and washers in a variety of sizes always proves popular and promotes 'twisting' whilst providing lots of creative design fun. Add metal cutlery holders with holes for children to thread the bolts through before twisting on the nuts and washers.

Bottles and jars

A really simple but highly engaging and effective activity is to provide a basket full of small jars, bottles and containers and their corresponding lids for children to explore. As well as the twisting motion, this activity encourages lots of size and shape sorting as part of their play.

Locks and keys

Keys and locks hold eternal curiosity for children. Building up a basket of different sizes and shapes is great for encouraging that twist action as well as the hand-eye coordination needed to put keys into locks. Try taking this a step further by building your own lock board, where children can freely explore a wide range of locks and bolts for tiny fingers.

Spinning tops

Age-old fun for little fingers, spinning tops are great for developing twisting skills, and the large pump-action ones are good for building gross motor skills in shoulders and arms. The possibilities for open-ended exploration on a tray are immense, especially if you add timers and stopwatches to the mix.

Get coordinated

As I've already mentioned, fine motor skills require the development of both strength and coordination, so here are some activities that promote the latter...

Pumpkins and hammers

This fun seasonal activity involves pumpkins, golf tees and tiny hammers. Letting children hammer the tees into the pumpkins is brilliant for building hand-eye coordination. Hint: tap tees into the pumpkins with a big hammer beforehand to provide guide holes – this allows children to use toy wooden hammers and still be able to get the tees into the pumpkins. Out of pumpkin season, try using half a melon or a watermelon. Alternatively, hammer coloured matchsticks into play dough. Polystyrene packaging is good for this too, as well as other vegetables.

Threading

Threading is one of the most common fine motor activities, but with a little tweaking it can be given a new lease of life. Pasta necklaces and threading Cheerio type cereal onto string or spaghetti.

Rice and sand

Using small containers and a range of messy play materials is great for building coordination. Try colouring some rice or sand for added excitement and engagement. Plastic shot glasses are ideal tiny containers and come in a range of bright colours and designs.

Bring on the play dough

I can't go without mentioning play dough. A staple of early years provision and a favourite with children, it can be made in a rainbow of colours and scents to stimulate the senses. Whilst children play, encourage them to explore the full range of actions to build up hand and finger strength. Try squashing, squeezing, rolling (into balls and worms), cutting and pinching. Search Dough Disco on the internet.

Working on vertical surfaces.

Paint or draw on an easel. Any art activity can be practised on an easel.

Use stickers or make a collage on the easel.

Chalk on a chalkboard. Paint a wall or a door with chalk paint to have a great surface for many years to come.

Clean the chalkboard with a cloth and water

Cleaning the windows with a spray and a squeegee.

Wiping the kitchen cabinet doors.

Painting the garden fences with a paintbrush dipped in water

Drawing with chalk on the external walls

Attach an old bed sheet to the garden fence and use it as a huge canvas to paint on.

Play with magnets on the fridge

Sellotape some contact paper on the window, sticky side facing your child and provide some material to stick on.

Foam shapes will stick to a window with a bit of water

For the fan of lego and duplo, why not fixing a lego/duplo plank on the wall to build on.

You can also fix a felt board on the wall or a pinboard to pin pictures on.

Use window pens to decorate the windows.