

EARLY COLOURING SKILLS Toddlers to 5 Years Old

Colouring is a wonderful activity that also helps children develop different skills, including:

- hand strength, when pressing against colouring surface to create crayon marks
- their hand skills like pinch, grip and pencil grasp, to hold their colouring tools
- fine motor coordination and eye-hand coordination, to target the page or an image and create strokes in different directions

Development of Colouring Skills:

As babies, they are developing their grasping skills, which will later help them hold onto a crayon. It is important at this stage, between the age of 6 to 12 months, to encourage babies to develop their fine motor skills to point and poke with their index fingers, as well as use a pincer grasp to pick small food pieces. Gross motor/whole body play during floor time is also important to help build their arm and hand strength.

Before they turn 1, babies can be encouraged to explore colouring once they are able to safely sit up in a high chair and hold thick primary crayons... but with supervision to make sure they don't put their crayons in their mouth! At this age, babies usually use their whole arm to move the crayon and make large marks on paper.

During their toddler years, from 12 months to 2 years old, it is a great time to encourage young children to explore colouring activities. At this stage, toddlers spontaneously scribble onto paper. As their colouring skills develop, toddlers will scribble onto paper with more controlled arm movements, and be able to imitate simple crayon strokes.

During early preschool years, between the ages of 2 and 3 years, their arm and hand movements will become more and more precise. Young preschoolers will be able to scribble using a circular motion, as well as be able to imitate vertical and horizontal crayon strokes.

When children are 4 to 5 years old, they are coloring with even more precision because of the development of their fine motor and eye-hand coordination skills. By 5 years old, preschoolers are usually able to colour in a small image with more coverage and with fewer deviations over the outline.

General Strategies to Help Develop Colouring Skills:

- Ensure the child maintains an age-appropriate or functional grasp on their crayon during colouring activities. Refer to "Pencil Grasp in Preschoolers" handout for strategies regarding pencil grasp development and achieving a functional grasp.
- If the child is 4 to 5 years old and colours using forearm movement, gently hold the child's forearm while they are colouring to encourage them to colour using wrist or finger movements.

- If the paper is moving on the table while colouring, ensure the child holds the paper on the table with their helper hand, providing reminders and/or hand over hand assistance as needed.
- Use modeling and turn taking to encourage colouring. Colour along with the child so they can watch and mimic you while you are colouring together, either working on the same image together or on your own images. You can also show them a model of the final product.
- Provide hand over hand assistance to teach the child how to produce smooth consecutive strokes while colouring.
- Give verbal cues while child is colouring. If practicing colouring with more coverage, provide prompt “Colour the white spots!”. If the child often looks away while colouring, provide reminders to “look” at the image. To encourage the child to colour in a uniform direction, repeat “up and down, up and down, etc.” and “side to side, side to side, etc.” When practicing colouring inside the lines, provide prompts like “little lines”/“little wiggles”/“baby lines” to remind the child to encourage them to slow down when getting close to the boundary and make smaller strokes.
- Combine verbal cues with hand over hand help to help them learn the skills.
- Singing while colouring. Sing the “This Is The Way” song to make it fun and to help engage the child while colouring! Example: “This is the way, we COLOUR the house...” (Search for the song “This Is the Way” online if you’re not familiar with the tune!)
- Take turns colouring. If the child becomes bored easily with colouring (this may be a sign that they find this task difficult), take turns colouring different parts of the picture.
- Celebrate their success! To help motivate the child to colour, poste their artwork at home and daycare.
- Encouraging the child to play fine motor games can help develop the skills needed for colouring too! Refer to our Hand Skills handout for activity ideas.

Tools and Strategies:

- Colouring Images:
 - Provide images to colour that are interest-based. You can find many free colouring pages online by searching for their preferred cartoon character, animal, superhero or general theme.
 - Start with a colouring page with a small image that has a simple shape. If the child only wants to scribble for a short time, you can start with small images that are about 2-inches by 2-inches, and progress the image size when the child’s colouring skills improve. Alternatively, colour in a larger image and leave a small area for the child to colour in. You can make your own partially coloured pictures or some can also be found online. Increase the size of area when the child’s colouring skills improve.
 - Provide images with thick/bold outline to make it easier also as a visual cue to colour inside the lines (even up to ½ inch thick border). Use highlighters or thick markers to outline the shapes. Progress to regular width line boundaries when the child’s colouring skills improve.

- When practicing colouring within line boundaries, you can also create textured or raised borders to provide a tactile cue to stay within lines. To achieve a textured or raised border, you can outline the picture with glue (then let dry!) or outline the image with Wikki Stix (waxed covered string). Be sure to put the border on the exterior edge of the boundary.
- If trying to encourage the child to colour in an image with more coverage, provide an image with a dark or coloured background that provides contrast.
- Note that a coloring book with images that have many details can overwhelm a child. When the child becomes more proficient with colouring, progress to colouring pictures from simple shapes to images with more details.
- Colouring Tools:
 - Some children get overwhelmed when there are too many options, so in that case, offer just one crayon at first or a choice between two crayon colours. If the child doesn't get overwhelmed by too many choices, use more than one colour and let them be imaginative – do not be concerned with what colours they choose.
 - Toddlers can start with tools that are easy to hold like egg shaped, water-drop shaped, or rock shaped crayons.
 - Example: [Water-Drop Shape Jumbo Crayons](#)



- If a child has difficulty holding their colouring tool with their fingertips, offer short/broken primary crayons (that are less than 1.5 inch long) or cone/finger crayon, to encourage a more mature grasp.
 - Example: [Finger Crayons](#)



- If the child has difficulties with applying enough pressure while colouring, try paint sticks/paint markers, gel markers or markers (i.e. washable Pip Squeaks markers). These tools are also a great option as they easily create bold marks on paper with minimal effort because they require less hand strength.
 - Example: [Paint Sticks](#)



- Shorter colouring tools (about 3 inches long) naturally encourage a more stable and functional grip by limiting excessive hand movement and promoting better control. This also helps improve pencil control which will make colouring activities easier for the child. Examples of shorter colouring tools: short Pip Squeak markers, regular pencil crayons that have been shortened to about 3-inches long.
- For fun and to motivate children to colour, also practice colouring with scented markers or drawing with chalk on a vertical chalkboard or on a driveway/side walk. Bath crayons are a fun tool to practice colouring even in the bathtub!
- Colouring Surfaces:
 - Try placing the colouring page on top of a textured surface to provide good sensory feedback while colouring. Examples of textured surfaces: sand paper, corrugated paper, leaves.
 - If the child is easily distracted and frequently looks away from his colouring page, place the page on a slanted surface to increase their attention. Example of slanted surface: 2-3 inch binder, slant board, easel.
 - Coloring on a vertical surface like an easel or chalkboard mounted on the wall, has many benefits. It helps to engage the core as a stabilizer, builds upper extremity strength when working against gravity, and places the wrist into extension which pulls the fingers into a tripod type of grasp for dexterity.

Colouring Activities:

1 to 2 years old:

- Encourage scribbling, providing modelling and hand over hand assistance as needed.
- Progress to imitating simple little crayon strokes, providing hand over hand assistance as needed.

2 to 3 years old:

- Practice imitating vertical lines. Provide modelling, and verbal cue “zip!” with hand over hand assistance when practicing.
- Progress to imitating horizontal lines. Provide modelling, and verbal cue “zoom!” with hand over hand assistance when practicing.
- Practice imitating circular scribbles. Provide modelling, and verbal cue “around and around, etc” with hand over hand assistance when practicing.
- Practice targeting small simple images with bold outline or on a dark background. Deviations over the outline are typical. Encourage more coverage while colouring by providing modelling, verbal cues and hand over hand assistance as needed.

4 to 5 years old:

- Practice colouring within the boundary lines of an image. Minimal deviations are still typical at this age. Continue to encourage more coverage while colouring by providing modelling, verbal cues and hand over hand assistance as needed.
- Encourage colouring in smaller areas to improve eye-hand coordination when colouring within the lines. A smaller coloring space enables children to use their fingers to move the crayon rather than the wrist, elbow, or shoulder.
- While colouring, you can help with concept development by helping the child identify/name colours and shapes. Also help to reinforce spatial orientation by describing the lines and shapes of the picture, i.e. “Those are straight lines”.
- As the child gets older, help them identify appropriate colours for each section or use colour by number style colouring pages.