

DEVELOPING HANDEDNESS IN PRESCHOOLERS

Children typically begin to demonstrate preferred use of one hand over the other at 2 to 3 years old. Development of true hand dominance can be established at different rates, but children typically develop hand dominance naturally *by 4 years old. However, some children need help to develop handedness.* Practice the following strategies to help the child develop a dominant hand:

- To determine which hand is their dominant hand, present all activities/materials/tools in the midline of the child's body and observe which hand they choose to **grasp it** during a variety of play, craft and eating activities. Examples of tools to offer: utensils, drinking cup, puzzle pieces, blocks, crayons, scissors, etc.
- Note that it is normal for a child to want to switch hands during an activity, especially when their hand gets tired. Therefore, it is important to note which hand is used to initially grasp the item.
- **Track** hand preference by making a simple tracking sheet with "right" and "left" columns for different activities (cutting, colouring, eating, drinking), and making a checkmark in appropriate column every time a hand preference is observed.
- **Monitor** hand preference over a period of a few weeks.
- Once hand dominance is confirmed (after observing a consistent preference during play and eating tasks), encourage the child to use that hand for the entire activity so that they may learn which hand is stronger or more dexterous.
- When they have an established dominant hand, but the child switches hands during an activity (i.e. if their hand gets tired while colouring), encourage the child to simply *take a little break*, then continuing with their dominant hand instead of switching hands. If they tend to switch hands during fine motor activities like colouring or cutting, and/or if they say their hand is sore or tired, this could be a sign that the child has hand weakness. To strengthen the hands, encourage play with resistive toys as well as fine motor play (examples: tweezers, tongs, spray bottles, pinch and grip activities, connecting blocks, play dough, beading, peg boards, etc.).
- Also, ensure that the child utilizes their non-dominant hand to stabilize items (i.e. holding down paper when colouring; holding the page when cutting; holding down the container/bowl when eating).
- Note: The child could have a dominant hand that is different depending on the activity (left hand for cutting, right hand for eating and colouring).
- To help the child remember which hand to use during colouring/cutting/eating activities, offer them a bracelet (or rubber band) to wear on the wrist of their dominant hand, as a reminder that that is their "colouring hand", "cutting hand" or "hand for eating".