

Occupational Therapy Service for Children and Young People

Encouraging Hand Dominance Activities

Definition

Hand preference refers to the consistent favouring of one hand over the other for the skilled part of an activity. For example, when writing or drawing the preferred hand holds and uses the pencil while the other hand supports the paper. Some people refer to the preferred hand as the “dominant hand” or use the term “hand dominance”.

A hand preference usually starts to develop between the ages of two to 4, however it is common at this stage for children to swap hands. Between the ages of four to six years a clear hand preference is usually established.

Establishing which hand is the preferred hand – Helpful strategies:

- If your child does not use one hand as their preferred hand, do not choose or force them to use one hand.

Instead, carefully observe your child while they are playing or doing everyday activities. Make a note of whether one hand is used more, or if one hand appears more skilled than the other. For example, observe your child drawing or writing, cutting, and pasting, brushing their teeth or hair, eating and drinking, and during any other play activities.



- Position toys or activities in front and to the centre of your child so that they can choose which hand to use rather than using the hand closest to the toy. For example, position pencils in front of your child when they are drawing so that they can choose which hand to hold the pencil with rather than using the hand closest to the pencil.



Encouraging the use of the preferred hand – Helpful Strategies:

Once it is clear which hand your child prefers or demonstrates more skill with, it is important to encourage your child to consistently use this hand. For example, when your child is cutting with scissors, encourage your child to use their preferred hand to hold the scissors and the other hand to position the paper.



Talk to your child about using one hand as a “doing hand” and the other hand as a “helping hand”.

Give your child lots of feedback and encouragement so they are aware of which hand they are using and can start to use one hand more consistently as their preferred hand.

Encourage your child to finish an activity with the hand they started with. If their hand becomes tired or they want to swap hands, get them to stop and have a rest (stretching and shaking arms/hands may be helpful). Regular rest breaks may be required until your child builds up the strength and skill to consistently use their preferred hand.

The mature stage of development in hand dominance is to establish at least one hand for skilled work and for both hands to work together in a complementary way so that a variety of tasks can be accomplished effectively.

Activity ideas to encourage use of the dominant hand:

Encourage your child to do these activities with their preferred hand and use their other hand to hold and position the paper, toy or object (if required).

Fine motor activities:

- Drawing, colouring, or writing
- Cutting with scissors
- Pasting with a glue stick or brush
- Art and craft activities: ink stampers, stickers, card making, mask making, stencils, tracing.
- Sharpening pencils
- Building with blocks or Lego
- Playing board games and card games
- Cooking activities: stirring, measuring, sifting.
- Threading activities such as with beads or lacing cards.



Encourage your child to do these activities with their preferred hand and use their other hand to hold and position the paper, toy or object (if required).

Everyday activities:

- Brushing teeth with a toothbrush
- Brushing hair with a hairbrush
- Using a fork and spoon when eating
- Using a knife to cut up food or butter bread
- Washing or drying the dishes
- Opening drink bottles or lunch boxes
- Removing lids from yoghurt containers or jam jars
- Zipping up school bags and clothing



Gross motor and outdoor activities:

- Sandpit activities: digging, pouring, driving cars or trucks
- Digging a small patch in the garden
- Painting
- Throwing balls or bean bags into a basket or at a target
- Playing Skittles or bowls
- Hitting a suspended ball or balloon with a bat
- Winding the string when flying a kite
- Washing the car

