

Hand Skills: encouraging your baby's hand skills

Babies learn hand skills by exploring the world around them. They will suck on their fingers, reach for and touch things they see and hear, and explore by holding and moving things. The more interested your baby is in what is happening around them, the more they will want to use their hands.

Hand skills develop alongside other skills. For example, as your baby learns to follow moving things with their eyes, their ability to reach with their arms will improve. Similarly, as your baby becomes more able to control their head and sit up, their arms will be free for reaching and holding things.

Playing with your baby, and providing them with things they find interesting, will help their overall development including their hand skills.



How do babies usually use their hands?

It is helpful to understand the order of hand skill development, so you can choose activities your baby enjoys and can manage. Hand skills usually develop in the following order:

1. Automatically holding anything placed in their palm (newborn babies)
2. Reaching for and holding dangling toys, and sucking on their hands
3. Using the whole hand to grasp toys, and putting toys into their mouth
4. Reaching for toys
5. Passing toys from one hand to the other; holding toys between their finger and thumb; and putting toys down again on a surface like the floor.

Activity ideas to help develop your baby's hand skills:

Give your baby interesting things to look at

- Talk or sing to your baby when you change their nappy or bathe them, to encourage them to look at you.
- Play games with your baby like “peek-a-boo” — cover your face with a scarf and ask, “Where’s mummy (or daddy)?”, and then take the scarf away.
- Lie your baby on a patterned playmat or cot sheet.
- Show your baby brightly coloured toys and shiny objects like foil or mirrors.

- Suspend mobiles over the cot, change table or play area. A young baby will find it easiest to look at things 20–25cm from their eyes. You can place objects to the side to encourage your baby to turn their head and search with their eyes. Change the items regularly so there's something new to look at.
- Use a play-gym to encourage your baby to reach towards the toys.
- Place a “lava lamp” near your baby’s cot for them to look at. Use it sparingly so it remains interesting to your baby and make sure it is not within their reach.

Give your baby interesting things to feel

- Massage your baby’s arms and hands. Use long, gentle strokes with a baby lotion. Let your baby reach and touch your face, hair and hands.
- Blow gentle raspberries in your baby’s palm or draw your finger across their palm in games like “round and round the garden”.
- Give your baby toys with different textures to hold. For example, soft teddies, rattles, soft balls or cloth books. Try this when you are changing a nappy.
- Encourage your baby to play splashing games in the bath or give them the flannel (face washer) or some bath toys to hold.

Give your baby interesting things to listen to

- Talk and sing to your baby.
- Provide toys that make sounds with movement like rattles, bells or shakers.
- Attach ankle or wrist rattles to your baby.

Give your baby opportunities to improve their trunk and arm strength

- Gently rock and swing your baby in your arms. Try in different body positions.
- Help your baby reach for their feet while they are lying on their back.
- As your baby gets older, vary their positions of play, such as supported sitting on your lap, back lying and tummy lying.
- Give your baby time in supported sitting, with some interesting toys.

Safety considerations

Supervise your baby with toys to ensure their safety. Look for and follow the age recommendations and instructions about proper assembly and use of toys. Small objects are a choking risk. Avoid toys with small parts, that are breakable, that have sharp edges or long dangling cords.

More information

Kids Health Information: www.rch.org.au/ot/infosheet/index.cfm?doc_id=10029
[Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne] Accessed 24 June 2013

Safe Toys for Kids:

www.productsafety.gov.au/content/index.phtml/itemId/972370/fromItemId/971693
[Australian Competition and Consumer Commission] Accessed 24 June 2013

