Normal Developmental Hand Skills for Young School Children

Information for educators and parents provided by Mrs. K., OTR/L, Occupational Therapist
Hand skills play an important part in success with classroom activities and participating in school. Some of the typical daily activities include:

- Drawing, coloring, and writing
- Cutting with scissors
- Clothing fasteners
• Children begin to show a hand preference around the age of 3-years-old, but they may not consistently use one hand until they are about 8-years-old.

• Reversing letters or numbers when writing is not unusual for young children up to 3rd grade.
Drawing, Coloring, and Writing

By the age of 4-years-old, most children hold a crayon or pencil with the pads of their index finger, middle finger, and thumb. This is called a tripod grasp.
Many people hold their pencils with a modified tripod grasp, and they do not have any problems with writing or drawing.
Some students hold their pencils with an inefficient grasp, that may lead to problems with handwriting legibility or fatigue.
Using a pencil grip can help position the student’s fingers correctly to improve fine motor control and decrease hand fatigue.
To write efficiently, the paper has to be stable. These children have learned from experience to hold the paper with the other hand.
Suggestions to Improve Foundational Skills for Handwriting

• Drawing on a chalkboard or easel helps to develop the arm and hand muscles used in writing.

• Drawing or writing with small pieces of chalk (1 to 2-inches long) helps promote a tripod grasp. You can draw with chalk on construction paper or the sidewalk, too.

• A pencil grip works best with younger students, before habits have been set for several years. A pencil grip may benefit some older students and adults.
Suggestions to Improve Foundational Skills for Handwriting

• Using a slant board during writing may improve posture and hand position.

• If a student is older and still has difficulty holding down his paper with his non-writing hand, using a clip board to stabilize the paper may help.

Your school Occupational Therapist can provide additional suggestions.
Cutting with Scissors

Most 5-year-olds can hold scissors correctly and cut out a simple shape, such as a circle or square.

This is an older elementary student demonstrating cutting a shape with more details.
These are two examples of immature scissor skills.
Suggestions of Activities to Improve Scissor Skills

• For younger students, games that use small tongs or tweezers to pick up objects are fun practice ("Bed Bugs," "Operation," for example).

• Let the child use small tongs to hold cotton balls or sponges for painting.

• Using small spray bottles of water to "clean" or during water play helps build hand strength. You can also use water squirter toys.

• The child can practice holding the scissors and opening/closing them correctly by cutting play dough ropes into small pieces.
Suggestions of Activities to Improve Scissor Skills

• Cutting coupons or simple pictures from magazines works on cutting out shapes. You can glue the pages to construction paper or card stock paper if the sturdier paper is easier to hold.

• If the child has difficulty with correct arm position, a reminder of, “Thumb up, elbow at your side,” often helps.

• Some children with special needs are able to cut independently with adapted scissors.

Your school Occupational Therapist can provide additional suggestions.
Self-Help Skills for School

Children beginning Kindergarten should be able to:

• Put on and take off a jacket

• Fasten and unfasten large buttons

• Dress themselves, only needing help for difficult fasteners, such as snaps on jeans

• Take care of using the restroom independently

• Wash hands and face
Children need opportunities to practice self-help skills, such as getting dressed and managing clothing fasteners (buttons, zippers, snaps, belts).

Tying shoes has several steps, and it is difficult for many children. Children need someone to teach them the steps and to encourage them through the learning process.

Most children have the basic skills needed to master tying shoes by the beginning of first grade.
You may use the one-loop tying method, or the bunny ear method to teach your child to tie his shoes...

Just be consistent, persistent, and patient with your child. It is not as easy as it looks!
Your school Occupational Therapist can provide suggestions for additional strategies to improve success with these skill areas and fine motor skills.

Remember, we all make progress with less frustration and with better results if we are interested, so make activities positive and fun.