

Hand Strengthening Activities

To be able to properly hold a pencil, the hand must be strong enough to maintain an open web space or to use the thumb in opposition. These activities strengthen the gross grasp of the hand to be able to move onto skillfully using the thumb in opposition. These activities, most of the time, naturally position the hand and fingers in the proper position and do not normally require close monitoring of the hand motions. Just make sure when your child begins one of these activities, that the thumb is grasped around the object and not just placed along side of the index finger (thus not using the thumb). If your child positions his or her thumb properly, they can do these items with minimal supervision.

1. **Squirt Bottles** Use a squeeze bottles to mist household plants. Use it to make spray pictures on a chalk board. Squirting off shaving cream off the shower wall with a spray bottle filled with water colored by food color is a popular activity! It also works best for hand development, to teach your child to place the ring, little fingers around the neck of the bottle and use the index and middle fingers to activate the trigger.
2. **Sopping Sponges** Use a half cylinder foam or sponge to sop up water and then squeeze it to transfer the water to another container.
3. **Hammering** Use a hammer and pound large headed nails into cork, fiber board, styrofoam or other soft wood. Golf tees can also be hammered into styrofoam. Covering the styrofoam with burlap will keep the styrofoam chunks contained.
4. **Animal Walks** Do different kinds of walking on hands, the wheelbarrow walk, bear walk, crab walk.
5. **Playground Equipment** Let your child spend time playing on playground equipment, the monkey bars, a swing. Anything that encourages gripping by the hands. Be sure that the thumb is played around the bottom of the bars and not beside the index finger.
6. **PVC Pipe Building** If you happen to have PVC pipe pieces, let your child use it to build objects with.
7. **Cutting with Scissors** Cutting with scissors on different thicknesses of paper. Be sure that your child holds his/her scissors with the index finger not in the loop, but resting under the loop to better guide the scissors around curves.
8. **Gardening Scissors** Cutting thin sticks or weeds with garden scissors is a functional way to develop hand strength.
9. **Stirring** Cooking activities that require stirring (especially mixing ingredients) are excellent for developing hand strength.
10. **Cookie Press** Squeezing soft playdough, cookie dough or flubber through a cookie press is great for hand strengthening. Be sure to adjust the consistency of the dough so it is soft enough that the child is successful but somewhat challenged.

11. **Hole Punch** Using a hole punch on various thickness of paper. Fiskars makes a “Teeny Tiny Cassette Punch” with exchangeable cassettes that children find fun to punch out various shapes. They will keep punching until their hand is tired!
12. **Opening Jars** Screwing and unscrewing jar lids can help to develop hand strength. The amount of strength needed can be graded by how tightly the lids are put on. Try "hiding" little manipulatives inside to make it more of a game.
13. **Carrying Tote Bags** Carrying tote bags or case with a handle that is heavy, but manageable. Look for handles that are thick enough to open the up the web space (area between the thumb and index fingers).
14. **Tug of War** Playing tug of war with a friend or dog. Try using a soft rope with a wide diameter or a rolled up towel. It's also fun to pull a friend lying on a towel.
15. **Bulb Lanch Rockets** – at dollar stores and therapy catalogs, there are rockets that are launched by air forcefully squeezed from a bulb to propel the rocket off the top. Children adore these, and will give their hand quite a workout.
16. **Play Dough** Playing with play dough or modeling clay can help to develop hand strength. Using the kitchen rolling pin on the play dough is another way to add another strengtheing activity to the play.

Here's a recipe for Cooked Play Dough that turns out nice and smooth and keeps well:

Cooked Play Dough (Toby School)

In a large bowl combine:

3 c. flour

1 Tbs. Alum (found in spice section)

Make a valley and pour in:

3 Tbs. Cooking oil

2 c. **boiling** water (If it's not boiling, you will have to cook it!)

Food coloring

Mix with a spoon until cool enough to mix with hands. Mix and then knead until smooth. Store in an airtight container when cool. This is a large batch, I usually put half of it in a bag and into the freezer until I need more play dough.