



Occupational Therapy Connection

Monthly Newsletter

Pencil grasp

Moving through the different stages of pencil grasp development is an important part of childhood development. There are principles of development called “big to small” and “proximal to distal” (Myers). Basically this means that children develop control over the larger muscles of the trunk and arms which are closer to the body center (proximal) before the smaller muscles of the hands which are further away from the body center (distal). You need proximal stability before you can develop distal mobility.

Learning to control a pencil or crayon with the hands and fingers is dependent on the shoulder and arm muscles. As your child develops physically, and takes part in lots of gross motor activities such as creeping/crawling, climbing and pushing, the shoulder and arm muscles will get stronger and steadier. This will have a positive effect on the development of fine motor skills, including pencil grasp.

- **Fisted Grasp** - When your toddler first grabs a thick crayon and puts it to paper, this is the grasp you could be seeing. It is a “fisted grasp”, and your toddler will be using movement from the shoulder to get the crayon to move across the paper.



- **Palmar Grasp** - As your toddler gains more control over arm and hand muscles, you will see this “palmar grasp” being used. Here, the pencil lies across the palm of the hand and your child’s elbow is held out to the side a bit. The shoulder muscles are steadier, and your child is using the arm and shoulder muscles to move the crayon around.



- **Five Finger Pencil Grasp** - This is sometimes, misleadingly, called an “immature” 5-finger pencil grasp. It is immature because it is not the 3-finger grasp that is used in school, but it is a perfectly mature grasp for a 4-year old. With this 5-finger pencil grasp, the wrist is usually held off the table and wrist movements are used for coloring. The crayon is often held very tightly initially, but as the hand muscles develop, you should see a few finger movements emerging.



- **Tripod Pencil Grasp** - By age 5-6, or even a bit later with some children, they should be comfortable using a tripod pencil grip, where the thumb, middle and index fingers are grasping the pencil or crayon. At first, the fingers will be held stiffly and your child may still use wrist movements to draw and color, but as the finger muscles become more skilled, your child will be able to use finger movements to draw and to form letters. Although the tripod pencil grip has traditionally been considered to be the "best" pencil grip because it allows for the most finger movements, there are other ways of holding the pencil that also allow for some good finger movements.



Please, do not force your student to hold the pencil with 3 fingers on the pencil if they are not ready to. It is very hard to “unlearn” a poor pencil grip. When a child is forced to use a “proper” pencil grasp before the shoulder and arm muscles are ready to support it, you may find fine motor problems emerging, such as holding the pencil in “weird” ways, messy work and even avoidance of drawing and coloring tasks. Do not be surprised if you see your young child switching between pencil grasps. As the shoulder and arm muscles become stronger and steadier, your child should switch less and less.

Little hands need little tools - using golf pencils, thin pencils, broken crayons, and small, thin markers are the best tools to help promote “proper” pencil grasp.

You can help promote correct pencil grasp development and endurance by working on the underlying foundations of gross motor and fine motor skills as discussed in earlier [OT Connection Newsletters](#).

Adapted from **OT Mom Learning Activities**

Please check out my website for more ideas and information: <https://missvicki-ot.weebly.com>