

## 5 REASONS WHY CHILDREN MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH HANDWRITING



1

The first thing that I look for when I am concerned about a child's handwriting skills is their palmar reflex.

The palmar reflex is an infantile reflex that newborn babies have, to encourage the baby to grab at their mum's breast for milk, and to start picking up objects (rattle, bottle) in baby's environment.

The palmar reflex encourages the hand to close and grab at an object whenever the palm of the hand is stimulated/touched by an object.

However, by the age of 3 years old a child no longer needs the palmar reflex to encourage their hand to grasp objects, because by the age of 3 the body should be exploring their environment by picking up and putting down a range of different objects and toys.



To test this palmar reflex, ask the child to relax and hold their hand out flat. Draw a 'j' shape with your pointer finger from the child's middle finger down towards their thumb. What you're looking for is movement in the child's fourth and fifth fingers. This reflexive movement of the fingers shows a positive sign for the palmar reflex still being present.

A present palmar reflex in preschool age can cause children to grab at the pencil with a full palmar grip, instead of having the coordination to use the pencil with smooth precision. You can often see that children who still have their palmar reflex will often hold their pencil extremely tight, and may at times avoid fine motor activities because these activities may be too challenging for them, leading to more delay in their palmar reflex becoming integrated (absent).

2

The second thing that I look for when the child is practising their fine motor skills is the position and use of their elbow.

Children who have poor shoulder stabilisation and poor fine motor development, will often use their elbow excessively for fine motor skills, rather than isolating their wrist, hand, and fingers muscles to do the fine motor task.

For example, what I see often, is a child spreading their elbow out to their side while handwriting, instead of having their elbow tucked in to their ribs. As the child is writing you will see the child's elbow and shoulder moving with each letter, rather than the formation of each letter coming from the wrist and hand muscles.

To improve shoulder stabilisation increase the amount of time spent playing in tummy time, stand and write on a window or wall, roll a ball up and down a wall slowly, and crawl at least 3 times per day.





3

The next motor skill that I look for with children who struggle with fine motor skills is their core strength.

To be able to use our arms and legs with coordination, we need a strong foundation coming from our core muscles.

If the core muscles are weak then the child often slouches forward in their chair to lean their forearms on their desk. While leaning their forearms on their desk, their wrist movement is restricted because their shoulders aren't doing their job of giving the arm a strong foundation to move from.

If the core muscles are weak, children will lack the endurance to stay sitting upright. Children will often lean back in their chair and disconnect from the written activity, or the child may even walk off on the fine motor task and go to lay down or slouch at a different play activity.

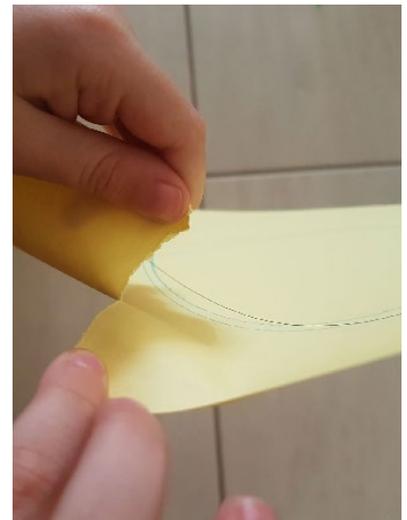
To improve core strength it is important to increase the child's gross motor activities such as running, jumping, hopping, balancing on uneven surfaces, crawling, tummy time, and pushing/pulling large tubs, cars, etc.

4

After observing the child's palmar reflex, shoulder stabilisation, and core strength, I then look at the child's ability to release and grasp objects. Things that I observe are: how the child sprinkles sand, puts multiple coins in to the money bank, tears paper, threads large pieces of pasta on to a pipe cleaner.

What I am looking for is whether the child uses the first three fingers (thumb, pointer, and middle finger) to perform these tasks, or whether the child tries to use all 5 fingers.

When the last two fingers are involved in these activities, we can see that the child is still using their palmar grip skills. What we want children to be able to do is use their pincer grip skills - getting the last two fingers to relax and to not be involved at all in the above activities.



5

For children who are having difficulty with getting their last two fingers to relax, I start by encouraging the child to improve the proprioception of their hand and fingers. What this means is that children need to rely on their sensation of proprioception to be able to understand the position of the thumb compared to their little finger, and the position of their wrist in comparison to their middle finger.

To improve the proprioception and spatial awareness of their hand, I encourage children to close their eyes, sit up tall, and slowly squeeze their thumb to their pointer finger, then squeeze their thumb to their middle finger, then squeeze their thumb to their ring finger, and then squeeze their thumb to their little finger. Do this activity 3 times on the right hand. Then repeat the same activity, squeezing each finger 3 times on their left hand.

Incorporating this activity in to your morning circle each day can improve children's fine motor skill development.



To learn more about fine motor skill milestones and fun fine motor activities click [here](#)



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