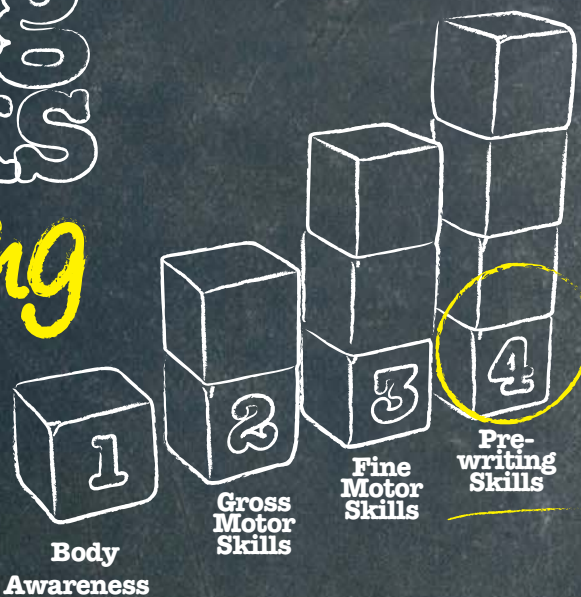


THE Building blocks for learning



Promote motor development by giving children exciting opportunities to use their fingers says **Alison Harris...**



This series has introduced basic skills for nursery-aged children in order to prepare them for transition into school. This final part considers how to introduce pencil skills. It's the most complex skill to introduce and should be considered carefully in terms of developmental progress.

Early pencil skills

When pencil skills are introduced too early, several things can happen. Many children, often boys, are not particularly interested and can be put off by pressure to perform before they are developmentally ready. As such, it's important to assess each individual child's progress in the preceding building blocks – body awareness, gross and fine motor skills – and to ensure that they are

progressing well in these areas before moving on.

Children achieve hand dominance through a gradual process of determining a 'clever' hand and a helping hand, yet many children will continue using both hands and swapping when using pens or brushes in nursery. Vigilance about whether a child has settled on a dominant hand is important as pressing on with mark-making before

the child has a sense of which hand is their 'clever' hand can cause further swapping between hands whilst doing early pencil skills. This can cause confusion in understanding directionality when in school and finally starting to learn letter formation. It's best to spend nursery years working on listening, communication, developing vital body awareness and motor skills and not pushing ahead with pencils too early. However, if a child appears to be ready, with a clear dominance, then there are basic pointers that can help to make early pencil tasks positive and beneficial.

Good habits

Teach the art of holding a pencil properly in a correct grip right from the beginning. One way of doing this is to:

- Lay the pencil or crayon down on the table, pointing the tip at the tummy
- Pinch the pencil near the writing point – you can place a tape or a band to mark where the fingers should pinch
- Pick the pencil up and swing it up and over to sit comfortably in the web space between thumb and index finger
- Sit it on the middle finger.

This may sound complicated when it's written down, but try it yourself – it's the easiest way of showing a young child how to hold a pencil. Encourage children to use a tripod grip when using all crayons, pencils and even brushes. If this is habitual by the time they reach Reception, it's a clear advantage when there will be so many other skills to learn.

Encourage interest by ensuring that tasks are always appropriate and achievable, building success and confidence. Colouring can be a great way to start practising with a crayon. Make sure that the colouring area is relatively small and can be completed quickly before the child loses interest. Consider

making broad edges outlined in black felt pen so that the child has a clear visual prompt as to where to aim! A broad outline also allows an area for error whilst still ending up with a colouring that they can be proud of.

Other colouring ideas include preparing simple shapes for colouring by sticking lolly sticks or string around the edges so that there's a physical outline to colour up against. The next step would be to edge the outline with PVA glue which dries clear but still gives a boundary prompt for early learners.

Finally, remember to ensure that the items you provide for children to use are fit to use! Blunt wax crayons are difficult to handle with any kind of accuracy. Young hands are best with chunky pens – triangular barrelled shapes are particularly good.

