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How Baby's Hand Skills Develop

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Baby's little fingers have lots of skills to master -- reaching is one of the first.

1 to 4 Months

When it comes to your baby, every new accomplishment is exciting to watch. While big motor milestones, such as rolling, crawling, and walking, are the obvious ones, small motor skills, like reaching, grabbing, and pointing, are just as developmentally important.

Learning and practicing these skills will improve baby's hand-eye coordination and teach her cause and effect. In her first year, baby will also improve her manual dexterity as she gains more control and strength in her tiny fingers. These new skills are sure to make playtime even more fun! Now she'll be able to manipulate toys by lifting, tossing, and dropping.

With her newly developed abilities, baby will learn how to feed herself and even hold a crayon. Watch how baby grows more independent and increasingly confident as she masters the following small motor skills.



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1 to 2 Months

At birth, your baby's hands are clenched. Even if you try to uncurl her fingers by pressing on her palm, they'll curl back into tight fists -- it's a reflex she's born with.

At around 3 months, she will begin to open her hands on her own and slowly gain control over her movements. She may begin to lift objects -- including her thumb -- to her mouth. You should notice baby's increased hand-eye coordination as she discovers that her hands are part of her body.

3 to 4 Months

By now baby has developed enough muscle coordination to get a grip on small objects placed in front of him. He will love reaching for toys and raking them toward him. As baby's vision improves and he is able to follow moving objects, he'll enjoy playfully batting at them. Hanging a mobile over your little one's crib will inspire him to swat at the dangling toys. (Be sure to remove the mobile when he is able to actually grab it!)

Some babies will also discover other parts of their body, such as those tiny toes, that will eventually find their way into baby's mouth.

5 to 12 Months

5 to 6 Months

As baby grows, her nimble fingers are eager to explore new and different textures and shapes. Soft books with bright pictures are perfect for this age as they are chock-full of exciting finds. Let baby stroke a touch-and-feel book so she can begin to feel the various textures.

Keep in mind that this period coincides with the development of some large motor skills, including being able to sit up. Combining all these skills means baby can entertain herself for a few minutes at a time.

7 to 8 Months

An exciting development -- learning to let go -- allows baby to transfer toys from one hand to the other. Your little one will begin to bang his toys together, producing sounds from the clatter. Be aware that

although he may clap his blocks together, stacking comes much later.

You will find that baby enjoys playing with toys that make fun sounds, such as shaking a rattle or even jingling a set of keys. These are both great ways to teach him cause and effect. Baby will also love the reaction he gets from you after making so much noise -- especially when he learns that it quickly grabs your attention!

9 to 10 Months

Ever wonder why babies love to dump things over, like a trash can or a box of toys? It's the thrill of filling it back up, of course! You will also see him stare in awe when he learns how to manipulate toys with moving parts, such as doors that open and wheels that spin. Each of these games will reinforce his understanding of cause and effect.

Baby will also delight in dropping his toys as he has more strength to open and close his hands. By the end of his first year, you will notice that baby begins to use objects correctly. Playing with a phone becomes a game as he learns how to dial and listen to the receiver.

10 to 12 Months

While baby has now mastered raking objects toward her, it is still a clumsy process. As she gains more control of her fingers, she will begin practicing the pincer grasp. Using her thumb and pointer finger, she can grasp small objects more accurately. Place some of her favorite cereal on a flat surface so she can perfect her technique. But be warned -- you may find most of it tossed on the floor as baby learns to throw. Baby may also begin to hold a bottle or cup during this time, allowing her to be even more independent.

What's to Come, Improving Skills

What to expect in the months to come...

By 5 Months

- Shake a rattle
- Flip pages of a book

By 10 Months

- Hold a sippy cup
- Clap hands

By 12 Months

- Roll a ball
- Point
- Wave bye-bye

By 14 Months

- Stack two blocks
- Hold a spoon and use it to feed herself

By 18 Months

- Turn knobs
- Build towers of up to four blocks

4 Ways to Improve Skills

1. Provide baby with interesting and safe toys to touch, shake, and bang together. Place these toys just out of her grasp and encourage her to reach for them.
2. While baby will enjoy discovering new objects in varying shapes and textures, she will also love brushing her fingers over your face as you make different expressions.
3. Read books to your baby every day. Even though she cannot yet understand the words, she will enjoy using her hands to turn the pages for you.
4. By 8 months, let baby try to feed herself. It will be a messy task, but it's one way she will eventually master the pincer grasp and getting things to her mouth. And in this case, there is an instant reward!

Originally published in American Baby magazine, February 2005.

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