

HAND DOMINANCE

Hand dominance simply refers to the fact that most children gravitate toward one hand or the other as their “strong” hand – the hand that is better at performing complex tasks like handwriting, picking up small objects, or using a fork or a spoon.

Beginning at birth and continuing sometimes until almost 5 years old, kids make their way through a very important trial and error phase with their hands.

As they play and explore, babies, toddlers, and young children gather information about how their hands work together. First, they begin to bring their hands together in front of them, playing with their fingers and even clapping. Then, they begin to perform activities that involve reciprocal (back and forth) movements of the hands, like crawling and climbing.

Eventually, kids become interested in activities like scribbling on paper, doing puzzles, and cutting with scissors. As they perform these tasks, they quickly realize that one hand needs to act as a stabilizer to hold the object they’re working on while the other hand performs some kind of work.

Kids usually start to feel that one hand is stronger than the other at performing fine motor tasks. This becomes their dominant hand and they use their other hand as a stabilizer or, as we OTs like to call it, a “helper hand”.

When children reach about 5 years old and are not yet showing signs of an emerging dominant hand, parents might start to think that the child is ambidextrous (able to use either hand equally well). I usually caution parents that this is extremely rare and that there is typically a reason that kids aren’t finding their dominant hand.

Sometimes hand strength is the issue. Weak hands mean that kids fatigue faster during fine motor activities like handwriting and cutting with scissors. When one hand gets tired, they simply switch to the other hand. One hand is stronger than the other, it just lacks the strength to show its true colors and make it all the way through a fine motor activity from beginning to end.

Other kids switch hands because they struggle with midline crossing – or the ability to use one hand to work on the opposite side of the body. Kids with an established dominant hand will stick with this hand even when they have to reach across their bodies to reach for something or perform some kind of task on the opposite side of their bodies. Kids who have difficulty with this skill may avoid crossing the midline altogether by using their left hand when they're working on the left side of their bodies and then switching to their right hand to work on the right side of their bodies.

If your child is struggling with establishing a dominant hand, try some of these ideas!

-Activities that require two hands to work together (one to stabilize and one to do the work): stirring, pouring, scooping, coloring, cutting with scissors, sewing or lacing activities, peeling off stickers, clip or clothespin activities.

-Don't force or encourage kids to use one hand or the other. Instead, allow them to choose and then encourage them to complete fine motor activities (e.g. writing their names, cutting on a line) using the same hand they initiated with. This is a good way for kids to get experience with both hands and to start to get a feel for which hand is stronger.

-Work on hand strengthening to ensure that weakness isn't contributing to hand switching during fine motor tasks.

-Practice midline crossing by having the child draw on a large piece of paper, chalkboard, or marker board.

-Practice throwing at a target

-Play with toys that require two hands (one hand to stabilize and one hand to work) like Wind up toys or jack-in-the boxes