



Community Children's  
Health Partnership

North Bristol **NHS**  
NHS Trust

# Does your child have difficulties with co-ordination?



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# Does your child have difficulties with co-ordination?

## Introduction

Some children have difficulty organising their movements smoothly: they are sometimes called 'clumsy' children. Often they realise they are not doing as well as other children, then their self esteem can suffer, they may lack in confidence and feel they are a failure. Behaviour associated with this may include being the 'class joker' or avoiding particular activities. These children may be labelled as naughty or disruptive.

This booklet has been prepared to help you structure part of your child's leisure time to help them improve their basic co-ordination skills. Children need these good foundation skills to help them organise information from their senses. Development of these skills will help them become more efficient at reading, writing, co-ordinating their movements and controlling their behaviour.

Parents can help children develop these basic skills so they are better prepared for learning new skills. If you feel that your child is suffering from a lack of confidence and low self esteem, here are some simple techniques you can use every day to help them.

## Everyday successes

Focus on your child's strengths as much as possible and find ways to use their skills so they feel good about what they can do: ask them to help a younger child to learn to read, for example. Giving them special roles and responsibilities and involving them in family decisions – such as where to go at the weekend – will make them feel positive about themselves.

- Focus on your child's improvements: never compare their skills and achievements to those of other children.
- Try to finish the day in a positive way, ask your child, "What went well today?"

## Feeling like a failure

When you feel frustrated with your child, stop and think: are their co-ordination difficulties to blame when they have been clumsy or made a mess? Are they feeling frustrated too and revealing that through different types of behaviour, such as aggression?

If they have had a bad day and are upset, try to get them to talk about it and channel their energies into something they are good at that will be encouraging for them.

If your child struggled with an activity, talk to them about ways to make it easier next time. Remember that new activities can be difficult to learn and your child may need extra time to develop the relevant skills.

Try to predict what situations or activities will be too challenging and will frustrate your child and find ways to make those activities more manageable. Allow more time to get dressed, for example, setting the alarm clock earlier so you can get everything done or prepare things for school, etc, the night before. You could help them on school days and let them practise when there is no time pressure – at weekends, for example.

Encourage your child to keep trying – praise them for the effort they put in and not just the results. Remind them that if anybody wants to improve, they have to try things that may seem a little difficult at first.

## Working on the activities in this booklet

It is important that your child is the focus when doing these activities as they need to be able to track their own progress. It can be very motivating, however, to have other members of the family cheering them on!

Don't worry too much about choosing the 'right' activities for your child, try to vary the activities as much as possible and spend a minimum of 10 minutes each day working with your child on a couple of activities – you should certainly see results in the long term. Your child will benefit from any of the activities

listed and will enjoy trying many of them. Never force your child to take part in an activity – the activities need to be fun, so try to give them a choice of similar activities. If possible, build some of these activities into your weekly routine, especially those activities that your child particularly enjoys and could develop into a long-term hobby or interest.

Your child's co-ordination may take months or years to improve, so look at this as a long-term effort. Try not to feel disheartened if there is little improvement straight away and encourage your child to keep trying. Modify activities as your child gets older to challenge them and keep them interested.

You may want to create a certificate to give to your child when they have done particularly well. A certificate can make a world of difference to a child who is not used to success and rarely feels they have ever done well. An alternative to this would be to give them a choice of reward, such as a trip to the zoo or indoor playground.

**Please also supervise your child for their safety.**

If any activity causes pain or discomfort do not continue and discuss the issues with your health professional such as GP, School nurse, OT or Physiotherapist. If your child's school seems to be unaware of their difficulties with co-ordination, talk to the class teacher and explain the activities you are working on. Many of the activities listed here can be worked into the school day and most schools will be keen to help your child improve.

It is important that a child with co-ordination difficulties is seen by a doctor as some problems may be symptoms of an underlying condition. If you have not discussed your child's difficulties with your family doctor, please make an appointment.

Does your child have problems with co-ordinating their body movements, sometimes called 'gross motor skill' problems? Do they have difficulties with balance or ball skills?

**Activities to try:**

**Outdoor activities at home**

Riding a bicycle; using a skateboard, roller skates or scooter; skipping and hopping games such as hopscotch; throwing and catching a large ball or balloon; playing tug-of-war; gardening.

Help them to walk on their hands, sometimes called 'wheelbarrows'. A starting point for this exercise would be to lie on their stomach on an exercise ball or footstool, supporting their body with outstretched arms.



**Space hopper or therapy ball activities**

Use these activities under close adult supervision in a safe environment. Exercises with a space hopper or therapy ball can improve balance, body awareness and stability. When sitting on the ball your child's knees should be in line with their hips and directly above their ankles with their feet flat on the floor.

Make sure your child's knees and feet are hip width apart. If you are using a space hopper, turn the handles to one side so that your child cannot grip them unless the exercise asks you to hold on to the handles.



Bounce on the space hopper or gym ball keeping feet on the floor. If using a space hopper remember not to hold on to the handles.



If using a space hopper your child can hop along with the space hopper, legs slightly spread, feet on the floor. Holding the handles, start jumping forward with the hopper, using your hands to move the hopper along.

Sit on the hopper or gym ball to throw and catch a ball. As your child's balance improves, increase the distance they have to reach for the ball by changing the angle of your throw. Try to keep your knees above your ankles. In this picture it is hard for our model to keep her knees above her ankles.



Sit on the hopper as you would on a chair. Maintain this position throughout the activity. An adult needs to hold a bean bag or soft toy in front or to the side of the child and ask them to take it and throw it into a box placed in front of them. Your child can also read a book or do a tabletop activity in this position.



Lie across the hopper, keeping knees straight and supporting yourself with hands flat and fingers pointing forward. Hands should be directly under your shoulders and your neck in line with your spine. Elbows should not be 'locked'. Try an activity from this position such as a jigsaw or throwing bean bags into a box.



Lie across the hopper as in the exercise above. Walk your hands forward so only your lower legs are on the hopper, supporting yourself all the time on your hands, then move back slowly until your stomach is over the hopper again. Repeat this move. Hands should be flat and fingers pointing forward and elbows should not be 'locked'. Hands should be directly under your shoulders and your neck in line with your spine.

## Stability exercises

These are especially useful for children who have difficulty controlling the muscles around their shoulders and hips. This can make it hard for them to hop or kick a football, for instance, and may affect their 'fine motor skills'. These exercises need to be done in a slow and controlled way. If your child finds it difficult to maintain their balance at first, support them at the hips.

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Place your arms by your sides. Lift your bottom slowly without swaying, keeping your knees a hand's width apart. Make sure your back is straight. Hold for three seconds and then slowly lower back to the floor starting with the top part of your back until your bottom gently touches the ground.



Do the activity above. While your bottom is off the floor, straighten one leg and hold it close to the floor for around 10 seconds, then slowly lower your bottom and leg to the floor. Repeat, then do the same with the other leg.



Get on all fours, with your hands directly below your shoulders and your knees directly below your hips. Bend your arms at the elbows and touch the floor between your hands with your nose, then return to the all fours position. Repeat.



On all fours, as above, with a box in front of you, reach out with one hand for a bean bag or soft toy that someone is holding out to you and throw it into a box. Continue with more bean bags and then repeat using your other hand.



On all fours, as above, stretch one arm out in front of you off the floor and then stretch the opposite leg out behind. Make sure your head, body and leg are in a straight line. Hands should be directly under your shoulders and your neck in line with your spine. Hold this position for as long as you can. Rest if your arm or leg drops.



Kneeling down on one knee, reach out to touch someone's hand held out to the left, then to the right and then above your head. Make sure your bent knee is directly under your hip. Practice throwing and catching balls in this position. Progress to throwing the ball from above your head. See how long you can stay in the position with your eyes shut.



Try 'wheelbarrows', keeping your hands flat and fingers pointing forward. Try not to raise your hips or let them sway from side to side.



Do some walking in a 'crab' position – forwards, backwards and sideways. To make this harder make sure your fingers are always pointing towards your feet. Once you are confident, try 'crab football'.



This one is really tricky! Lean against a wall with your knees bent, as if you were sitting in a chair. Hold this position for as long as possible. Make sure your hips and knees are in line.



## Other activities

Does your child enjoy swimming, woodwork, indoor playgrounds or horse riding? These are all good for balance and co-ordination.

### **In the park and at school**

Use climbing frames and other playground equipment. Try swinging from ropes, using rope ladders, hanging from bars, pulling yourself along a bench on your stomach.

**Obstacle courses** – going over, under or through obstacles can be a good challenge. Try a blanket over two chairs to make a tunnel, or your child could crawl under a duvet.

### **Indoor activities**

Lying on the floor on their stomach, propped up on their elbows to read a book, do a puzzle or watch television. Activities that involve resistance – pushing or pulling against something – for example, pushing a shopping trolley, playing with clay or lego.

# Does your child have difficulty with daily routine activities, such as dressing or using a knife and fork?

## Activities to try:

### Dressing

- Try to choose clothes with fewer fastenings to make dressing easier. Choose clothes with Velcro fastenings or tops like polo shirts that go over the head.
- Instead of encouraging your child to dress independently in the mornings, try to practise dressing at weekends, holidays or in the evenings when the pressure on time is reduced.
- Always use the same order or technique of dressing every day to help form a habit.
- When learning to dress, motifs on the front of clothing or labels on the back help children to orientate their clothes.
- Always lay your child's clothes out in the sequence they will need to put them on.
- During practice times, try to use clothes with easy fastenings, such as zips with tags, or large buttons as these are easier than smaller ones.
- When teaching your child to dress, take them through the complete process leaving the last stage, or last few stages, for them to complete by themselves.

Gradually increase the number of stages that your child completes alone.

If your child finds buttoning especially difficult, try to encourage activities like threading, simple sewing, cutting with scissors, construction toys and working with Playdoh. Also see the yellow pages in this booklet for 'fine motor skill' activities.

## Using a knife and fork

It is a good idea to practise using a knife and fork away from mealtimes when there is less pressure on time.

- Practise using Playdoh to make food and cut it up
- Place your hand over your child's to guide them
- Always use the same technique for using cutlery to help form a habit
- Use cutlery with chunky handles
- Try adding a small blob of nail polish onto the cutlery handle to show where to put the index finger

To help your child with using a knife and fork try to encourage activities like threading beads, cutting with scissors and construction toys. Also see Page 15 in this booklet for 'fine motor skill' activities.

# Does your child have difficulty using their hands, sometimes called 'fine motor skill' difficulties?

## Activities to try:

Choose a range of activities from this list, experimenting with activities from different groups. This will strengthen the small muscles in the hand and improve hand skills.

### ■ **Musical instruments**

Learning and playing musical instruments such as drums, maracas, triangles, tambourines, whistles, bells, keyboard and recorder.

### ■ **Construction toys**

For example Lego, Duplo, Stickle Bricks and Meccano. Try creating pictures and patterns on peg boards.

### ■ **Craft activities**

Cutting with scissors, making collages, threading beads, drawing around templates, drawing with a ruler, cooking and baking, model making. Working with clay, including Play Doh and modelling clay – rolling, pinching and squeezing.

### ■ **Activities using small pieces**

Playing games like Connect 4, Pick Up Sticks or Frustration. Craft activities such as jewellery making kits or model making kits. Doing jigsaw puzzles. Finding small objects hidden in sand, lentils or pasta.

# Does your child find it hard to look, listen and pay attention?

## Activities to try:

Memory games, e.g. card pairs.

Try the shopping game where an increasing list of items must be repeated by your child.

Read a short story to your child and ask them to retell it in the right sequence.

Try singing action songs and rhymes.

To help your child to concentrate try using these guidelines:

- Make sure your child is looking at you before giving instructions
- Give one instruction at a time, using short, simple phrases
- Give your child time to understand the command and put it into action
- Ask your child to repeat the instructions in the proper order
- Give a visual demonstration to explain what you mean and give physical help as necessary
- Provide some written instructions if that might be helpful
- Reduce possible distractions such as background noise and cluttered work space

## Resources

Use a Gym ball when playing computer games or watching TV or a Movin Sit Cushion when sat at a table for home work or meal times. – see page 25 for details.



# Does your child need to improve their basic pencil skills (sometimes called pre-writing skills)?

## Activities to try:

These activities are useful for children who did not develop good pencil skills in early childhood and are now having problems with their handwriting.

It is good for your child to draw or colour in different positions – on all fours, lying on their stomach, kneeling, kneeling on one leg, standing at an easel.

Involving all your child's five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell – can make the activities below effective and fun. Select a range of activities, including some from each section.

## Sight

- Try 'writing' on aluminium foil, different kinds of paper, light card or craft paper in different colours.
- Use colouring books, including the type in which colours appear when children paint on the pages with water.
- Use different colours of chalk, markers, crayons, pens, pencils and paints – including finger paints.

## Touch

- Try writing on different textures such as corrugated card.
- Try 'writing' on sandpaper using your finger – with or without finger paint.
- Draw around stencils made from sandpaper or wood.
- Trace a finger around a shape made of wool or craft sticks.
- Try drawing in sand, tea leaves, shaving foam, mud, lotions, gelatine, oatmeal, cornflour, custard or whipped cream with your finger.

## Smell

- Draw with scented markers
- Add a few drops of bubble bath or scented oil to finger paints
- Use scented lotions for finger painting

## Hearing

- Use a musical toothbrush for painting
- Attach bells to the end of a paintbrush

## Taste

- Try finger painting in whipped cream on a flat pan of jelly.
- Try drawing with tubes of coloured icing on a cake to decorate it.
- Draw with 'squeezy' cheese spread on crackers or bread.

## Movement

- Using water and paintbrushes paint lines and shapes outside on a safe area of concrete for your child to copy
- Use ribbons on a stick to draw in the air, draw people, letters shapes, try to guess what your child is drawing.
- Use your whole body to make letter shapes or animal movements, try to guess what each other are doing.

## **Combined activities for indoors**

Give your child a stencil cut out of cardboard, felt or sandpaper and ask them to feel the shape with their eyes closed. Then, with their eyes open, ask your child to draw or paint inside the shape with finger paints, crayons or markers. Remove the stencil so your child can see the shape produced, ask them to follow the outline of the shape with a finger, then ask them to draw or paint the shape without the stencil.

Make a shape on cardboard using wool, sandpaper or flat sticks. Ask your child to feel the shape with one or both hands, then ask them to use finger paints or crayons to repeat the shape.

Stick stars on a piece of paper that, when joined together with a line, will make the outline of a shape. Ask your child to draw from star to star to make the shape, then ask them to draw the shape again without the stars.

Attach crepe paper streamers to the end of a cardboard tube from a kitchen towel roll to make a 'magic wand'. Stand next to, or facing, your child and move the wand through the air to 'draw' shapes or letters. Use the hand you use for writing to hold the wand. Ask your child to imitate the movements.

Use an easel or paper fixed to the wall so you can give verbal directions to help reinforce the movements made to form letters, e.g. round, up and down forms the letter 'O'.

Draw with a 'wobble pen' – a pen that vibrates when in use. See page 25 for a supplier.

## **Other outdoor activities**

Using water and paintbrushes, 'paint' lines and shapes on the pavement for your child to copy.

# Does your child have difficulties with handwriting?

## Activities to try:

Please look at the orange pages in this booklet for advice on foundation pencil skills before starting this section.

When working on handwriting, it is important that your child is seated at a chair and table of the correct height, with their feet flat on the floor and the table top just above elbow height. This will give them a more stable posture and help to improve their ability to write well. If the chair is too high, then put a box under your child's feet.



## Paper position

The paper needs to be correctly placed in relation to your child. Encourage your child to angle the paper as shown for right handed and the opposite angle for left handed. Your child will then be able to see their written work and avoid smearing the writing.



Right handed paper position

## To help your child to place their paper at the best angle:

- Stick a piece of tape on the table against which your child can place the top edge of their sheet of paper, or
- tape a piece of paper on the desk at the correct angle and your child can put their paper over this, or
- teach your child to place their elbows and forearms on the table with their finger tips touching, to create a triangle shape on the table between their arms and their body. The paper can be placed in the triangle shape so that it lies at an angle in front of them.

A sloped surface can be used for children who find it hard to sit upright when at a desk. A 'lever arch' file can be used as a sloping surface by placing the lever arch spine away from the child, or you can buy an angled desk top – see page 25.



Left handed paper position

## Pencil grasp

Allow your child to try a variety of pencils, triangular pencils and pencils with large barrels, rubber grips, or different nibs such as ballpoint pens, gel pens and fountain pens.

Sometimes when the grasp is well-established, trying to correct it can affect your child's concentration and pencil control. If their pencil grasp is not interfering with their ability to keep up in class, then there is no need to change it.

## Encourage your child to hold their pencil or pen correctly by:

- placing sticky tape or an elastic band around the pencil at the place for correct holding
- practising with a very short pencil – about 2.5 cm (1 inch) in length – this will encourage the right grasp
- Holding a penny in the palm of your hand using your ring or little finger encourages a good grip.

## Improving letter formation

It is helpful to practise writing letters from groups that have similar letter formation, such as the groups

a c d g o q / b h r m n / i l t u y

Use colours, arrows, crosses or stars to show directions and starting or stopping points, e.g. a green dot for the starting point and a red dot for the stopping point.

## Writing speed and endurance

To improve writing speed and endurance it is important that your child should practice for a short time each day. If you find that they experience hand strain, encourage them to:

- have a short break from continuous writing before hand strain starts;
- drop their arm beside their body and shake their hand gently;
- put their flat hand under their thigh and shift their body weight on to it to stretch the tense hand muscles, then gently shake the hand again.

## Pressing too heavily on the paper

If your child presses too heavily try:

- large barrelled pens and pencils or ones with nonslip barrels;
- placing carbon paper between two sheets of paper and then ask your child to try to write on the top sheet without making a mark on the bottom sheet;
- writing or drawing on aluminium foil without tearing it;
- using coloured pencils alter the pressure to make the colour lighter.

## Pressing too lightly on the paper

If your child presses too lightly try:

- fibre-tipped pens, softer pencils, large barrelled pens and pencils or ones with non-slip barrels;
- placing carbon paper between two sheets of paper and ask your child to write on the top sheet and try to make an imprint on the bottom sheet;
- writing or drawing on aluminium foil, trying to make an imprint;
- using coloured pencils alter the pressure to make the colour darker.

## For children who find it difficult to keep up with written work in class

If your child continues to struggle with writing down information in school, there are several ways to help them. Discuss these ideas with their class teacher.

- Try to reduce the amount of written work they need to do to within their limits: this can be achieved by using photocopied notes and worksheets
- Allow them more time to complete the work.
- Your child may also benefit from alternative methods of recording information, such as a Dictaphone, computer or scribe. Your child will need plenty of time to get used to using new equipment, especially if it is to be used in examinations.
- Ask your child's school to help them by marking their work mainly on content, or by giving separate marks for content, quality of writing and effort.
- Learn to touch type using some free on line children's games will be a useful skill for the future.

## References

Survival Strategies for Parenting your ADD Child by George T Lynn

Developmental Co-ordination Disorder: hints and tips for the activities of daily living by Morven F Bell

Dyspraxia: movement development, co-ordination, organisation, sequencing – a guide for teachers and parents by Kate Ripley, Bob Daines, Jenny Barrett

Dyspraxia in the early years: identifying and supporting children with movement disorders by Christine Macintyre

Developmental Dyspraxia: a manual on identification and intervention for parents and professionals by Madeline Portwood

The Out of Sync Child by Carol Stock Kranowitz

Answers to Questions Teachers Ask About Sensory Integration by Carol Stock Kranowitz, Stacey Szklut, Lynn Balzer-Martin

Guide to Dyspraxia and developmental coordination disorders. Amanda Kirby and Sharon Drew. David Fulton Publishers London 2003

Dyspraxia The hidden Handicap Dr Amanda Kirby. Souvenir Press 1999

Sensory Issues in learning and behaviour Carol Stoke Kraniwitz

## Equipment and resources example of suppliers

### **Triangular pencils, wobble pens, pencil grips, multiwriters and gel pens, etc**

Staples, Office World, Toys R Us and Early Learning Centre WHSmith, even supermarkets or various web sites.

### **Sloped boards/angled desk tops**

To encourage good posture when writing.  
These can be sourced from various web sites

### **Therapy balls**

These can be bought from the Early Learning Centre (called a Sit 'n' Bounce) Many supermarkets, Tesco's Argos etc.

### **Air Ball Cushion**

To help improve posture, attention and to reduce 'fidgeting' on a chair. Order from various web sites

### **Movin Sit Cushion**

Can be used to improve posture and/or to provide sensory feedback for some children who need to fidget.

### **Write From The Start**

A programme designed to guide children from early hand/eye co-ordination skills to proficient pencil control. Available from:  
Learning Development Aids  
Duke Street, Wisbech  
Cambridgeshire PE13 2AE  
Tel: 01945 463441

### **Caged in Chaos**

A dyspraxic guide to breaking free. Victoria Biggs.

### **Handwriting without Tears**

This programme assists children from the pre-writing stage, through letter formation and on to a fluent writing style. Available from:  
The Psychological Corporation  
Harcourt Education, Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8EJ  
Tel: 01865 888188

### **Big Strokes for Little Folks**

A developmental training programme designed to help children form letters correctly. Available from:

The Psychological Corporation

Harcourt Education, Halley Court, Jordan Hill

Oxford OX2 8EJ

Tel: 01865 888188

### **Loops and Other Groups**

A writing system that teaches letters in groups that share common movement patterns. Available from:

The Psychological Corporation

Harcourt Education, Halley Court, Jordan Hill

Oxford OX2 8EJ

Tel: 01865 888188

### **Hands at Work and Play**

A fine motor skill programme aimed at five to seven year olds, incorporating ideas to develop skills in cutting, colouring and writing. Available from:

The Psychological Corporation

Harcourt Education, Halley Court, Jordan Hill

Oxford OX2 8EJ

Tel: 01865 888188

## Associations and websites

### **Dyslexia Institute Ltd**

Park House  
Wick Road  
Egham  
Surrey  
0178422300  
[www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk](http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk)

### **Bristol Dyslexia centre**

11 Upper Belgrave Road  
Clifton  
Bristol  
0117 9739405  
[www.dyslexiacentre.co.uk](http://www.dyslexiacentre.co.uk)

### **Dyspraxia Foundation**

8 West Ally  
Hitchin  
Herts  
01462454986  
[www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

### **Hypermobility foundation**

[www.hypermobility.org/](http://www.hypermobility.org/)

## Website

### **[www.dyspraxicteens.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxicteens.org.uk)**

Has advice and a forum for teens and older children to find out more.

NHS Constitution. Information on your rights and responsibilities.

Available at **[www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution](http://www.nhs.uk/aboutnhs/constitution)**

[Last Accessed March 2010]

**PATIENT  
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### **How to contact us:**



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**East and Central  
0117 340 8063**



**South Bristol  
0117 301 5491**



**[www.nbt.nhs.uk/cchp](http://www.nbt.nhs.uk/cchp)**

If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.