

Ready, Set... Kindergarten!

by Hilary Feldman

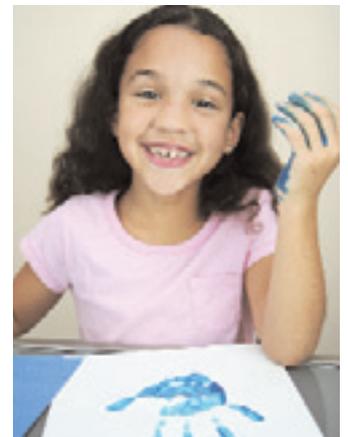
Tiny fingers pinch their first piece of o-shaped cereal; inwardly, you cheer budding independence. The world opens up, as babies start developing their motor skills – it is a rapid progression from this point – grasping toys, spooning food, holding drinks. Mere moments later, and they are preschoolers: drawing pictures, driving toy fire trucks, even trying to use the mouse to play computer games.

By kindergarten, children need to develop their fine motor abilities so they can hold a pencil and learn to print properly. If your kids are like mine, they may have started this process a lot earlier, but with mixed, often illegible, results. A simple box of inexpensive items can help the process along, as well as providing an assortment of fun activities for a rainy day.

Marina Knutson, a paediatric occupational therapist, has put together an extensive collection of items that she uses with children. She starts with

Letter formation requires a sense of direction: start with an upright chalkboard, or even a large piece of paper attached to the wall (or door or fridge). “One of the important things with a vertical surface - a paper or chalkboard - what’s up is up, what’s down is down, and the concept of top and bottom, side to side, make more sense,” explains Knutson. Break the chalk or crayon into an inch-long piece, which encourages small fingers to use the tripod grasp. Draw, copy shapes, create dot-to-dot games, but Knutson insists that learning letters is best left until kindergarten, “Letters have a whole different element to them; they’re letters but they’re language, and emotionally they’re very different than just copying shapes.”

Lesley Foran, an experienced kindergarten teacher, prefers not to focus on printing but on basic skills. Jennifer Lake, a Vancouver teacher, agrees about the motor skills needed, “The big ones for kindergarten [are] learn-



basic household items, supplemented by a trip to the dollar store and a kitchen store.

Include a wide variety of objects: a plant sprayer, jars and tubes with screw-top lids, a hole punch, tongs, clothespins, “rookie” chopsticks, a pickle picker, zip-lock bags, a small hourglass. Add some craft materials like play dough, clay, beads, stickers, origami paper, weaving kits, lacing cards, wikki sticks, and so on. Top it off with old-fashioned toys like dice, small tops, playing cards, pick-up sticks, Tinkertoys, Lite Brite, dominoes, even Etch-a-Sketch type toys. Board games with spinners or dice are also good, as are books with mazes and dot-to-dot puzzles. An empty shoebox or basket holds everything for quick storage.

The idea is to have lots of choice, with fun items that strengthen the hand muscles, develop wrist extension, and introduce the pincer grasp. In school, your child needs to hold a pencil correctly, form letters in a particular sequence, and develop writing endurance. So, for preschoolers, the goal is supporting these skills through play – using activities that require general visual perception and manual dexterity.

ing how to hold a pencil properly and learning how to cut [with scissors] properly.”

If you have a preschooler who insists on printing her name, Knutson advises that parents sit down and demonstrate correct letter formation. It is considered a “splinter skill” and won’t necessarily translate into knowing how to print in general (or even how to connect letters with sounds).

Instead, Knutson suggests focusing on activities that strengthen the hand long before a pencil is introduced. Think about your own hand as you write, and you can begin to appreciate the many muscles and movements that go into the whole process. So, there are a lot of different ways to prepare your child while you play. Try drawing a shape on your child’s back; have him name the shape, then repeat it on your back. Do obstacle courses, which help children understand all sorts of directions, such as on top of, under, beside, through, and around. Play with your box full of different activities. But most of all, make it fun!

Marina Knutson also runs workshops for parents and teachers. Contact her at 604-738-3839.