

Within grasp

Physical skills and fine motor control are declining among some school-starters, so what better time to stock up on products that aid the development of these abilities, says *Marianne Sargent*

Many children are now entering Reception without the fundamental physical skills and fine motor control that are needed to be able to write.

'Teachers can't assume any more that children arriving are going to have the underpinning skills that you can immediately work with to teach handwriting,' says Dr Lala Manners, physical development trainer and director of Active Matters.

'Gross motor skills, core stability, upper body strength and manipulative skills used to be a given because children would acquire them, rehearse them and refine them in play and general movement.

'Their fine motor skills are very specific to technology but don't link to the particular manipulative skills you need for holding a pen or a pencil, and the eye skills are not there either.

'They are very weak around the middle, they don't have the upper body strength, they certainly don't have the hand strength and they also don't have the eye skills. Now we can't guarantee all children would have had exposure to printed material before they arrive in the setting. We have a lot of children having two years of exposure to screens, which doesn't actually let them rehearse the skills needed to look down at a printed page.'

Dr Manners advises getting outside more often to build physical strength through climbing, rolling and playing. She also recommends looking for



resources that will encourage children to build the strength in their hands and fingers and increase their manipulative ability, as well as activities that help develop hand-eye co-ordination.

The following fine motor skills resources have been selected because of their cross-curricular appeal.

CONSTRUCTION

Construction kits are an appealing way to help children build the strength in their wrists, hands and fingers so that they are able to comfortably hold and control a pencil. Try:

- Small construction games that require children to arrange, match and balance pieces.
- Interlocking kits that require children to guide objects to fit and slot together; for example, Octoplay, Interstar and gears.
- Kits that encourage children to construct characters for role play and small-world play.
- Hammer and nail sets that encourage children to create their own designs, pictures and patterns.

At Thames Tiddlers Nursery in Woolwich, children explore objects at a light box

Below (l-r): Yellow Door's Handy Scoopers, an Eduzone Tracing Stencil, and Eduzone's Magnetic Maze

Suggested resources

- Eduzone's Hammer and Nail Play set for mosaic designs (£34.95) and Spring Butterflies and Vehicle Nailing Set (42.50). Its construction kits include Gears Gears Building Set (£42.95), Interstar Group Pack (£39.95), Nuts and Bolts (£18.95), Kit Knex Classroom set (£67.95) and Giant Polydron (40 pieces, £67.50; 80 pieces, £97.95).
- Three construction games from Yellow Door that require strategic thinking while practising fine motor control: Stacking Tree (£14), Balancing Cactus (£22) and Beehives (£18).
- Construction kits from TTS that encourage children to create characters: Popoids Economy Set (£29.95), Monster Maximix (£31.95) and Crazy Creatures Set (£52.95).

THREADING AND WEAVING

Threading and weaving not only helps children to develop their fine motor control, but requires hand-eye co-ordination and encourages creativity.

- Look out for lacing sequencing activities and themed blocks and letters that encourage children to create patterns, stories and words on laces.
- Think about how you can introduce the physical movements, directionality and shapes in writing, using resources such as ribbons and tracing activities.
- Incorporate weaving and threading into maths activities to teach about shape, space and measure.

Suggested resources

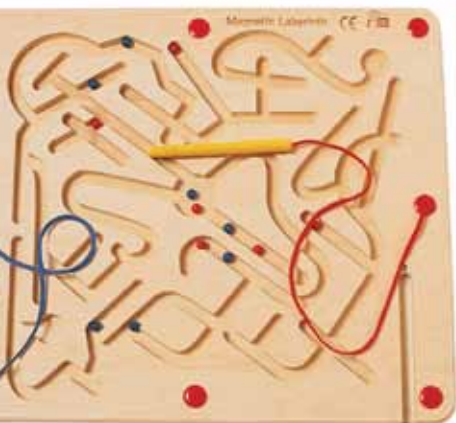
- Absorbent Minds' selection of early craft equipment includes a wooden Weaving Loom with shuttles and wool (£7.99), First Knitting Set





(£12.99), First Tapestry Set (£2.99) and Weaving Frame (£9.99).

- Yellow Door has resources that familiarise children with the directionality and patterns in handwriting. These include the Feels-Write range of Pre-Writing Stones (£35), Upper and Lowercase Letter Stones (from £50) and Number Stones (£28). Also available are a set of Alphabet Pathway Mats (£25).
- TTS's thematic weaving frames include Weaving Flowers (£28.95), Giant Weaving Numbers (£39.95), Weaving Letters (£39.95) and a set of large, colourful Wonderful Weaving Frames! that can be wall-mounted (£129.95). Find also Ribbon Tail Balls (£8.99), Holding Streamers (£14.50) and a Weaving Ribbon Pack (£19.99).
- Early Years Direct supplies safari, transport, farm and pirate-themed Lacing Blocks (£48 for 4 sets of 12 pieces) and Lacing Butterflies (£45 for a set of 4).
- Eduzone's Wood Farm Sequencing lacing game (£24.95), wooden Tracing Stencils that practise handwriting directionality (£11.95), a Magnetic Maze that involves holding magnetic pencils (£32.95) and Design and Drill (£28.50).



- Also check out the Caterpillar Weaving Frames (£16.45) from Early Years Resources.

PUZZLES AND GAMES

Provide children with interesting and challenging manipulation games that require concentration and perseverance, while improving hand-eye co-ordination and fine motor control.

- Source puzzles that ask children to problem-solve.
- Encourage children to learn essential practical skills such as buttoning clothing, tying laces and using zips by providing purpose-made equipment to practise on.

Suggested resources

- EYP Direct supplies a set of Shape Links (£11.95) and a Giant Pegs & Pegboard Set (£9.95).
- SenseToys' resources include a Pick and Peg Platter (£22.49), Super Sorting Pie (£19.99), Sweet Jars Magnetic Sorting Game (£24.99) and Owls Colour Magnetic Sorting Maze (£17.91). The company also supplies The Early Handwriting Toolkit (£24.99) and Combi-Pack Pencil Grips containing a chart of correct hand positions (£11.65).
- Early Years Direct supplies a wooden Tree Layer Puzzle (£30), themed wooden puzzle sets (£65), animal alphabet and number jigsaws (from £25) and a wonderfully tactile set of animal wall panels featuring cogs, mazes and threading activities (from £60).
- Absorbent Minds provides a set of six Wooden Thread and Peg Boards (£19.99), a Wooden Pin Board (£12.99), Plaiting Board (£8.99), Threading Bugs (£2.99 each), Set of 12 Beechwood Puzzles (£249.99), Buttoning, Bow Tying, Lacing, Hook and Eye, Safety Pin and Zipping Frames (£21.90 each) and a Buckling Frame (£25.10).

SAND AND WATER

As well as the usual scoops, spades, rakes, jugs and bottles that all help children to develop co-ordination and strength in their hands, think of other things to fill the sand and water trays with that will encourage children to grab, grasp and grapple with.

- Replace the sand with flax seed, lentils, beans or rice and provide scoops and paper bags.
- Put sponges and squirters in the water tray to strengthen children's hand and finger muscles.
- Fill the water tray with jelly, slime or

INFORMATION

- www.absorbentminds.co.uk
- www.active-matters.co.uk
- www.cosydirect.com
- www.earlyyears-direct.com
- www.earlyyears-resouces.co.uk
- www.eduzone.co.uk
- www.eypdirect.co.uk
- www.finger-gym.com
- www.sensetoys.com
- www.tts-group.co.uk
- www.yellow-door.net

BOOKS

- *The Little Book of Fine Motor Skills* by Sally Featherstone. Featherstone Education (£8.99)
- *Finger Gym: Developmental games to improve language, fine motor skills and handwriting* by Galina Dolya and Judy Holder. GDH Publishing (£29.95)
- *Foundations of Literacy* by Sue Palmer and Ros Bayley. Featherstone Education (£24.99)
- *Developing Early Literacy Skills Outdoors* by Marianne Sargent. Practical Pre-School Books (£21)
- *On Your Marks!* by Michael Jones. Lawrence Educational (£15)
- *50 Fantastic Ideas for Mark Making* by Alistair Bryce-Clegg. Featherstone Education (£9.99)



Left: Eduzone's Wood Farm Sequencing. Above: Early Years Direct's Lacing Butterflies. Below: Yellow Door's Twisty Droppers

goo for children to run their fingers through, squeeze and pour.

- Mix cornflour and water and spread it thinly on a tuff spot, and provide mark-making tools for the children to create disappearing patterns.
- Fill the tray with rice and drop in small coloured objects. Provide tweezers and challenge children to pick out as many items as they can.
- Bury a dinosaur skeleton in dry sand and provide small brushes and tools for children to excavate it.
- Set up a laundrette with washboards, soap bars and dolls' clothing and a line for children to peg everything out to dry.

Suggested resources

- Yellow Door provides sets of Twisty Droppers (£11), Squeezy Tweezers (£10) and Handy Scoopers (£10).
- Early Years Direct has some fun squeezing and squashing objects such as the Rain Ball and Cloud set for water play (£20), and Gelli Baff for messy gooey play (£22).
- Absorbent Minds offers a selection of Natural Sponges; Mini (£3.99 for 10), Small (£1.49) and Soft (£4.99), as well as a Jumbo Pipette (£2.49), Wooden Washboard (£19.99), Mini Clothes Pegs (£3.49 for 40) and Clothes Horse (£19.99). ■

