

# Developing Scissor Skills

## Why are scissor skills important?

Scissor skills play a large role in fine motor development. While being able to cut is an important skill in itself, scissor skills can also:

- help build hand muscle strength and dexterity - for example, the grasp-release cutting motion develops the muscles of the tripod fingers for pencil grasp and pencil control, while developing stability of the 4th and 5th fingers, which support finger movements for writing
- support bi-lateral coordination (using both sides of the body together) which is important for things like reading a book, dressing, tying shoes, and opening and closing containers
- improve hand-eye coordination, which is important for things like using a knife and fork, or throwing and catching a ball
- improve visual motor and visual perception skills, necessary for riding a bike, getting dressed, and playing sports.



## How can I tell if my child is having difficulty using scissors?

Children who struggle with scissor skills may:

- slump in their chair or frequently reposition themselves
- frequently swap hand and complain of hand or arm pain
- frequently move away from the line, go beyond a line, miss corners/curves, or remove important parts of the picture
- experience confusion on where to begin cutting
- have difficulty keeping their eyes on the worksheet while cutting
- have challenges re-adjusting the paper and holding it securely, resulting in awkward twisting of the body
- struggle to recognise and correct errors
- have an inconsistent rhythm when opening and closing the scissors
- have an excessively tight grip on the scissors.



## Start with pre-cutting activities

Scissor skills require a child to use muscles that are still developing or not previously used, therefore it may take some time and practice for a child to develop their scissor skills. Pre-scissor skill development can promote foundational scissor skills, like hand and muscle strength and coordination. Some ideas include:

- Tearing or ripping paper - this requires both hands working together and encourages the child's hands to move in opposite directions. Once they are comfortable, develop their skills by encouraging them to tear the paper along lines.



- Puppet play - opening and closing the mouth of puppets mimics the same motion needed for cutting paper but in a more creative and playful way. Have some fun with your child creating your own sock puppets - here's a video for a simple DIY sock puppet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Nh0n2LcU7I>

- Picking up items with tongs, tweezers, or clothes pegs - the grasp on tongs or pegs helps to isolate the thumb, index and middle finger, the same fingers used for cutting and writing. Start off with easier items like cotton balls or pom poms and progress to harder items like beads. You can make a game using pegs to squeeze onto the side of a box or peg out clothes.



- Play Doh for hand strengthening - rolling or kneading Play Doh on the table or between both hands, squishing, pinching, and pulling Play Doh apart are all excellent and fun ways to develop hand strength and coordination. Hiding little treasures inside Play Doh to search for can be a fun way to get children engaged.

- Other activities, such as painting using small items such as cotton buds, eye droppers, etc., hole punching paper, using trigger spray bottles or squeeze bottles, drawing with chalk on concrete, using wind-up toys, placing coins in a piggy bank, building with Duplo or blocks, and threading beads all promote fine motor control, hand strength, coordination and hand-eye coordination.



These pre-scissor hand skills are the stepping stones to mastering scissors. Giving children a chance to build their hand strength and coordination before introducing scissors can make the process so much easier and less frustrating later on.

## Choosing the right scissors

It is important to choose the correct scissors. There are right and left-handed scissors and these do make a big difference as the blades are differently aligned. For righties, the right-hand blade is uppermost, while for lefties, the left blade is. If children use the wrong scissors for their hand dominance, the positioning of the blades will obstruct the cutting line, making cutting much more difficult.

If your child does not have enough hand strength or control to open and close scissors, but is showing an interest in cutting, spring loaded loop scissors can be a helpful starting point. These allow them to start practising their scissor skills.



## Ensuring correct positioning

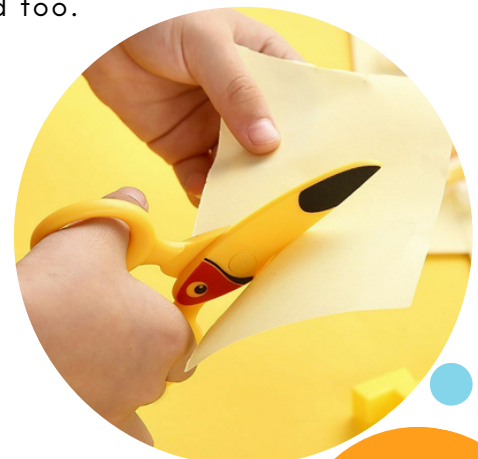
Developing an appropriate scissor grip is crucial for efficient cutting. Children need to learn how to hold the scissors correctly, with their thumb in one hole and fingers in the other, allowing for controlled and precise movements. Scissor use is much easier and less frustrating with a correct grip.

When teaching children to hold the scissors correctly, there are a few things to remember:

- The thumb is always in the top hole, which is usually a smaller, rounder hole. Use the phrase “thumbs up” to help kids remember.
- The index finger can either wrap around the bottom hole, or sit inside it. Place as many other fingers as will fit in the bottom hole.
- Hold the scissors upright so the blades are going up and down, rather than side to side.
- Always have the blades pointing away from the body. We want to turn the paper, not the scissors.
- Use the “thumbs up” position on the paper with the helping hand too.



**Remember: Two thumbs up for cutting**



## Starting with simple snipping

Begin developing scissor skills by introducing simple snipping activities. Using scissors with paper might initially be challenging for some children. Snipping activities help them gain control over the scissors and understand the basic concept of cutting. Here is a list of materials that can be used to practice cutting before paper to increase independence and confidence with scissors:

- Play Doh
- tissue paper
- cardboard or thicker paper
- cooked noodles
- fabric scraps
- foam sheets
- drinking straws
- sponges
- old magazines or junk mail
- yarn or wool
- grass
- flowers and stems



When your child is ready to practice with paper, start with snipping thin strips of paper. Move onto cutting a fringe around paper, before attempting cutting longer lines and more complex shapes.



### More tips:

- If your child is “winging” out their elbow and turning the scissors sideways or back towards their body, get them to hold a piece of paper to their side with their elbow to encourage always cutting forwards.
- It is much easier to cut from a smaller piece of paper than a large one. If there are multiple shapes to cut from a page, encourage your child to cut them roughly into separate pieces first, before focusing on each smaller shape one at a time.
- Place a smiley face or sticker on the top hole to remind your child where their thumb belongs.



## Developing directional control

Once the grasp-release motion has been mastered, the next step is to start to develop directional control - the ability to coordinate the movement of both the scissors and the paper. There is a typical developmental sequence in which this happens, which starts with cutting on a line and directing scissors to follow it.

It is important when choosing cutting activities, that we consider where the child is developmentally and to meet them there. If your child has yet to master cutting lines, don't rush to the circle, instead spend time mastering line cutting. Follow this directional sequence with cutting:

1. **straight lines** - when starting out, thick cutting lines can help children master a continuous cutting motion, helping to facilitate mastery and the muscle development needed for progression. The thickness of the lines can decrease as skills develop. To be successful with lines, children must be able to make continuous snips and move the scissors forward.
2. **curves and circles** - cutting curves and circles follows on naturally from straight lines because there are no corners to navigate. Circles bring in a directional component requiring children to be able to cut and use their helping hand to turn the paper to follow the curve. When cutting shapes, right-handed children should start cutting on the right side of the shape moving counter-clockwise. Left-handed children should start on the left side of the shape moving clockwise to avoid the paper bending and tearing.
3. **external corners** - mastering the cutting of triangles and squares is about manipulating the scissors around the external corners. This develops subtle graded wrist movements, which are used in handwriting as your child progresses across the page while writing and is an important stage in the development of scissor skills.
4. **internal cutouts** - the final scissor skill children learn is to cut on the inside of the paper, for example, cutting the eyes out on a mask. Internal cutouts use the same skills as external corners, however, they require more precision and a lot of practice.

### A note on zig zags

Whilst zig zags might initially appear to be an 'easy shape' because the lines are straight, they are in fact quite difficult. This is because each time the child 'zigs' and 'zags' they have to make a 90 degree direction change with the paper. Before they do this, they need to cut slowly so they don't cut too far. Coordinating both of these movements is difficult and requires good precision and control.

This video on the Learning Links website provides a good visual overview of how to build scissor skills, including grasp, hand placement and cutting movements -

<https://www.learninglinks.org.au/resources/developing-scissor-skills/>

