



## How to help your child develop a correct pencil grip

It is vital for children to move through different stages of pencil grip development in order to develop good fine motor skills. Please, do NOT force your under 5 year old to hold the pencil the way an older child does, with 3 fingers on the pencil – you will do more harm than good. It is very hard to “unlearn” a poor pencil grip later in life!

On this page, you can see the various stages of pencil grip development that your child should move through. Each stage is dependent on how “steady” the shoulder and arm muscles are. As your child develops physically, and takes part in lots of fun gross motor activities such as crawling, climbing and pushing, the shoulder and arm muscles will get stronger and steadier, and you will notice your child's grip on the pencil change and mature as well.

There are principles of development called “big to small” and “proximal to distal” – basically this means that children develop the larger muscles of the trunk and arms before the smaller muscles of the hands, and that the proximal muscles closer to the body centre (eg shoulder muscles, upper arm muscles) develop before the distal muscles which are further away (eg hand muscles).

When a child is encouraged to use a “proper” pencil grasp before the shoulder and arm muscles are ready to support it, you will often find fine motor problems emerging, such as holding the pencil in “weird” ways, messy work and even avoidance of drawing and colouring tasks.

So, don't be in a hurry to make your child draw or colour “properly” – let them develop in the stages outlined below, and by Reception they should be ready to hold and control a pencil correctly.

### Correct Pencil Grip Development



When your toddler first grabs a thick crayon and puts it to paper (hopefully not to your walls!), this is the grasp you should be seeing. It is a **fisted grip**, and your toddler will be using **movement from the shoulder** to get the crayon to move across the paper.



As your toddler gains more control over arm and hand muscles, you will see this **palmar grip** being used. Here, the pencil lies across the palm of the hand and your child's elbow is held out to the side a bit.



The next stage is what is misleadingly called the **immature 5-finger pencil grip** – it is immature because it is not the 3-finger grasp that is used in school, but it is a **perfectly mature grasp for a 4-year old!** As you can see, there are 5 fingers holding the pencil.



With this 5-finger pencil grasp, the wrist is usually held off the table and wrist movements are used for colouring. The crayon is often held very tightly initially, but as the hand muscles develop, you should see a few finger movements emerging.



By age 5-6, or even a bit later with some children, they should be comfortable using a **mature 3-finger pencil grip**. At first, the fingers will be held stiffly and your child may still use **wrist movements** to draw and colour, but as the finger muscles become more skilled, your child will be able to use **finger movements** to draw and to form letters.

## Correct Pencil Grips for Handwriting

The correct pencil grip is essential for good **handwriting**. Although most experts agree that a tripod pencil grasp is best (with 3 fingers on the pencil), there are subtle variations that may work just as well. The key to deciding whether a pencil grip is the correct one, is to ask whether it is **efficient**.

An **efficient pencil grip** is one that allows the child to write neatly at a reasonable speed without tiring easily. Poor pencil grasps look awkward and do not use the hand muscles efficiently.

The photo gallery below shows correct pencil grips that are mature and efficient. An adult hand is used for illustrative purposes.



This is the ideal pencil grip with the thumb, index and middle fingers holding the pencil. Those three fingers can move freely because the ring and little finger are curled gently into the palm, giving the hand stability.



When writing, the last joint of the index finger should be slightly extended.



As you can see, from this photo and the next: when the last joint is slightly extended, it can stretch back and forth more easily.



Try it yourself to see the range of motion that you achieve. These finger movements are necessary for good handwriting skills.

An alternative...



This is an example of a D'Nealian pencil grip which is useful for children with low muscle tone or hypermobility of the fingers as it gives more stability.