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Losing our grip: More students entering school without fine motor skills

KIMBERLY MARSELAS | LNP CORRESPONDENT Oct 26, 2015



Denver Elementary School art teacher Alisa Leidish reminds kindergartner Laiklyn Lloyd to "pinch and flip" her crayon so that her pointed fingers—not a closed fist—shape her writing.

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** Editor's note: If you're finding this story on social media, it was originally published in October 2015.*

As art teacher Alisa Leidich sends four vertical lines marching across an oversize drawing pad in paradelike formation, 20 kindergartners put their hands to paper and try their best to mimic her.

It's not as easy as it might seem.

Local teachers and occupational therapists say an increasing number of children are showing up for kindergarten without the fine motor skills needed to grip a marker, hold their paper still while coloring or cut and glue shapes.

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"We're basically reteaching a lot of things," says Denver Elementary School's Denise Young, a teacher for 23 years. "It's hard to get a lesson accomplished."

In a typical year, Young and colleague Trisha Pohronezny estimate just two of 20 students arrive with enough hand strength and coordination to use scissors. Only about half can hold a pencil correctly, versus the fist approach they should have grown out of by age 3.

Near-constant corrections take valuable time from quick-paced academic programs, while individual sessions to build or strengthen skills require students to miss class and cost districts big money.

Denver Elementary Principal Angela Marley says occupational referrals to address such deficits doubled over a three- to four-year period. Districtwide, Cocalico saw its elementary school therapy spending jump from \$85,440 in 2011-12 to \$208,104 last school year.

"We've been questioning, 'Why is this happening more and more?'" says Linda Cunningham, an occupational therapist with Lancaster-Lebanon IU13 who spends four days a week at Denver Elementary.

"It's just our busy world. There's real pressure to get your kid involved (in organized activities) earlier and earlier, so there's less time to play in the backyard. ... Kids need to manipulate their environments to understand spatial concepts. They usually learn not by being told, but by doing."

Cocalico officials this year instituted an art program that aims to improve coordination and concentration. In years past, kindergartners had only sporadic exposure to art. Now they get one 25-minute session each week, working on pre-writing concepts and skills like cutting, coloring and spatial orientation.

Surrounded by Monet prints, the Mona Lisa and bottles of bold tempera paint, Pohronezny's students meet Mr. Line in mid-October.

Leidich has students hop out of their chairs and imitate the line: They stand tall for vertical, pretend to sleep on the floor for horizontal, and skip for a broken line. The idea is to connect the writing skills to physical activity.

Getting students in the earliest grades to move while focusing on a task helps with sensory integration. It can also help build muscle. In some cases, Cunningham says, young students are unable to stay seated for sustained periods because they don't have adequate trunk strength.

During the animated lesson, Leidich, Pohronezny and an aide work the room, looking for errors in posture, grip and arm support.

Once they've made shapes with Mr. Line, they're invited to do "World's Best Coloring," a verbal cue to focus on the image and use slow, controlled movements to stay within the lines.

Students get gentle reminders to keep their "helper hands" on the paper, and when Leidich spots Laiklyn Lloyd closing her fingers around her marker, she takes her hand and shows her how to "pinch the tip and flip it."

Concerns about physical readiness for school are growing locally and nationally.

Warwick School District has also seen an increase in occupational therapy needs, according to Melanie Calender, director of elementary education and student services.

Calender says the years between birth and 3 are "instrumental in core muscle development" and recommends parents incorporate a mix of gross and fine motor skills into at-home play.

While Warwick kindergarten teachers continue to focus on fine and gross motor skills through center-based and instructional activities, parents shouldn't stop providing hands-on opportunities once their kids are school-age.

“They can continue to use the activities they’ve worked on in the preschool years, mindful to keep a balance with screen time,” says Calender.

In Ephrata Area School District, all early childhood programs include fine motor skill development, according to spokeswoman Sarah McBee. That includes Plant the Seed of Learning, a program that started in partnership with Ephrata Community Hospital in 2002 and now serves eight districts. During sessions, children and their parents work on early literacy and science skills while manipulating play dough or catching bubbles.

The New York Times reported in February that public schools in New York City saw a 30 percent increase in the number of students referred to occupational therapy, with the number jumping 20 percent in three years in Chicago and 30 percent over five years in Los Angeles.

While some of those increases are due in part to an increased diagnoses of sensory or autism spectrum disorders, Marley says the additional need at her school is related to children without cognitive impairment.

What’s changed?

Cunningham says many therapists believe the Back to Sleep campaign, which promotes placing infants on their backs to sleep, has delayed muscle development. The problem becomes more pronounced when parents skip wakeful tummy time because their kids don’t like it: toddlers might not be able to hold their bodies upright as well as their peers did years ago.

They might not be as adept at spreading their hands and using their arms to push themselves up, a fundamental base for good seated posture and proper shoulder support when writing. Their eyes also may wander, making focusing on detailed tasks difficult.

Today’s children also spend less time outside, where they might have more opportunities to explore how their bodies move through space, learn to balance and figure how to handle toys and tools in relation to one another.

Some parents, says Cunningham, are afraid to let their children engage in physical play or cut with scissors. Others have traded in the messiness of hands-on play dough for a sterile “educational” tablet.

“Rather than sit and color the way they used to do, our kids are part of the burst of technology,” says Cunningham. “It’s amazing to see a kid who can swipe an iPad, but you put a pair of scissors in their hand and they don’t know what to do.”

AT-HOME SKILLS BUILDING

Some skills critical for kindergarten readiness are simple to build at home. Try incorporating these activities into the daily routine:

- **Work on tummy time.** This should start in infancy, but older kids can be encouraged to read or work on puzzles while lying on the floor, says occupational therapist Linda Cunningham. Many children like the novelty of it.
- **Raid the pantry.** Kitchen experiments like flour-based dough or homemade putty strengthen muscles in the hands and fingers, says Cunningham. Make a batch, then let your child work with it at the counter while you make dinner.
- **String it together.** Kindergarten teacher Denise Young suggests making bracelets by threading open-ended pasta, cereal loops or beads onto pipe cleaners.
- **Play dress up.** Kindergarten teacher Trisha Pohronezny recommends practicing putting on coats and gloves, zipping up, snapping, buttoning and tying shoes. All can help with dexterity.
- **Play with scissors (with supervision).** An array of safety scissors are available for preschoolers, including some designed without metal edges that can cut only paper. Others offer an extra piece that makes squeezing the handles together a cinch, Cunningham says.
- **Color in the lines.** Encourage creativity, but throw in projects that require slow, controlled movements. Squeeze glitter glue over a line, fill in shapes with paint or use small, circular strokes to color an image.

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