

How Monkey Bars Help Your Child's Brain

Kerry Pratchett



Monkey bars are a great way for children to develop their motor skills and visual hand eye-co-ordination.

Preschool teacher Kerry Pratchett shares her views on the importance of active children.

I have recently read three media articles discussing how children are losing the skill to hold a pencil correctly.

It is great this is finally being discussed outside the staffroom and that parents are being made aware of this. The articles all discuss the importance of fine motor skills and how too much touch screen technology is probably to blame.

As Montessori preschool teachers, we are seeing more and more children come to us with poor strength throughout their whole body.



Monkey bars help children develop their core strength, which is crucial for their later development.

This led me to do some research on how we can help improve handwriting. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that we need to increase the child's fine motor ability. However, before this can happen children need to have a strong core and upper body strength. Simply showing children how to hold a pencil and having them practice is not enough. Building the strength to hold a pencil needs to start at birth.

Myelination

Babies, when born, can only lift their heads because their muscles are not yet developed. After a short while they are able to sit, crawl, and eventually walk, leaving their hands free for exploration. When a child is born, the hands are closed and grasping is a reflex. Over time, grasping becomes intentional as they realize that if they reach out, they can grab things. We see young children reaching for the tiniest speck on the floor and unsteadily bringing this to their mouths to explore further.

We hear that children need to move, and we know that movement has its benefits in physical fitness, but there is more to gross movement, as it links to fine motor skills and the pencil grip. Purposeful activity supports the creation and development of the neural connections - myelination.

Myelination is described as being like a plastic coating that protects an electrical cord. This coating helps the nervous system to function properly. Children will only gain full control of their bodies through effort. Through repetition and practice, children's movement becomes refined.

The process begins at the head and works its way gradually down the body centered around the spinal column; first the mouth (first month), then the head (second months), rolling over (between four and five months) to sitting and eventually walking, children put in a tremendous amount of practice. This movement eventually becomes unconscious and so frees not only the child's hands, but also allows the brain to process other things.

The myelination process begins before birth, and takes approximately 15 years. Once the myelin process has reached the spinal cord, it then moves out to the arms, the hands, eventually reaching the fingers. This order ensures that the large muscles necessary for coordination and getting from here to there are well organized and in control, before taking on the complex muscles in the hands.

Movement

The book *A Moving Child is a Learning Child* states "Climbing, hanging, swinging, and any other high-energy activities that build strength in his upper body and core muscles are vital precursors to fine motor skills". (McCarthy, C. Connell, G. p.236).

Before we worry too much about preparing the fingers for holding a pencil, we must start young and begin with the larger muscles. Firstly, let them do for themselves. As I say often, "They need the practice – you don't". Give children the time to walk themselves, let them help you to carry the groceries, slow down and let them do.

Children need to be away from screens, and must move. They need to be engaged in active movement. The mind, body and hands should always be thought of together, meaning that they should work together.

Something that we discovered to be a great benefit to hand strength are the monkey bars. They are a great way for children to develop their gross motor skills and visual hand eye co-ordination as they learn to swing from one bar to the next. Children set challenges for themselves: swinging from one end to the other, skipping a bar, and turning upside down. They are developing their core strength and these are the muscles that must develop before the finer muscles.

The monkey bars also have an enormous effect on the child's confidence and emotional development. They begin as the child watches and absorbs other children swinging. Through hard work and perseverance, they become the child that can.

Next time you think of entertaining your children with a screen, please have a thought for all of the great things that they could be doing instead.

Their little bodies really need movement; all movement is good movement, not only for their bodies, but also for their brains.