

Handedness and Children with Developmental Delay

Babies and young children are typically ambidextrous in their first year. They practise picking objects up banging them, dropping them and moving them around on the floor or available surface with increasing organization using one or the other hand. They are particularly good at putting their fingers or hands, and other objects, into their mouths. As their grasp becomes established in the middle of their first year, children may begin to show a preference for one hand to move first towards an object. But, generally, both hands are used to explore convenient objects in their near body space. By the end of the first year, the child usually shows a distinct preference for one side, ‘which tends to obviate indecision and lateral confusion’ (Waldon, 1976).

Children who have learning delay usually have problems in their movement development and, in particular, are slow to use their hands to explore the space around them. They are often reluctant to bang or move objects around which in turn inhibits further exploration and practice necessary for the firm handling of objects using a variety of grasps. Very often the children prefer to use one hand only. This may be due to a primary movement impediment or a learned response. The inability to use both hands when exploring the environment results in limiting the capacity to switch attention from one side of the body to another, which in turn compromises bodily integration and the structuring of near body space.

To help bring about better coordination, children need prolonged practice of simple energetic movements using both hands. Picking Up and Putting In, Banging and Scraping activities in the Functional Learning Lessons help to facilitate an awareness of both sides of their body and also support bodily integration. Vigorously ‘alternating hands’ – that is, picking up bricks with one hand and then the other,

continuously and in quick succession – is introduced gradually into all the early learning activities. When helping children to use both hands, we use transitional steps. We start by working with the hand that the child uses more willingly, then gradually introduce the other hand to more and more activity before working with alternating hands.

Very often children object to these bilateral, effortful and unfamiliar movements, since their very unfamiliarity makes them a source of emotional discomfort to the child. In Banging, the noise may be a secondary cause of anxiety to a child who is hearing-sensitive. The noises can be dampened by using a pillow or having a rubber tip at the end of the stick or hammer, but it is still important for the child to gradually come to be able to tolerate, then actively adopt for themselves, the large strong upward and downward movements which have been missed for so long in their development.

Once the child begins to use both hands in their Lessons, whether together, separately or alternately, they will have more confidence in using both their hands in their daily life. Their preferred hand will still be their preferred hand, but now the child will be better able to carry a tray full of plates and mugs to the kitchen table, stuff laundry into the washing machine or wash their hands in the basin using both hands together.

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