

Developing Coordination for Scissor Skills

By Tara Calder, OTR/L

Cutting accurately with scissors is a skill we sometimes take for granted. When we watch a child having great difficulty using scissors, we may scold them or insist that we “show” them how. Cutting, however, requires the coordination of many skills including fine motor coordination, bilateral coordination, and eye-hand coordination. Like many other skills, scissor skills develop sequentially and require appropriate instruction and practice to develop fully.

Prerequisite Skills

Before a child learns to use scissors, he/she should be proficient with the following five skills.

- Use a fork or spoon.
- Open and close his/her hand.
- Use his/her hands together in a leader/assist fashion (e.g., one hand holding a jar while the other takes off the lid).
- Isolate the thumb, index, and middle fingers.
- Stabilize his/her shoulder, forearm, and wrist.

Development of Scissor Skills

Once the child masters the above skills, he/she is ready to learn how to use scissors. Scissor skills develop in eight stages.

Stage One: The child learns how to hold the scissors (18-19 months). Initially, many children try to manipulate scissors using both hands to open and close the blades (see Figure A).

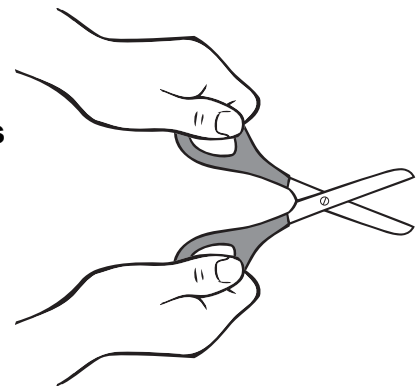


Figure A

Children will then attempt to place their fingers in the loops. Often children will place the index and middle fingers in the loops, but not the thumb (see Figure B).



Figure B

The most efficient grasp is the thumb in the top loop and middle finger in the bottom loop (or middle and ring fingers, depending on the size of the hole). Placing the index finger below the bottom loop provides stabilization and directional guidance (see Figure C).

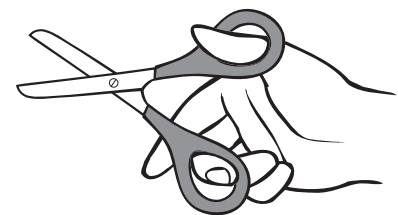


Figure C

If children do not have the necessary shoulder, forearm, and wrist stabilization, or if the scissors are too big for their hands, they will hold the scissors close to the knuckles of the hand rather than near the middle joints of the fingers (see Figure D).

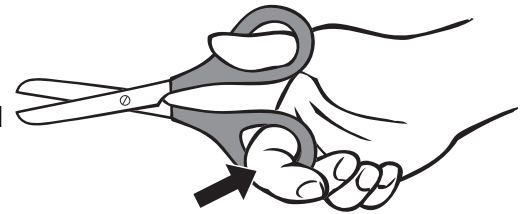


Figure D

Holding the scissors near the middle joint of the fingers provides better scissor control (see Figure E).

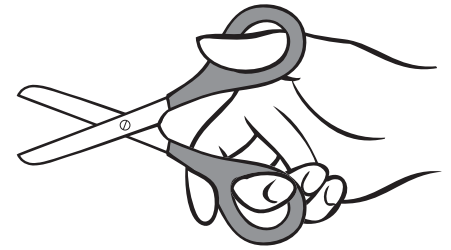


Figure E

Stage Two: The child learns how to open and shut the scissors (20-23 months). Once children can hold the scissors correctly, they are ready to practice opening and shutting the scissors. At this point, children are not ready to use paper. Additional tools to practice opening and shutting include picking up items with tongs, using a small squirt gun or spray bottle, and using a small, hand-held hole punch.

Stage Three: The child learns how to snip paper (23-29 months). In this stage, children make random snips on paper. Cutting is not directional and there is no forward movement of the scissors. During this stage, children often open and shut the entire hand, which causes an exaggerated opening and closing of the scissors (see Figure F).

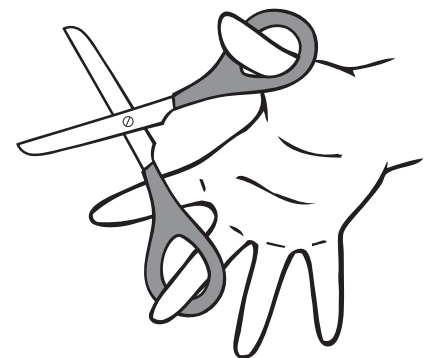


Figure F

Stage Four: The child learns how to snip paper (30-35 months). During this stage, children begin to push the scissors forward to cut across a piece of paper. To start, children often do well cutting a one inch strip of heavyweight paper (such as an index card). This allows the child to cut across the paper with one snip. Heavyweight paper provides additional stability, allowing the student to concentrate on manipulating the scissors rather than stabilizing the paper. As the child's ability progresses, increase the width of the paper.

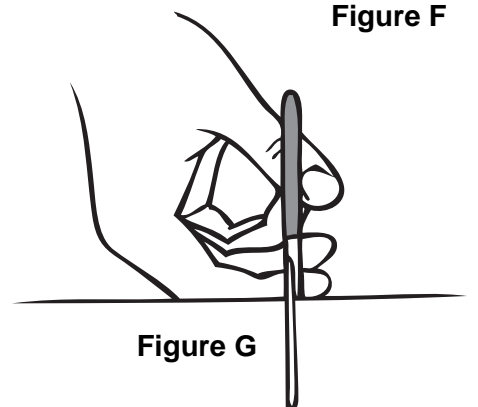


Figure G

Stage Five: The child cuts on a straight line (36-41 months). In this stage, children begin to manipulate the direction of the scissors to stay on a line. Manipulation of the paper is still limited mainly to stabilization. Scissors cut most efficiently when held at 90 degrees to the paper (see figure G). This requires forearm stability, as children must hold their hand with the thumb up and their arm in mid-position between pronation (palms down) and supination (palms up) (see Figure H).



Figure H

Children with decreased forearm stability often have a hard time keeping the scissors at 90 degrees to the paper which leads to the bending and tearing of the paper (see Figure I).

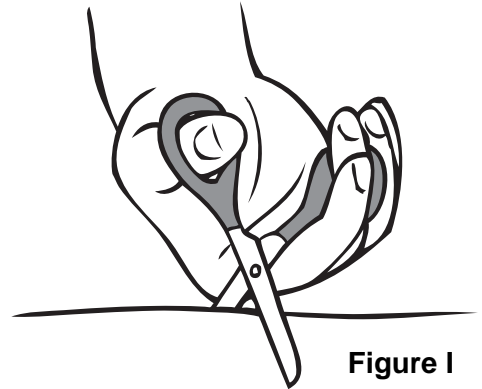


Figure I

Stage Six: The child cuts on a curved line (42-47 months).

Children are now learning to turn and manipulate the paper as well as the scissors to stay on lines. During this stage, children often have better control opening and shutting the scissors, generally only opening the scissors half way which provides a smoother, less jagged and more controlled cut (See Figure J).

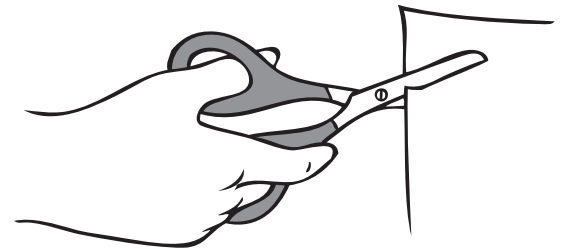


Figure J

Stage Seven: The child cuts out simple shapes like circles and squares(42-47 months). Once children have mastered this stage, they are ready to cut various weights of paper and non-paper materials. Easiest to cut is heavy paper like index cards, then thinner paper such as copy paper, and lastly, non-paper materials.

Stage Eight: The child cuts complex shapes and figures (48-57 months).

Help With Scissor Skills Mastery

If your child is having difficulty mastering scissor skills and/or the prerequisite scissor skills, please contact an occupational therapist for a screening or evaluation. An occupational therapist can assist your child in developing these skills. Additionally, many different types of adapted scissors exist — loop scissors to electric scissors. An occupational therapist can help you select the appropriate adaptations, if necessary, for your child.



Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. <http://www.aota.org>

Folio, M. Rhonda and Rebecca R. Fewell. Peabody Developmental Motor Scales, 2nd Edition. Austin: Pro-Ed, 2000.