

# Teaching Scissor Skills

(Adapted from articles by Anne Zachry and *Meredith Corporation*)

Cutting with scissors requires the skill of hand separation, which is the ability to use the thumb, index, and middle fingers separately from the pinkie and ring fingers. This can be challenging for a youngster with small hands. Although many 3- or 4-year-olds have the skills needed to snip and cut, scissor skills are not fully developed until around age 6.

**Select Good Scissors.** Scissors come in a variety of sizes, so search for a pair that fits your child's hand. For an inexperienced cutter, select scissors with a blunt point, and give them a trial run to make sure the blades are sharp enough for cutting. Dull scissors can fold the paper instead of cutting it.

Left-handed children should always use left-handed scissors. The upper blades on true left-handed scissors are on the left side so that children can see the cutting line. Beware of scissors that are supposedly ambidextrous; although these can easily be held with the left or right hand, the upper blade is still on the right side, which makes it difficult for lefties to see the cutting line.

Children with special needs, hand weakness, or coordination problems may need special or adaptive scissors to start, though many are able to progress to regular scissors over time. There are various types of adaptive scissors that work well for children with physical limitations. One is spring scissors, which automatically spring open after being squeezed closed. These are useful for a child with limited strength or coordination. Mounted tabletop scissors are suitable for children with one functional hand. "A pair of very small Benbow Learning Scissors, designed by an occupational therapist, can also make correct positioning easier," says Barbara A. Smith, M.S., an occupational therapist and author of *From Rattles to Writing: A Parent's Guide to Hand Skills*.

Blunt-tipped Fiskar scissors are preferred by schoolteachers. "The reason I have come to love the Fiskar brand is that it works," says Carol Welch, a [kindergarten](#) teacher with 23 years experience. "As parents we often think 'safety scissors' are the best option for beginners, but all too often these scissors have dull blades, which makes it harder to cut. Children who try are often unsuccessful and they become discouraged or give up. Fiskar scissors actually cut the paper successfully in a short amount of time," she says.

**Stress Scissor Safety.** Scissor safety is critical and should always be emphasized at the beginning of each cutting activity. Welch reveals her two "golden scissors safety rules" for her kindergarten class.

1. **Scissors are only for cutting paper. Nothing else!** (This includes shirts, crayons, fingers, hair, and lips.) If a child feels the need to cut something other than paper, he loses the privilege of having scissors until he is ready for another chance. If the problem happens again, the scissors are taken away.

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2. **Avoid walking with scissors.** Discourage children from walking around the classroom while holding scissors. On the rare occasion that they must do so, the students know the proper way to hold them is with the blades closed, gripping the blade end in the hand, forming a fist around the blades, and leaving the handles exposed. The scissors should be held close to one's side when walking. By following this rule, there is no risk of children walking around while opening and closing the blades.

**Work on Fine Motor Skills First.** Before teaching your child to use scissors, have him participate in some fun activities that will strengthen his hand and finger muscles and improve bilateral coordination. Tong activities are an entertaining option. Have your child use kitchen tongs to stack small blocks or to move cotton balls from one container to another. Or jump-start his fine motor skills with these activities:

- Tear paper into small pieces to improve the ability to use both hands in a coordinated manner.
- Spin a top to exercise the muscles in the thumb, index, and middle finger.
- Punch holes on index cards with a handheld puncher to strengthen the hand muscles and improve bilateral skills.
- Squeeze water out of squirt-toys in the bathtub so hand muscles get a workout.
- Use an eye dropper filled with watercolor paints to challenge fine motor skill.
- Finger puppet play is entertaining and addresses finger isolation and dexterity.
- Place clothespins or kitchen clips on the edge of a paper plate to strengthen small hand and finger muscles and encourage bilateral skills.

## Steps to Perfect Scissor Development

**Start the Snipping Process.** Once your child's hand muscles have strengthened and her bilateral and coordination skills have improved, introduce the scissors. Follow these simple instructions for holding scissors correctly.

1. Position the wrist so that the thumb is turned upward, the thumb joint resting inside the thumb loop.
2. Make sure the tip of the middle finger is inside the opposite loop. Some scissors have enough space for the middle and ring fingers to be positioned inside this loop. There may even be adequate space for both fingers.
3. Place the index finger outside the loop, in front of the middle finger serving as a "guide."
4. The ring finger and pinkie should be curled into the palm (unless the ring finger is inside the loop with the middle finger). "Many children need frequent help positioning the wrist correctly in the 'thumbs up' position," Smith advises. "A helpful strategy is to hold the paper above eye level or tape it to the wall so that the child is cutting upwards. Cutting in this position automatically positions the wrist correctly."

**Showcase Your Own Skills.** Teach your own scissor skills to your child. "Modeling, while sitting beside your child instead of across, is easier, especially for kids who are challenged with body position and space," says Sunita Murty-Gami, an occupational therapist and Clinical Coordinator for PediaStaff. Be sure to explain what you are doing at each step. For example, say, "Look, I am using my thumb to open and close the scissors." Provide a visual cue, such as, "<http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/physical/teaching-preschoolers-to-use-scissors/>  
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scissor blades are opening and closing like a crocodile's mouth." If your child has a difficult time manipulating the scissors, there are "two-person" training scissors available in many craft stores or online. These are excellent because they have an extra set of loops. You can hold and manipulate the outside loops while your child holds the inside loops, allowing your little one to "feel" the movement of the blades opening and closing.

**Encourage Independent Cutting.** Once your child can hold and manipulate a pair of scissors with ease, she is ready to cut on her own. She can start by snipping several colorful straws into small pieces. Thread a colorful piece of string or yarn through the pieces to make a bracelet or necklace. Once she has mastered snipping, offer her one-inch-wide strips of card stock, construction paper, or old file folders. The firmness of these materials makes cutting easier for a beginner because the paper doesn't flop around and the short width of the paper allows for cutting the strips in half with one snip. Never let the scraps of paper go to waste. "I often have a child snip pieces of green, yellow, and orange paper into small pieces to make leaves for a tree or sprinkles for an ice cream cone picture," Murty-Gami says.

Have your child attempt to snip sequentially by cutting across a 4-inch piece of paper and progressing to an 8-inch piece. With practice, he will learn to cut on straight lines, curved lines, angled lines, and simple shapes with skill. The cutting lines should be thick and bold in the beginning; as your child's skills improve, progress to thinner lines. If your child has difficulty staying on the lines while cutting, make a practice sheet by outlining the cutting line with two thin strips of [school](#) glue. Once the glue dries, have your child cut on the line between the ridges of glue. If he veers off of the line, he will feel a bump as he cuts across the glue strip. After completing several practice sheets, the sensory feedback should help him understand how to stay on the lines.

**Encourage Scissor Skill Development.** Don't worry if your child is a messy cutter at first. Kids progress at their own pace, so prepare his little hands with fun games and activities that challenge fine motor skills. Keep this development progression in mind as your kid begins using scissors:

1. The child begins to show an interest in cutting.
2. The child holds the scissors correctly.
3. The child opens and closes the scissors in a coordinated manner.
4. The child uses an entire hand to snip paper.
5. The child uses scissors to cut forward across a piece of paper with two or more consecutive snips.
6. The child cuts a piece of paper in half.
7. The child follows straight lines, with the scissors (not the paper) moving to stay on the line.
8. The child manipulates scissors and paper to cut out shapes with curves.
9. The child cuts squares.
10. The child cuts more complex shapes. Remember that using scissors efficiently is a complicated skill that improves with practice and, as we all know, practice makes perfect.

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