

### Supporting Children's Hand Preference

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The term 'handedness' describes a preference for using one hand as opposed to the other. Handedness identifies which is the preferred use of the right hand or the left hand depending on the task. There has been many social and cultural biases against left-handed children. Children who showed left hand preference were often forced by parents or teachers to use their right hand for eating and writing. Many generations talk of having their left hand tied behind their back or being punished for using their left hand. However this practice has decreased as it has slowly been accepted that children need to be able to determine their own hand preference. Left-handedness still appears to be rarer in restrictive societies as compared with more permissive societies.

The causes for hand preference has been attributed to either a physical, psychological, or supernatural cause however it is not well-understood.

Although previous theorists have stated that infants as young as four weeks may display signs of handedness preference there is now the common belief is that babies are born ambidextrous. Often it may appear that the child has chosen their hand preference by the end of the first year, but this still may continue to change several times over the subsequent few years.

The older child, around 2 years, may show the use of using one hand for some activities and the other hand for other activities but has developed their preference by the third year. However it is still common for a child to repeatedly switch hand preferences well into their preschool years.

Although the past practice of forcing a child to use their right hand has decreased, a non-right-handed child may still feel pressure to conform to a right-handed world. A teacher may have a strong feeling that the child is disadvantaged for the following reasons:

- The handwriting may look sloppy and untidy
- The child looks awkward
- The child looks clumsy trying to adapt

However, the left handed child can be supported in all of this.

### Suggested Strategies

Each child is different and an individual. It is important to work closely with the parents in order to provide quality care and support for children. It is also important to gain an understanding from the parent as to what is the most important aspect of the parent's concern about hand preference as well as providing the parents information about what the service provides, what rules and regulations the service is required to abide by. Services aim to provide quality care for children meeting families' needs, child rearing practices and creating a safe inclusive environment where the child can explore and experiment and develop to their full potential. However it is important for services to be clear about what they can or cannot provide due to the services policies and procedures, child care regulations and individual childcare practices. The following strategies are just a few thoughts about supporting a child's hand preference development.

- When a child begins to show consistent hand preference it is important that the adult does not try to change it.
- Place table settings according to their handedness.
- Try and provide left-handed scissors or scissors which do not denote left or right use.
- Find alternative ways to handle paper and pencil.
- Ensure that adults interacting with the child treats the child appropriately and not demean the child for using their left hand.
- Focus on the positive skills of the child rather than focusing on the differences.
- Provide a mirror image; i.e. sit across from the child rather than next to the child, if aiming to instruct a child in a specific task such as tying a shoe lace. The child may become frustrated if they try to copy the sequence of shoe lace tying if it is shown by a right handed person.
- If the child is still swapping the use of their hand by school age, the parent in consultation with the teacher needs to determine which hand the child needs to use to learn to write. This is done through observing which hand the child consistently uses for various activities such as holding a spoon, cutting with scissors, playing with puppets, using a lock and key, screwing lids on jars and throwing a ball.
- Adults can help lefthanders to hold a pencil or crayon and place the paper in ways that are appropriate for left-handed writing.

### References and recommended reading

Annett, Marian. *Handedness and Brain Asymmetry: The Right Shift Theory*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002.

Healey, Jane M. *Lefties: How to Raise Your Left-Handed Child in a Right-Handed World*. New York: Pocket Books, 2001.

Kozma, C. & Stock, J. (1993) *Caring for every child—Ideas to meet diverse needs in Child Care*. Funded by the Commonwealth department of Human Services and Health : Sydney

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