




An Occupational Therapist's Roadmap to Hand Therapy

Signs that a baby has a hand preference:

-  They prefer using one hand and/or dislike using the other.
-  They keep one hand in a fist.
-  Their one hand moves slower and/or looks awkward compared to the other hand.

A baby's hand preference



Options to assess hand preference:

- [Screening Hand Assessment for Infants](#) (HAI): for 3.5 to 12 months old
- [HAI](#): for 3 to 12 months old
- [Mini-Assisting Hand Assessment](#) (AHA): for 8 to 18 months old
- [AHA](#): for 18 months to 18 years old



Standardized assessments to diagnose cerebral palsy

- Hammersmith Infant Neurological Evaluation
- General Movements Assessment (<4 months)
- Brain MRI may be requested by physician

What does hand preference mean?

Signs of asymmetrical hand use are not typical in babies younger than 12 months old. The baby may be at risk for a cerebral palsy (CP) diagnosis and could benefit from hand therapy.

No need to wait for confirmed CP diagnosis to start therapy

When a parent comes to you for early hand therapy:



Start therapy as soon as possible

If you don't have experience with early hand therapy, consult these resources:



[Bloorview](#), [UCalgary](#), and [OT mentors](#)



Encourage the family to talk to a doctor about their baby's hand asymmetry.

How you can help



What is your role for early hand therapy?



You do not need to follow a specific protocol. The goal is to encourage increased use of the baby's less-preferred hand.



Early hand therapy is done while parents play with their baby.



[Your role is to coach the parent.](#) Provide consistent support, virtually (phone, email, video call) or in-person.



There aren't special tools, toys, or skills needed.

Two effective play-based approaches



Constraint induced movement therapy (CIMT)

A baby's preferred hand is [wrapped](#) ("[constrained](#)") to encourage the use of their helper hand/arm while engaging in one-handed activities like reaching for objects or picking up food.

Wrapping the preferred hand is not harmful. It may take several tries for the baby to get used to the constraint.



Bimanual therapy

A baby practices using both hands together, like clapping. Or, each hand may do a different movement, like holding a container while the other hand takes the lid off.



Both approaches can improve how a baby uses their less-preferred hand. You can use one or both. Choose the approach that works for the parent and baby.

What early hand therapy involves



How do parents start?



Place the baby in a stable position, like in a baby lounger or highchair.



Sit where your baby can see their parent's face.



Play! [Select activities](#) based on the baby's skill and age to [create a program](#).

30 minutes everyday is recommended, but this can be broken up into smaller time chunks. Even a little bit of time can make a difference.

How can you encourage skill development?



Follow [motor learning principles](#): Repetition, progression, and variety.



Share tips with families for [engaging, challenging, and encouraging their baby](#).

Where can I learn more?



Instagram: [@therapy4littlehands](#)



Websites: [UCalgary](#) | [Bloorview](#)



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