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Special Issue

## Utilizing everyday items in play to facilitate hand therapy for pediatric patients



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## ABSTRACT

This article describes how hand therapy for pediatric patients can be enhanced through the use of play with everyday items. Playful activities integrate purposeful hand skills of pinch, grasp and manipulation, while encouraging the child to fully participate in therapy and home programs. By referring to Takata's developmental hierarchy of play, therapists can design the sessions to include novel, fun and age appropriate activities. The author offers eight sample activities for specific therapy goals utilizing inexpensive, everyday items.

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## Introduction

The use of purposeful activity can improve a patient's motor performance and adherence to hand therapy.<sup>1,2</sup> Since play is the primary occupation of children, they are intrinsically motivated to participate in therapy when this option is presented. Play is a powerful medium to improve occupational performance skills as children develop sensorimotor, cognitive and psychosocial function.<sup>3,4</sup> Playful activities integrate the purposeful hand skills of pinch, grasp, and manipulation<sup>5</sup> and sets the child up for successful participation in therapy sessions.<sup>6</sup> In a study of children with burn injuries, it was shown that playing games rather than encouraging rote exercise significantly reduced pain and improved hand function.<sup>7</sup> The movement of two or more joints occurs more often when treatment uses purposeful, play activities. For example, a child is more likely to extend his elbow and wrist to throw a ball versus completing an elbow or wrist extension exercise.<sup>8</sup>

## Discussion

The challenge for the therapist working with a pediatric patient is to find multiple activities that can fully engage the child. Therapy activities should be novel and fun yet include a sense of purpose, play or competition. Thinking outside of the normal therapy exercises may require some extra thought and planning. Takata's developmental hierarchy of play can guide the selection of the activities.<sup>9</sup>

Age (years)	Type of play skills	Sample of activities
0–2	Exploratory play	Sensorimotor activities: Reaching to grasp food and place in mouth, dropping objects into a container to make noise, knocking down a block tower
2–4	Symbolic play	Simple construction activities: Counting and sorting items by color or shape while placing in container, manipulating objects with moving parts to see how they work
4–7	Creative play	Complex constructive activities: Building or creating a pattern using various items, carrying objects with a spoon to place in container, molding clay into shapes
7–12	Competitive play	Games: Race/relay or timed placement of objects into a container, throwing ball or darts at a target, playing card games, timed completion of a puzzle

Modified from Morrison CD, Metzger P. Play. In: Case-Smith J., ed. *Occupational Therapy for Children*. 4th ed. St. Louis: Mosby; 2001:528–544.

Manufactured exercise equipment and toys/games are often costly for families to use with home programs and many appreciate item suggestions that are inexpensive and readily available. Creative use of common everyday items in a therapeutic way can meet these challenges. Here are some suggested activities that incorporate the use of inexpensive, common objects (coins/buttons/cotton balls, paper cup/tubes, rubber bands, pasta, hand towel, wooden spoon) used to attain targeted therapy goals:

## ○ Finger extension

1. Push coins/buttons across a table into a paper cup that has been cut in half to serve as the goal (Fig. 1). Timing the

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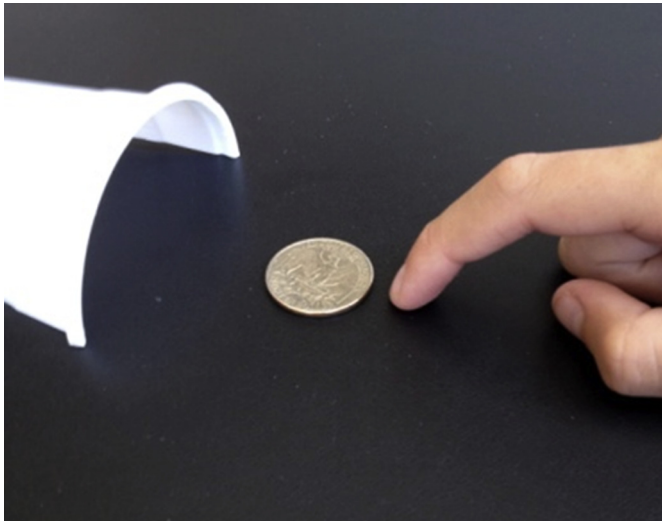


Fig. 1. Using finger extension to pushing coin into goal.

completion of this task with a certain number of items could help to engage the child. Motivation could be enhanced by setting up two goals for two players to allow them to compete against each other in a simulated “soccer game.”

2. Stretch open a rubber band with the fingertips and place the band onto end of a paper towel roll or inverted cup (Fig. 2). Creative play can be fostered through the use of colorful rubber bands to make a pattern on the roll or cup. Two children could play by having one child copy the design made by the other.
3. Place a row of cylindrical pasta on one side of a small hill made in a hand towel. Push the pasta over the hill by moving the finger from full flexion to full extension (Fig. 3). Racing against time can add an element of interest by counting how many pieces of pasta can be moved over the hill in 30 seconds.



Fig. 2. Using finger extension to making a rubber band pattern on a cup.

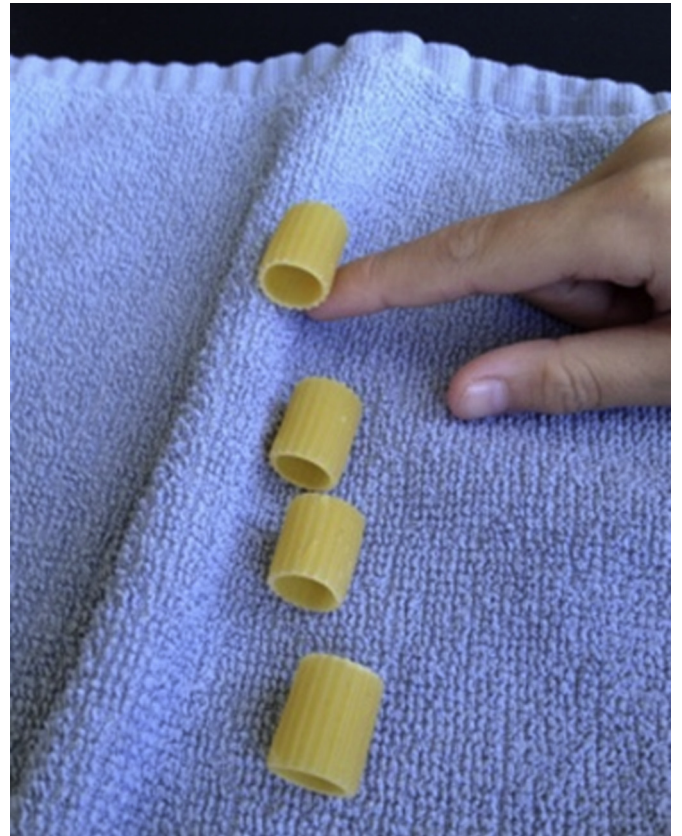


Fig. 3. Using finger extension to push pasta over a hill in a hand towel.

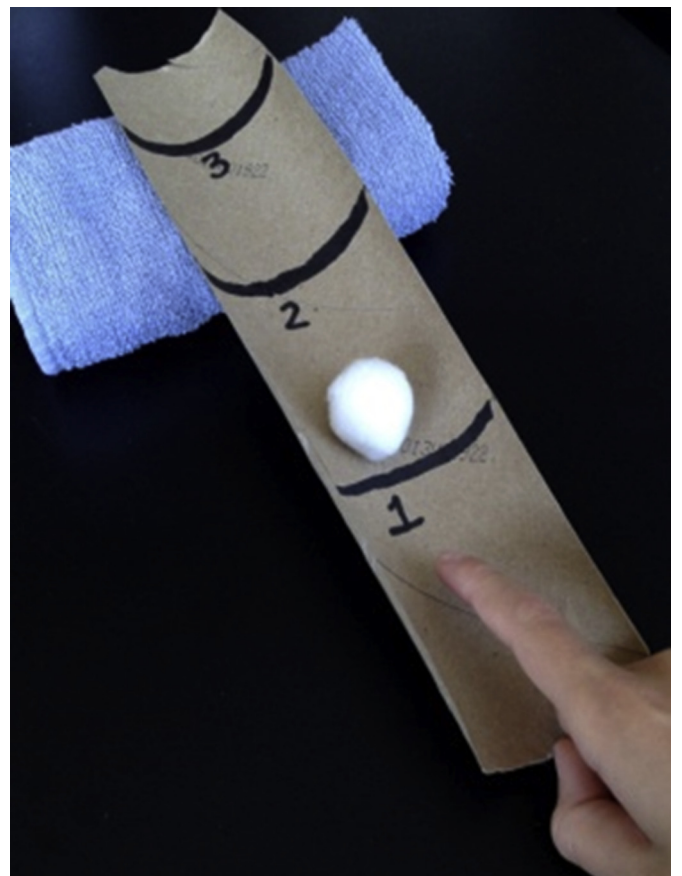


Fig. 4. Pushing cotton ball up a ramp made of a paper towel roll.

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