



PHOTO NO. 6 Given the choice, the child always picks (with) their left hand.

What if our child cannot decide if they are left or right-handed?

It is June 2002, and Paul's parents come to my practice with the following problem: "Our son starts school in three months – and we're already at our wits' end! You're our last hope!"

How has it got to that point? A year ago, when Paul's pre-school teacher asked if he might be left-handed, his mother realised that she had never really thought about it. As far as she was concerned, there was only one thing that mattered: Her child's development. Handedness was a factor they had not considered before, so Paul's parents set about gathering all the information they could find on the subject. They quickly found that everyone has something to say about left-handedness, and received a bewildering array of opinions and recommendations from their parents, friends and neighbours.

Paul regularly switches between his hands and does not appear to have a preference. Some days he does a lot with his left hand, while on others the opposite is the case. Despite their new knowledge and a wealth of conversations on the topic of handedness, his parents are still unable to determine whether their son is a left or right-hander. His mother senses that Paul is left-handed, but the lack of a definitive diagnosis and a clear course of action are only serving to make her increasingly tense as her son's first day of school approaches. She even begins to suffer from a sleep disorder. Things begin to improve when the family doctor urges Paul's parents to have their son tested for left-handedness. This initiates a new phase of discovery and clarity – not least for Paul.

It is me who tests Paul, and I am able to confirm that his mother was right – he is indeed left-handed. But that is just the beginning, as I am sure you can imagine. Two weeks later, I receive an extremely revealing telephone call from Paul's mother: "Paul is doing really well. He was still a bit sceptical on the day of the test itself, but everything changed within just a few hours. On the way home in the car, he said, 'Mum, this is the best day of my life. I'm left-handed!' He's since become much more proficient at using his left hand, his mood has improved dramatically and he's even done a painting of his own free will for the first time in five years."

Upon hearing this, I suggest that Paul's mother gives his pre-school teacher a bouquet of flowers as a token of her gratitude. After all, it was her that got the ball rolling. We are often far too slow to give positive feedback to the people responsible for our children's education!

Children are already left or right-handed at birth.

If you are now thinking “My word, recognising left-handedness sounds really tricky!” then I can put your mind at rest. It is far easier than you might think. Allow me to start by dispelling two widely held myths that may prevent you from finding out if your child is naturally left-handed:

1. Many parents assume that their child only becomes a left or right-hander between the ages of three and six. This could not be further from the truth! It is our genes that determine whether we are left or right-handed.
2. Many parents are convinced that their child decides on a preferred side during the first four to six years of their life. Here again: This is wrong! It is impossible for children to decide for themselves, because they are already left or right-handed at birth.

Both of the above assumptions cause parents and other adults to ignore signs of left-handedness. Even if a child uses the left side of their body a lot during the first few years of their life, we often fail to either notice or grasp the significance of the respective indicator.

The “left-handed or right-handed?” puzzle

Many parents have it easy: From the moment they are born, their child clearly demonstrates whether they are left or right-handed. As a mother once said to me, “Our son did everything left-handed right from the word go. And when I say everything, I mean everything!”

Other children, however, appear to have set themselves the task of making life as difficult as possible for their parents – with the “left-handed or right-handed?” puzzle.

They do not reveal their handedness just like that, they keep you guessing. If this sounds like your child, then I recommend you take a sporting approach. You will soon see that solving the problem can be great fun. You might find the following tips and instructions helpful. Whichever path you choose, the most important thing for you and your child is that you solve the puzzle at least one year before they start school.

The following indicators form part of my instructions on how to solve the “left-handed or right-handed?” puzzle.

23 key indicators that show your child may be left-handed

These indicators are an easy way to identify left-handed children between the ages of three and six.

I have only selected indicators that are a reliable sign of left-handedness.

Hands

- Which hand does your child use to reach for things you hand to the middle of their body?
- Which hand does your child hold their bottle in?
- Which of their thumbs does your child suck?
- Which hand does your child first use to explore their mouth?
- When teaching your child how to eat with a spoon, put one spoon in each of their hands. Which hand do they favour?
- Which hand does your child offer you when you ask them to shake hands?
- Which hand does your child use to pick their nose?
- Which hand does your child stroke animals with?
- When excited, which hand does your child reach for their mouth or face with?
- Your child wants to unscrew a bottle top. Do they use their left or right hand?
- It is time to open a new jam jar. Which of your child's hands is stronger?

Feet and legs

- Which leg can your child keep their balance on for longer?
- Ask your child to hop on one leg. Which leg do they choose to hop on?
- When riding a scooter, which foot does your child use to push themselves along?
- Create an obstacle and ask your child to jump over it. Which foot do they take off from?

Ears

- Whisper something. Which ear does your child listen with?
- Which side of their head does your child turn towards you when you read them a story?
- Which of their ears does your child hold the telephone to?

Eyes

- Give your child a camera (not a mobile phone) and ask them to take a photo. Which eye do they look through the viewfinder with?
- Which eye does your child use to look through a kaleidoscope or telescope?
- Which eye does your child use to peek through a keyhole?