

It's All About the Thumbs



Background: An opposable digit is a digit (finger or toe) on a hand or foot that is able to turn so that it “faces” the other digits. Humans and some other primates, like chimpanzees, have opposable thumbs.

Baby chimpanzees, just like humans, have to learn how to use their thumbs to pick up and manipulate things. Chimpanzees learn from birth how to get along in a group. They watch their mothers and other members of the group and learn everything from them - how to feed, where to sleep, how to groom, how to “read” other chimps’ behaviors, and how to interact with others. Only by learning appropriate behaviors will a chimp be tolerated by other members of the group and survive. Social grooming, play, physical displays, and willingness to share food are some of the ways that chimpanzees form and maintain bonds with each other. A chimpanzee’s thumbs are a very important *adaptation* that allow them to do just about everything they need to do to survive, and thrive in their group.

Materials: Shoe with shoelaces, a variety of objects in different shapes and sizes, piece of paper, pencil, gloves with the thumb taped down (optional),

Instructions: Can you think of some things that we (humans) do regularly that would be difficult to do without our thumbs? Let’s test our ability to do a few different tasks without using our thumbs!

Try tying your shoelaces while keeping your thumbs folded down. If you are having a tough time, you can put on a pair of gloves and tape your thumbs down so you can’t use them. Try picking up various objects from around your home or backyard. Can you write your name? Make a sandwich? Life would be tough for us, and for chimpanzees, without our opposable thumbs!