

# You Can Therapy

Integrating Educational, Occupational, Physical, and Speech Therapy in the classroom

## Tennis Ball Heads

**Why** This is a great tool for strengthening the hand in general, but specifically for helping develop hand arches and strengthen the base of the thumb for opposition to the index finger (very important for optimal pencil grasp and mechanics). You might use this if your children have poor control over crayons, pencils, or scissors; or if they complain about hand pain or fatigue.

**How** Take an old tennisball and CAREFULLY (...can't tell you how easy it is to cut your palm doing this...) cut a slit across the ball with an exacto knife or similar sharp blade. The longer you cut the line, the less resistive (easier to squeeze) the ball will be.

Try it out and cut it until it is about as difficult as you want it. Now put on eyes, hair, whatever. You can just use a permanent marker, or fabric paint, yarn or feather for hair, whatever. Sometimes I cut a little X in the top and then push knotted yarn through with a darning needle to make hair. If you let the student draw on the face, they are often more invested in the tool.

Now place your thumb on one end of the mouth and your middle finger on the other end and squeeze. It should open the mouth like a change purse.

Tennis Ball Head games to play with your students:

### Feeding Time at the Zoo

*Explain, "Tennis ball heads are almost always hungry. In order to feed your tennis ball, you need to help him/her open his/her mouth. Put your thumb on one end of the mouth, and your fingers on the other end. Now squeeze. Tennis ball heads like to eat almost anything that will fit in their mouths. They like dried beans or pasta, small rocks, coins, dice, cotton balls, paper clips, marbles, bits of wood, small game pieces, and fingers. They do NOT like human food, including peanut butter, ice cream, macaroni and cheese, or anything else soft. You should try to feed your tennis ball at least twice a day."*

With one hand open the Tennis ball head's mouth. With the other feed it small items like suggested above. This will help: build strength in the hand holding the ball, improve pincer grasp in the other hand, and improve fine motor skills like crossing mid-line.

### Vacuum Head

Tennis ball heads are also very helpful at picking up spills of small objects. Scatter some small objects, e.g. beans, marbles, pasta.... See how many objects your students can pick up before they start falling out.

