

What Good is a Thumb?

Have you ever thought about how much you use your thumb? Thumbs move in a different direction than fingers. They give people the ability to grasp things. An opposable thumb is a physical adaptation. Adaptations can be physical or a behavior an organism has developed to help it survive in its habitat. Adaptations help a plant or an animal survive in its habitat.

Opposable thumbs are a physical adaptation for primates. They help monkeys and apes climb trees and gather and eat their food. Chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans have opposable thumbs. Many of these primates also have toes on their feet that can function like an opposable thumb. These “opposable toes” are particularly useful in climbing trees.



Activity: Try out some everyday activities without the use of your thumb to find out just how important your thumb can be.

Materials:

- Jar with a lid
- Paper and pens
- Shoe with laces

Try performing the everyday activity with your thumb. Then try again without your thumb. Decide if the activity took longer or was more difficult without your thumbs. Was it about the same or was it nearly impossible to do without the help of a thumb?

Further Discussion: What are other activities that would be difficult to do without your thumbs? What activities would primates need thumbs to perform? (Examples: grasping, climbing, hanging, peeling, throwing, swinging, fishing and even using tools.) What other physical adaptations do monkeys have that help them survive in their habitat?