

# Handwriting Help for Kids



By Joanna Nesbit

These days, it's easy to feel as if your child is already behind if she's not writing her name fluently, recognizing all her letters, and able to hold a pencil properly by kindergarten. But putting pencil to paper is a complicated developmental task for youngsters, and everyone progresses at her own rate based on a variety of factors, including the development of fine-motor skills, hand-eye coordination and cognitive abilities. Here's what's going on for kids and why they might struggle.

## **Fine-motor Skill Development**

Fine-motor skills — the ability to use fingers, hands and wrists for small, controlled movements — are essential for kids to be able to write letters and words legibly. Children typically develop their fine motor skills in a natural progression throughout early childhood, but these skills come easier for some than for others. Parents can help. Early on, babies begin developing fine-motor control by eating finger foods such as corn, peas, rice and beans, using thumbs and index fingers to pick up tiny pieces of food, says Jan Olsen, occupational therapist and developer of the Handwriting Without Tears curriculum. It's an essential beginning, she says.

When a child is older (3+) and beyond the oral stage, playing with small toys contributes to the development of fine-motor control skill. Activities such as building with blocks or playing with any small toy that requires both hands, one as a holder and one as a helper, develop fine-motor control, says Olsen. Other dexterity tasks include stringing beads, sorting coins or buttons, cutting and pasting, using utensils for eating, and tying shoelaces.

## **The Writing Process**

While some children develop coordination and dexterity by age 2, others are still developing it at age 6 and beyond. As a result, it's normal for early-elementary-age kids to struggle with writing, and boys can take up to two more years than girls to develop the necessary fine-motor skills, says Ann Dolin, author of *Homework Made Simple: Tips, Tools and Solutions for Stress-Free*

*Homework.* Complicating the developmental issues is the expectation that children can write their names and letters by preschool and definitely by kindergarten, says Jennifer Little, Ph.D., a veteran teacher and educational psychologist. Historically, such mastery wasn't expected until first grade.

In addition to the physical skill of holding a pencil, writing is a challenging cognitive process for children. "Writing is a multifaceted activity in which a child has to pay attention to many separate tasks at one time," explains Anne Zachry, a school pediatric occupational therapist and educational psychologist. "A child has to think of a topic about which he is going to write, or formulate an idea for the text. He has to remember how to form each letter and make sure to write the letter in the designated space and in the correct sequence on the page. Finally, there are rules of spelling, grammar and punctuation that must be attended to."

### **Understanding Symbols**

Children acquire the conventions of writing in stages, beginning first with awareness of written language as toddlers. According to Olsen, children begin developing phonemic awareness around age 2, and acquire "alphabet knowledge" by noticing writing in the world — on cereal boxes and stop signs, for example. Then comes scribbling and pictures. Parents can help by modeling writing for children, so they see proper hand movement.

By the time children get to school, they're transitioning from real life to symbolic life. "The whole business of school is to teach children how to use our symbols," says Olsen. But children are not born into symbols. Children learn early the concept of object constancy — that is, that position doesn't change identity. A car is the same car no matter which direction it's driving. The symbolic life doesn't operate that way, but to a child a backward B looks just as good as a forward B because it's still a B, which is why letter reversal is so common.

### **Why Kids May Struggle**

The reasons for writing struggles vary, but several are common. One is a child's rate of development. Another is pencil grip. Starting off with a bad grip can create ongoing problems if uncorrected. A tight-fisted grip where the thumb is overlapping the fingers and the whole arm is involved will cause excessive physical strain. Just as a violin teacher instructs students how to hold a violin and bow, children must be taught how to hold a pencil, says Olsen.

Check to see if your child's thumb is on the pencil. The "tripod" grip involves holding the pencil equally with the thumb, tip of the index finger, and side of the middle finger. Having children practice with very short pieces of chalk or crayon forces them to write with their fingertips and hand.

Lack of instruction in the classroom also causes difficulty. According to Olsen, 90 percent of teachers don't receive training to teach handwriting and don't know how to teach it. Consequently, kids may not receive instructions that help them get oriented on the page from top to bottom and left to right, or receive guidance on how to form their letters in the proper sequence.

As for letter reversal, Olsen's specialty, she says it's not hard to teach kids the correct direction of

letters, but often letter reversal is ignored as a developmental phase to be outgrown on a child's own time. "Children can be disorganized about letters and numbers and it's often mistaken for dyslexia," she says.

Dysgraphia is also a common term that may be applied to poor handwriting. But Olsen says it's not common. "I have been working for more than 35 years with kids, and I can count on one hand the children who were truly dysgraphic," says Olsen. "Of course, children can have trouble with motor planning, visual perception or fine-motor control, but the majority of handwriting problems are due to lack of proper instruction."

### **How to Tell if Your Child Needs Help**

Because kids' rates of development vary, the reasons for poor writing skills may not be obvious, but experts agree it's always a good idea to check with your child's teacher if you're concerned. Olsen also recommends finding out if the school has a curriculum for teaching writing.

Even for older elementary children, a wide range of skill is normal. "Parents should not be too concerned if their child is not at a particular stage by a certain age, nor should they pay too much attention to where their child is in relation to the child's friends or classmates," says Virginia Goatley, Ph.D., research director of the International Reading Association. "What's important for parents to watch is the progress, not the pace."

However, if you notice at school your child's writing stands out from others among samples on a bulletin board, you may want to talk to your child's teacher before letting potential undiagnosed learning issues go too far. Medical reasons behind poor writing skills can include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, sensory integration issues, and poor visual perception skills.

If a child doesn't exhibit an undiagnosed medical reason but his writing skills are impeding his ability to complete homework, that's another reason to look into handwriting help. It's important for writing skills to become automatic so that children's brains can focus on building complex ideas and sentence structures in writing. Getting your child evaluated with an occupational therapist can identify the problem and get your child on track. Talk with your child's teacher about best steps to take.

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