



The Skill of Handwriting

By

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I don't know how many times I have heard parents say: "He knows what he wants to write, he just can't get it on paper". Often, the problem of handwriting doesn't arise from poor comprehension or expression but problems from the actual mechanics of handwriting itself.

Handwriting is a skill. It is not something that comes, as it were, naturally, but is a skill that is taught. Once a child has mastered the skill of 'how' to write he can get on with developing the skill of 'what' to write. Thus, the ultimate objective in developing handwriting abilities is to allow the child to focus on the process of writing good material.

In basic terms, handwriting is the ability to put the verbal language into visual symbols that conform to rules of consistency and form. It is one of the most complex and highest forms of expression- and it is the last to be learnt. We learn to listen, then to speak, to read and lastly to write. Writing is often thought of as one of the 3 'basics', or the 3 'R's of reading, writing and arithmetic. However, writing is more than a mental processing capability or act of expression; it is a highly complex motor development skill.

Mastering handwriting requires a certain level of physical and mental ability in a child and requires many levels of developmental integration to have matured. By the age of 6, a child's development should have matured to provide the child with the necessary foundations for successful handwriting.

We teach children to write as a form of communicate and to be creative. Yet, what a child writes is also used to measure their knowledge and intellectual ability. Thus, a child's ability to write affects how other assess or appreciate them and, accordingly, their own self esteem. When a child is intellectually quite capable, but is unable to write well, it can be devastating as poor writing skills will have a direct affect upon their overall education achievements.

So why is it that some children seem to develop handwriting capabilities easily but for other's it is a challenge. Handwriting requires a complex integration of all our brain systems. If there is a delay in any of these systems it will affect the child's ability to master this skill. The systems of the body-mind are complex and therefore there can be a number of causes behind a child's handwriting problems.

Essentially, handwriting is a visual motor process. Hand use is dependant upon a good upright posture and shoulder, arm and wrist stability. We have 2 sides to our body and we learn to move both sides in a coordinated manner. The ability of the brain to co-ordinate influences balance, and the ability of our limbs and eyes to cross the midline of our bodies from one side to the other. If a child is right handed they have to cross their midline to start writing on their left side if writing in English. If a child can't cross their midline it may very well influence their hand dominance and their ability to write quickly and neatly.

It is a common fallacy to believe that it is advantageous to be ambidexterous. It should be renamed 'ambi-clumsy'. Hand dominance is important as children need one hand to lead in 'doing', and the other to 'support'. The small complex coordinated movements of the hand develop after hand dominance is established. Not having one clear dominant hand reduces the skill of both hands.

The development of hand arches are important for skilled complex movement. The small muscles of the hand provide fine coordinated movement and the muscles of the forearm provide stability. The hand is divided into 2, skill at the thumb side and stability on the other side. The thumb is crucial as it opposes the first 2 fingers and gives us as humans the ability to hold a pencil and write in a tripod grip.

Successful handwriting is also dependant on sensory feedback from the skin and the joint receptors, and visual perceptual skills. A child's ability to feel and discriminate information through the skin will influence his ability to manipulate the pencil. Sensory feedback from the joints tells us how much pressure to apply to the pencil. Some children write heavily and get tired easily and some have light writing with poor control.

Visual perception is complex and visual recognition and memory of the letters are important. Forming the letter, the correct spacing and visual tracking with the eyes to follow the line are all necessary visual motor skills for handwriting. Children with good visual motor skills may be able to copy and memorise what to write but the ability to plan and write a story requires in addition good verbal comprehension skill (listening skills). Writing is a complex skill which requires good listening skills and good language and speech development. A child needs to first retain ideas and then to put them in order, hold the concept, and express themselves on paper.

With all this detail on the body-mind mechanics of handwriting skill development, the task of the parent and teacher is to prepare and develop a child's visual motor skills for successful handwriting. First, handwriting for children should be fun. It should be interesting and it should increase a child's self confidence. Lots of tactile sensory input by using paints, clay, sand along with threading beads, cutting, and colouring for example, will develop fine motor skills. Likewise, playing large movement games, climbing, swinging, ball games and swimming will gross motor skills.

A child is ready to write when they have an established hand dominance, a good posture, a dynamic tripod grip of the pencil, can copy a circle, square, triangle and a cross and can cross the midline of their workspace.

A child who has not achieved the above requirements or is continuing to find handwriting a challenge should seek the professional help of an Occupational Therapist. An Occupational Therapist can identify the underlying difficulties creating the handwriting difficulty. She can provide 3 supports: First, therapy to address the underlying problem. Second, provide practical ideas for activity and learning in the classroom in liaison with the teacher. And third, use a functional handwriting programme. The combination of these support measures will achieve successful handwriting.

If your child is struggling with handwriting, do not punish them by giving them more handwriting, contact an OT for professional advice and support in learning handwriting without tears.

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