

Handwriting and the development of writing

Skills needed for writing



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The skills needed for writing start developing long before children are introduced to writing tools and the ability to write involves the combination of many skills including:

- The learning aspect including phonics, comprehension and processing of information
- The ability to attend and concentrate in order to practice the skills needed to develop writing
- The development of physical and sensory skills (see 'Normal variations in children's development' for more information about this)



Learning

If there is a possibility that writing development is delayed due to an element of learning seek the advice of the Specialist Advisory Teachers and/or Educational Psychologist

Ability to attend and concentrate

- Ensure that play and learning activities are the correct developmental level for the child so they are not too easy or too hard
- Ensure that the child is able to understand the language being used and consider using visuals to support understanding
- Consider the child's age and developmental level and how the activities are being delivered; some children, particularly boys, benefit from learning through movement and physical play throughout Key Stage 1 and this is normal – they shouldn't be expected to sit for long periods of time
- See 'Maximising attention' and 'Sensory processing' for more information and advice to support this

Physical and sensory skill development

Pencil grip development

The forming of a functional pencil grip is dependent on the development of muscle strength in the hands and fingers in order to be able to hold the pencil in a way that allows the refined movements needed to form small letter shapes. The type of pencil grip a child uses can be an indication of the strength of their hand and finger muscles; children would be expected to have less strength when they are young and this develops naturally as they use their hands through play. See 'Fine motor skills' and 'playdough' for more information and advice about this.

The development of pencil grip begins with exploration of writing tools and other objects including mouthing, banging, dropping and throwing.



When ready to start using writing tools the grip formation generally follows this developmental sequence:



Dagger

Maximum contact of hand and fingers around the pen producing whole arm scribbles



Digital pronate

The arm is turned slightly inward and the pen is positioned under the palm. The pen is held by straight fingers and most of the movements are from the whole arm.



Static tripod

The pen is held by the thumb and index finger and rests on the knuckle of the middle finger. When the grip is first developing you may see the wrist 'floating' above the writing surface but as children become more comfortable in the position they are usually able to transition to resting their forearm on the table.



Dynamic tripod

The little and ring fingers are now able to tuck themselves into the palm which opens up the hand arch allowing freer movements of the other 3 fingers. The wrist is slightly extended (bent back) and the little finger side of the hand is comfortably resting on the table.

Supporting pencil grip development

There may be many reasons why children are having difficulty developing a pencil grip that allows the refined finger movements needed for efficient writing. Here are some simple ideas to try:

- It is essential that children have a good sitting posture when being asked to produce quality writing – see 'Good seating' for more information and ideas for this including the use of an angled surface
- Many children benefit from carrying out warm ups to 'wake up' the hands and arms – see 'Fine motor warmups'
- Have the child hold a small object between the little finger and palm as this will encourage the use of the 3 fingered grip and the opening up of the hand arch
- Try using different types of pencils, crayons and pens; chunky writing tools are easier to hold
- Try using short pens or pencils
- Try experimenting with different pencil grips

Establishing hand dominance

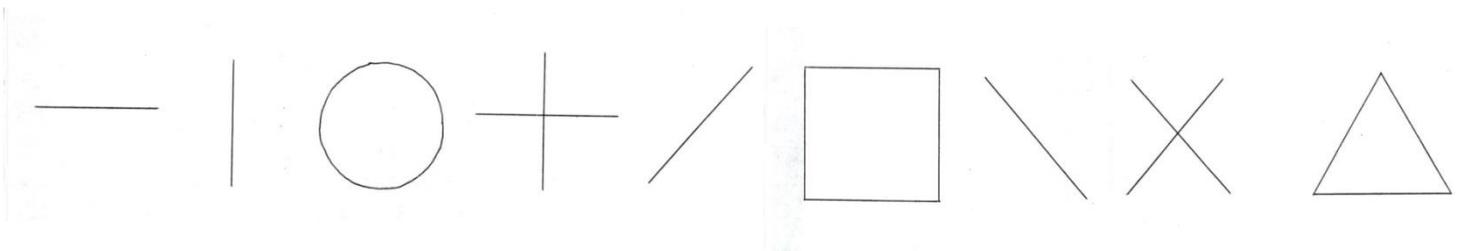
Clear hand dominance can take up to the age of 6 to develop and some people can go on to be ambidextrous. However, if a child has reached this age and is showing difficulties with grip and letter formation and they haven't yet established hand dominance then they should be encouraged to do so. Many children are slow developing hand dominance due to difficulties with crossing midline – see 'Crossing midline' for more information on this and how to encourage hand dominance.

Pre-writing and letter shape formation

For a child to be able to write and form letters properly in the future, they need initially to learn how to copy and form simple shapes. Always emphasise that work should be from 'Top to Bottom' and 'Left to Right'. See 'Crossing midline' for ideas to help children who have difficulty writing across the page and forming diagonal shapes.

Pre-writing skills do not have to be developed by sitting at a table and doing writing tasks. Movement is a great way to teach children about shape, direction and other concepts associated with pre-writing. Try to keep the movements large and talk to the child about what they are doing in order to draw their attention to the movement.

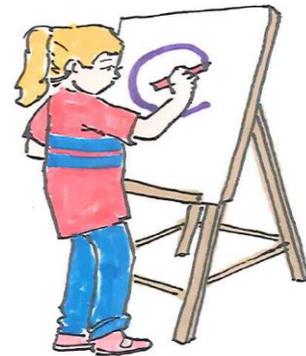
Below are the developmental stages that children move through in making shapes or patterns. Learning how to make these shapes will help them develop the necessary skills needed to be able to form letters correctly.



Children learn to imitate the shape first, that is they watch an adult draw the shape first and then do it themselves. They then learn to copy a shape, which means they don't have to watch how the shape is made anymore but can form it just from looking at the pre-drawn shape.

Activities to help the development of shape formation:

- Feeling wooden or plastic shapes/letters with eyes open and then trying to guess what they are with eyes closed.
- Tracing the shape of letters and shapes made of string or sandpaper glued onto card.
- 'Walking' shapes and letters on the floor or 'writing' with your finger on your child's back.
- Drawing shapes and letters in the air, using a whole arm movement.
- Use water and a paintbrush to paint large letters on an outside wall
- Practising drawing on a vertical surface for example a blackboard or paper pinned on the wall.
- Making patterns in flour/talc/sand/shaving foam.
- Potato or sponge printing.
- Making shapes and letters out of play dough or pipe cleaners.
- Copying activities to a defined pattern, for example peg board, fuzzy felt or block patterns.
- Copy pegboard, lego and brick designs
- Practice 'lazy 8's':



Developing pencil control

- Simple Dot-to-Dots
- Simple Mazes
- Jig saws
- Using finger-paints to make or copy patterns.
- Drawing round other people's hands and body or simple stencils.
- Tracing activities.
- Picture completion. Simple items to be filled in. Start with a completed picture to copy.

Start the activities on a large scale, for example use large pieces of paper stuck to the wall with patterns to copy on rather than A4 sheets. As the child's control and as the concept of the shape develops, progress onto smaller pieces of work.

Difficulty regulating pencil pressure

Some children can either press too hard or too light and there may be a number of reasons why they do this. The following activities will help them learn to regulate their pencil force:

- Place a piece of carbon paper underneath their work and tell them that you do not want their writing to come through onto the underlying paper if they press too hard, or that they press through to underlying layers if they are pressing too light. The child may need to practise this first with writing shapes and then with letters.
- To keep the pencil from slipping, start with using larger pencils or use pencil grips over the pencil. You could wrap a rubber band around the pencil about one inch up from where the point begins and the child can place their fingers on the rubber band to reduce slippage.
- You can get the child to rub a crayon hard on large paper to cover a picture.
- Writing on a vertical surface, such as the chalkboard, whiteboard or wall, for part of the day.
- Try using a sloping desk or desk top.

See also the 'sensory processing', 'core stability' and 'fine motor skills' advice sheets

Alternative methods of recording

For some older children it is beneficial to promote alternatives to handwriting. This is particularly so when handwriting problems are preventing the child from achieving their academic potential. These may include:

- Use a dictaphone or have a scribe to dictate a story or homework.
- Allow the child to use a laptop or Ipad to record their work if their typing speed is quicker than handwriting
- Allow extra time as the child may either find writing physically tiring or need time to process the information and their ideas
- Recognise that a child may be concentrating so hard on their writing that they miss the verbal instructions.
- Sit the child at the front of the class near the board.
- Use photocopied notes where possible.
- Use diagrams, spider diagrams and mind maps where possible.
- Write key points only when taking notes.
- Use plans when writing a story - divide into sections and write key points.
- Use answer sheets where the gaps need to be filled in.

If you would like this factsheet in another language or format, for example Braille, large print or audio, please call:

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