



HANDY TIPS FOR PARENTS & TEACHERS

By Jaime Spencer, Occupational Therapist



Handwriting 101

Handwriting is a complicated motor skill that requires dexterity, strength, motor planning skills, and visual memory. In the past, children learned the alphabet and how to write their letters in Kindergarten. These days, children are learning how to write earlier and earlier. Most pre-schools boast that they include capital and lowercase letters in their daily instruction, even though the state curriculum expects capitals and a few lowercase. Why? Parents want their children to be prepared for Kindergarten. Nowadays, most children are already writing on the first day of school. However, their muscles aren't ready to start so young. What should we do?

We want our children to keep up, but we don't want to force a skill that they aren't ready for. It's a tricky situation. The good news is, the majority of students are able to keep up and learn these new skills even though we are presenting them much earlier. Here is the bad news: the children who are a little weaker often try to compensate to keep up with their peers. They form the letters improperly, use the wrong positioning to hold their pencil, and develop poor handwriting habits in general. So what can you do to help? A lot!

Here's what you should know:

- 1. It's easy to work on handwriting without picking up a pencil or crayon.**
- 2. Just because it looks nice, doesn't mean it is correct.**
- 3. The way the child writes a letter is much more important than what it looks like when he's done.**



1. It's easy to work on handwriting without picking up a pencil or crayon.



You can practice writing with a child by writing on the driveway with chalk, painting with water on the sidewalk, tracing with your finger on the tiles in the bathtub, or using shaving cream on a cookie sheet. Cut a tiny piece of a kitchen sponge and wet it, then use it on an easel. Download "I write words" to your Ipad or Iphone and use your finger or a stylus. Write your name in the sand at the beach or draw it in the dirt at the park. Children like anything that is fun and different.

2. Just because it looks nice, doesn't mean it is correct.

Many parents don't realize that their child is developing poor writing habits. They are excited that "Jimmy" is writing his name at all. It's great that he is interested in writing and excited to make his name, but it is just as important that he learns the letters in his name correctly. Once a child develops a habit of writing a letter incorrectly, it is hard to change! Think of how many times a preschooler or kindergarten child writes their name each day. It is better to stop a child and instruct them in the proper formation of each letter than to let them write it incorrectly over and over. Writing letters with proper formation helps with legibility and speed later on. It doesn't seem as important in the younger grades, but it has a big impact later on!

3. The way a child writes a letter is much more important than what it looks like.

Again, letter formation is very important. So is pencil grip. The students who have difficulty writing in third and fourth grade are usually students who developed poor writing habits when they were preschoolers or kindergarteners. If they aren't holding their pencil correctly, they may be using the wrong muscles to write. Then, as they write, they are missing out on valuable fine motor strengthening. The most common problem is that children use their whole hand or arm instead of the fingers to move the pencil. This makes them tired as they write for longer periods of time. You can help this by having them write or color while laying on their bellies. If they are using their arms and elbows to hold themselves up, then only the fingers are left to move the pencil!

Children's letters often look misshapen or lopsided. That's OK! If they write them with proper formation and correct pencil grip, the motor control will come. First thing is first!

4. Children enjoy writing when they feel successful.

Small children have small muscles. They really shouldn't write or color for more than ten minutes at time, especially if they don't enjoy it. Offer fine motor games, playdoh, and crafts to help build strength in their hands. Practice letters and tracing with some of the ways listed above. Make it fun! Praise your child when they make a letter correctly, and correct them when it is wrong. You are doing them a favor! Handwriting is a lifelong skill. It needs to become automatic, so a child can concentrate on their thoughts, which are much more important.



This is the most common grip error that I see. The child is compensating for weak muscles by wrapping his thumb around. He is using his arm or his wrist to move the pencil, instead of his thumb. As he gets older, writing will be a chore for him because his whole arm is doing all his work all day!



This is a proper pencil grip. The thumb is sitting on the pencil, and it is doing most of the work. It should, because the thumb is the strongest finger on the hand.



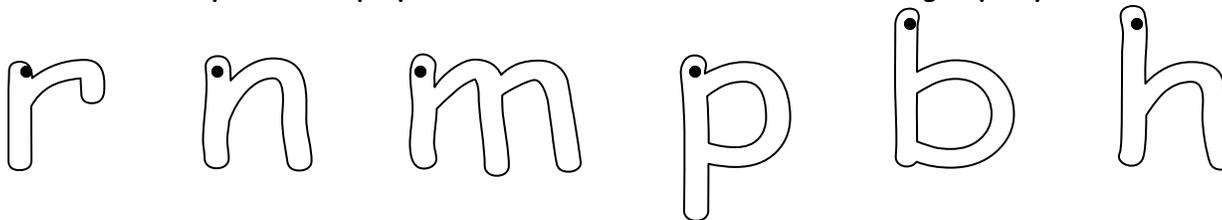
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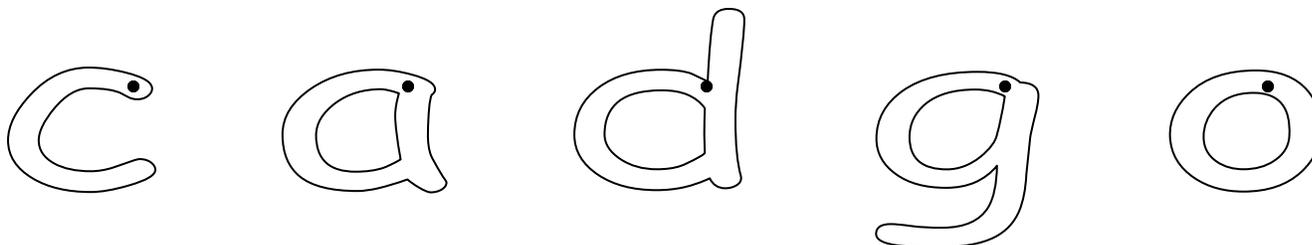
English is a top-to-bottom, right-to-left language. The key to printing quickly and neatly is to start each letter at the top.

The easiest way to teach proper formation is to teach the letters in groups by formation.



These are the diving letters, they start at the top and dive down. The most common error that children make is to start them at the bottom.

- r start at the top, dive down, trace back up (do not pick up pencil)
- n start at the top, dive down, trace back up (do not pick up pencil), and over
- m make an "n" trace back up (do not pick up pencil), and over
- p start at the top, dive down, trace back up (do not pick up pencil) and around
- b start up high, dive down, trace back up (do not pick up pencil) and around (when children don't trace back up, b looks like a 6)
- h start up high, dive down, trace back up (do not pick up pencil) and over



These are the Magic C letters, they start with a "c" and then turn into something else. The most common error that children make with these is they start with an O. As they write faster it ends up looking like "ol" instead of "a". Also, if they pick up the pencil instead of tracing back up, the letters end up looking like "cl" instead of "d".

- c walk backwards, and around to make a magic c!
- a make a magic c, trace up like a helicopter, bump the line, back down and bump!
- d make a magic c, trace up like a helicopter, up higher, back down and bump!
- *Many children start "d" at the top instead of with a "c", this makes it confusing with b, and often causes reversals. We always say start at the "top", but for d, it means, start at the top of the "c".
- g make a magic c, trace up like a helicopter, back down and turn!
- o make a magic c, keep on going and stop!

Other helpful hints

These two groups of letters are the most commonly used and are often learned incorrectly. Children rarely make mistakes with straight line letters like t, l, and i. They do often make straight lines for diagonal letters (A, v, w) but that changes over time as they progress developmentally. Other letters that are often learned incorrectly:



There is always an exception to the rule. Lowercase d and e are the only letters that don't start at the top. For "e", go straight across and then around. E is the most frequently used lowercase letter, so spend extra time on him!



"S" is a letter that many children have trouble with at first. This is because its curvy, which is hard for little fingers. Start with a "c", then turn down and curve around.