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Why Some Children Struggle with Handwriting

Writing is a crucial life skill. Even though technology has taken the place of writing in many realms, writing continues to be important for many everyday tasks such as signing documents, writing checks, or just jotting down a quick note. Besides, how would anything get accomplished if the power goes out?

Unfortunately, many kids have difficulty with handwriting tasks, whether it be an abnormal grasp, decreased endurance, not applying the proper amount of pressure, reversing letters, or difficulty with size, spacing and letter formation.

Reasons for Struggling

Children struggle with handwriting for numerous reasons. Among these are developmental delays, vision problems, abnormal muscle tone, impaired motor planning, poor bilateral coordination, and immature fine motor skills.

Some children simply master skills later than peers their age. Perhaps they were born prematurely or have a medical condition, but most often there is no specific reason. Their skills such as the grasp on the pencil, their ability to copy simple figures, drawing a person, or forming letters and numbers may develop

later. Often with time, practice and sometimes therapy intervention, a child can overcome these delays.

Vision Problems can directly affect a child's writing ability. Some vision problems are **structural**, which may include blindness, strabismus (eye turns in or out), glaucoma, or cataracts. Some are **functional** such as near-or farsightedness, perceptual problems, difficulty coordinating both eyes together, or double vision. Does your child complain of headaches while performing close work, aching or burning eyes, blurred or double vision, nausea while reading? Do you observe your child rubbing his eyes, avoiding close work, only using one eye while reading, or holding reading material in an unusual position? If so, a formal vision assessment by a Developmental Optometrist may be indicated.

Many parts of the body need to be coordinating in order to write well

Muscle Tone can also effect writing readiness. **Hypotonia**, or low tone, means that a person's muscles require more effort to contract and move the body. In children, this may manifest itself as poor posture and endurance, hypermobile joints, open-mouth posture, using too little or too much force with drawing, cutting, or writing. **Hypertonia** or high tone, means a child's muscles are in a heightened state of readiness and they can be stiff and

inflexible. Abnormal muscle tone adversely affects any child's writing ability since they are unable to control their muscles in a smooth manner.

Motor Planning, also known as praxis, is a person's ability to plan and execute a new movement task. This often causes frustration in children because of difficulty learning to sequence and "organize" the steps and movements needed. It affects writing and how to form letters, numbers, shapes, and simple pictures.

Bilateral Integration is the ability to coordinate both sides of the body together. This includes the ability to cross midline and using a dominant hand and a helper hand. With school-related tasks, this means the dominant hand holds the pencil while the non-dominant hand stabilizes the paper steady on the desk or one hand cuts with scissors while the helper hand holds and guides the paper. Most children have a solid hand preference by age 5, so if they do not demonstrate hand dominance by then, there may be reason for concern.

Immature Fine Motor Coordination can be the result of instability and/or atypical movement patterns. Stability develops from the shoulder to the elbow, to the wrist, then to the hands and fingers. A lack of stable positioning negatively affects writing ability as it difficult for a child to isolate finger movements smoothly and efficiently.

Activities to Develop Writing Skills

When practicing writing skills with your child, remember that repetition is key. Provide a great deal of positive reinforcement, as writing can be extremely frustrating. Make sure you praise your child, maintain a positive attitude, and provide appropriate incentives for hard work.

Activities to address visual problems:

- Have your child use a wooden spoon to strike a ball hung by a string

- Play flashlight tag by sitting in a dark room and having your child follow your light's beam on the wall
- Play catch using large milk jugs with the bottoms cut off
- Practice with simple mazes and dot-to-dots, progressing to smaller and more intricate designs

Activities to address Low Muscle Tone:

- Encourage your child to perform heavy work, such as carrying laundry, pushing a shopping cart, raking or digging, weight lifting, carrying their own backpacks.
- Play fun games that help build strength such as tug-of-war, wheelbarrow walking, imitating animal walks, jumping activities, gymnastics, and most sports.



Activities to address Motor Planning:

- Give verbal and visual cues to help your child sequence the activity.
- Play games where your child must imitate body positions and movements such as Simon Says, Charades, moving to action songs
- Make obstacle courses to climb and crawl and navigate through
- Have your child trace letters with his finger on sand paper; use pipe cleaners or popsicle sticks to form letters, or form letters out of common household materials (i.e. gluing beans on paper to form letters)

Activities to address Bilateral Integration:

- Play games that require crossing midline, such as Twister or hopscotch or tennis

- Ball games that use two hands to catch and throw like basketball or inflatable beach balls in a pool
- Encourage your child to do activities like cartwheels, jumping jacks, climbing, swimming or bicycling.

- Allow your child to read, do puzzles, or color while lying on his stomach
- Have your child pick up small items using tweezers or hang art work using clothespins on strings
- Roll balls out of clay or playdoh, cut playdoh with scissors, make letters
- Use a single-hole punch to build strength, then glue the dots onto a piece of paper to make a picture or design

Activities to address Fine Motor

Coordination:

- Have your child perform upper extremity strengthening exercises such as handstands against a wall, wheelbarrow walking, swinging from monkey bars, pushing and pulling heavy objects
- Practice writing and drawing on a vertical surface like easels or chalkboards



These are just a few simple activities that you can perform at home to help your child develop excellent hand writing. Targeting these underlying foundation skills will often get you faster results if done in conjunction with consistent writing practice. Besides, games are more fun too!

Karen Beardsley is a Pediatric Occupational Therapist specializing in Early Childhood for over 25 years and has worked extensively with children who have Autism, Sensory Motor learning problems and Developmental Delays. She is certified and registered with the National OT board in the United States; licensed in the State of Oregon; and a member of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists.

She has taught workshops in the US and Asia and is a published author.

Karen currently lives in Phuket, Thailand where she has a private practice and works collaboratively with families and schools.

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