

The Importance of Handwriting

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Homeschooling Today – Jul/Aug 2005
Vol. 14 Issue 3, pp. 56-57

The goal for handwriting is legible letters and numbers written at age-appropriate speed. When to start? How to get there? How to choose a program?

The trend in the United States is to start school earlier and earlier. Parents and educators are anxious that children get a running start; the hope is that they will acquire maximum academic achievement. When we look to some of the cultures that surpass us academically, we see that many start a child's education at age six and a half to age seven. But we can wait until a child is ready and let him enjoy the God-given pleasures of childhood while he can.

Suppose a child loves to read. Allow and encourage reading, but take care with handwriting. Letter and numeral formations must wait for young hands to develop sufficiently so that a child is able to hold a writing tool comfortably with the forefinger (call it the "writing finger"), which is in charge of moving the tool. The thumb and middle finger are there for support only, to keep the tool from falling out of the hand.

If taught to write before a child is ready, he will form habits of holding crayons or markers too tightly. If he must write more than a few lines, his hand will hurt. Pencil-hold habits are hard to change. Keep those poor habits from forming so that the child will not have awkward, illegible writing.

Often a child will use his thumb for additional support. Unless there is an open space within the cup of the hand large enough for a small ball to fit, the pencil hold will be poor.

Young children want to please the adults in their life. How can we teach handwriting at a later age when a young child wants to imitate parents sooner? He sees Mom writing, and her expression says that her marks are important. Let the child pretend and write with paper and a short, fat crayon that is easy to hold. Gently guide the forefinger into dominance. Meanwhile, provide lots of activities to strengthen the hand: pick up beans, string beads, pick up and press tiny pebbles into clay. Our adult fingers do fine motor work every day, so engage your child in some of those activities.

How to Get There

To "get there" with real writing instruction, start with gross motor movements. A child can stand at an easel to write or paint on large paper. This provides ideal eye-hand coordination. Write letters in sand, or mud – an all-time kid's favorite! Use a jellyroll pan with rice or finger-paint – chocolate pudding is cool! Let the child write on steamy glass. Instruct your child to always use the writing finger to form letters.

Posture and rhythm are two critical elements of handwriting. Every physical activity depends on relaxed posture, neither tense nor slouched. There is rhythm in effective movements, whether for playing baseball or piano.

Chant or sing stroke directions. Write with the eyes closed. It's fun to open your eyes and see the results. Both chanting and blind-writing implant habits of movement for the different letters and numerals. Background music soothes tension and supports rhythmic movement.

Young children draw letters slowly, but it is important to establish rhythmic movement early. By grade two or three, handwriting is more automated, allowing a child to think about content, spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation while forming letters. Literacy is a sophisticated human endeavor, and these multiple considerations take handwriting into the complex graphomotor skill (muscular movements in writing) that it is.

The handwriting of an eight-year-old will look childish and be relatively slow, but the tempo will speed up as he or she grows and develops. Rhythmic, consistent movements sustain legibility when writing rapidly.

How to choose a Program

How can you choose a program? A packaged curriculum can be a problem if the handwriting instruction does not meet your criteria and you are required to supplement it with an alternative program. This means more teaching effort for you.

The posture and activities mentioned apply to every handwriting program. However, consistency requires you to start with one way to form letters without changing. That eliminates all programs that present manuscript first, followed by conventional cursive. Letter formations for these two methods change radically. Manuscript letters start at their tops. Most lowercase, conventional cursive letters start at the baseline, capitals start at various points, and many letters change shape altogether. That third grader would need to focus on how to make the next letter rather than on the next word to write.

Until the 1920s children were taught cursive only; it was conventional cursive that employs undercurves, overcurves, and loops for lowercase letters so that all will join within words. With modern pens and the tripod hold, one will attain more consistent letter shape, slant, and size if the pen is lifted occasional in multisyllabic words.

I prefer an italic method for its simplicity and ease of learning, but you might favor the conventional cursive. Whatever your choice, choose wisely to avoid the risk of trauma when unnecessarily changing a child's habits of movement. You will help your child reach the goal of legible letters and numbers written in beautiful style.