



Handwriting Problems & Solutions

Handwriting is a tremendously complex task, requiring perfect integration and coordination between both sides of the brain and the hand and arm. Children must integrate movement patterns in their muscles and joints with information stored in visual and spatial memory (shapes and forms of letters) and auditory information (hearing words inside their heads) so that they know what to write and how to sequence it.

When we see dysgraphia (difficulty with writing), it is important to continue to strive for quality. Dysgraphic children often need extra time to write and may need to write less at a time, as the work on improving their writing.

Quality vs. Quantity

- Place an alphabet strip and a number strip at the top of the desk (manuscript or cursive). It is easier to reference than a sample above the chalkboard. Put a green dot on the left-hand side as a special reference to remind the child to go from left to right.
- Circle representative problems/questions in workbooks, instead of requiring the whole page, which can be overwhelming and cause the child to rush and be unclear.
- Do not require the student to copy questions or math problems as part of the assignment. Instead offer a photocopy of the page which he/she can fill in. Keep the emphasis on problem solving rather than copying.
- Request minimal copying from the chalkboard, unless the child likes it. Instead, offer a sample on the desk, so the child doesn't have to keep changing visual fixation from far to near and vertical to horizontal.

Specific Strategies

Poor pencil grasp: The best way to hold a pencil is using a "tripod grasp". This is when the pencil is supported by the thumb, index and middle finger. Some children will use a modified tripod grasp, but this should not be a cause of concern unless it is affecting their writing. Because many children begin holding a pencil in preschool, they may have already developed an alternative grasp. If children develop poor habits and you may need to try adaptive grip to help position their fingers. Children do not need to use the pencil grip constantly- too much may frustrate them. When modifying the pencil grasp, have the child only use the adaptive grip for a short time each day. This will help the child get use to the feel of a new grasp. Too much awkwardness may make the child resist change. Also, using golf pencils and 2-3" broken crayons promotes use of a tripod grasp

Child holds pencil too close or too far from the tip: Put a reminder where the paint stops- either a small rubber band or draw a ring in permanent marker.

Child holds pencil straight up in the air: The child may be having a difficult time separating the two sides of their hand. There is a mobile side to the hand which maintains a grip on the pencil (the thumb, index, and middle finger) and the stable side which are held tightly bent (the ring and pinky finger). By placing two rubber bands looped together with one loop placed around the child's wrist and one loop around the pencil, you can help anchor the pencil in the web space between the index finger and the thumb.

Child has a difficult time manipulating a large or regular size pencil: Studies have shown that using large diameter pencils does not improve a child's grip or ability to write legibly. Having children use writing implements which are out of proportion to their hands may make things even more difficult. Think about how you feel when using large pencils or crayons- does it improve your legibility? Use golf-size pencils or with children. Adults write with pencils in proportion to their hands so why shouldn't children?

Child writes with an open hand or fingers straight: Have the child hold a small sponge, piece of crumbled tissue or a marble in the last two fingers while they write. This helps stabilize one side of the hand so the mobile side is more accurate in its movements.

Child writes too hard: This can be related to a lack of sensory feedback. It can be exacerbated by a poor pencil grip. Try having the child do pencil drawings where they color in spaces with different shades of gray. Mechanical pencils can be helpful because they snap when pressed on too hard. Placing a piece of craft foam under the child's paper can also teach him to grade the pressure, since pushing too hard pokes a hole in the paper.

Child writes too soft: May also be affected by a poor pencil grip. Try having the child "cross out" text by doing dark scribbling.

Child does not space between words: Exaggerate the spaces by putting "nothing" between the words. You can use an underline between words to mark the empty space. (ex. See__ Spot__ run.) You can also place a small bingo marker or a sticker between the words

Child's writing movement comes from their entire arm when they write: Make sure the child's desk height is appropriate so that they are sitting upright and their arm rests easily on the surface. Allowing the child to weightbear comfortably through their arm when righting helps to stabilize it. You can also try having the child lay on the floor to write. Having the child write on a vertical chalkboard or stable easel helps the child put their wrist extended (bent up), which is the optimal position for writing. It also strengthens the shoulder muscles.

Poor posture: Make sure that the child is appropriately positioned at their desk when writing, with feet flat on the ground and their bottom all the way back in their seat so the back of the chair can help support them. A comfortable desk height is one hand width above the belly button.

Poor paper placement: Put a tape line on the desk to give them a visual cue for lining up the bottom of their paper. For right handed writers the paper should tilt left and vice versa.

Child tends to lie on the desk when writing: use a slant board or hard 3-ring binder for keyboarding and writing activities. It encourages upright posture, and is visually easier on the child.

Child leans on arms and slides forward on their desk: Put no-slip shelf liner under elbows.

Trouble aligning numbers: Provide graph paper for math or spacing during writing. It helps with orientation on the page and aligning numbers for addition and subtraction.

Letter and number reversals: Give the child visual cues for left right orientation (place a sticker at the top left hand corner of their paper and desk. Focus on correcting one reversal at a time instead of all of them at once.

Child has a difficult time seeing the blackboard: Make sure the child's vision is not the issue. For some children, it is difficult to visually move between a horizontal and vertical surface. A slant board or large three ring binder as a writing surface may help.