

## PARENT SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING HANDWRITING

Sharon R. Berry, Ph.D.

As a general rule, concerns about handwriting have little merit when considering other academic priorities. Some people, even educators, say that legible, fluent handwriting is a relic of the past, given our current high-tech innovations that translate speech to text with the push of a button. So, why pursue improved "penmanship"? Even the word sounds archaic, doesn't it? Let look at the research, as well as some common sense, to find some answers.

In the most recent, and perhaps the best, integration of current studies on handwriting (including brain imaging), the conclusion was clear: "The results showed the numerous positive effects of handwriting, such as improved cognitive development and increased learning ability. Because it requires the integration of visual, motor, and cognitive (purposeful thought) brain processes, handwriting's benefits were proven to outweigh those of employing a mechanized device." This article (one of many) can be found at <http://fyiliving.com/research/handwriting-is-beneficial-to-childrens-cognitive-development/>.

Even more serious, Dr. Kaya Feder reports that "Failure to attain competency during the school-age years often has far-reaching negative effects on both academic success and self-esteem." However, there's good news: "Studies of handwriting remediation suggest that intervention is effective" (Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology 2007, 49: 312-317).

Let's take a closer look at two benefits of improving handwriting before we consider suggestions.

- 1) We are familiar with the term "multitasking" as the ability to do several things simultaneously. However, brain research reveals the fact that we do only one focused/ concentrated task at a time, although we can do hundreds of automatic/ habitual tasks. The goal of handwriting intervention is to so deepen the memory traces in motor memory that it becomes automatic. The concentrated task then becomes the thoughts we want to express. Therefore, the speed and quality of what we want to communicate increase.
- 2) Notice the phrase above: "integration of visual, motor, and cognitive processes." This integration is of crucial importance as our brain efficiently communicate, sort, and coordinate information across both hemispheres and various control centers. Serious issues of integration are generally treated by occupational, physical and academic therapists. However, during developmental periods of life, young students just need some common-sense practice that results in both ease of production and self-confidence.
- 3) Writing our thoughts makes them more visible and stable (versus fleeting and easily forgotten). That's the reason we take notes when we really want to remember something. Handwriting is simply a tool in the process – much like the pencil itself. To serve us efficiently, it needs to work well without demanding much attention. The result is greater clarification of thoughts, more accurate storage to long-term memory and, subsequently, effective retrieval when needed in the future.
- 4) The skills of handwriting require attention and concentration. Children with attention deficits have a high propensity for handwriting and language problems – about a 50% co-occurrence rate. Brain researchers have noted improvements in both related to handwriting practice, (<http://davidsortino.com/intelligence-and-the-art-of-cursive-writing/>). Also see Gina Shaw, (ADHD Causes Motor Skill

Problems, *Neurology Now*, June/July 2011). Students with processing challenges often benefit from the approaches to improving handwriting as they develop skills in dually processing (e.g., listening intently while writing notes about what they remember).

We are familiar with the *Karate Kid* movies (both 1984 and 2010) where the teacher focuses on underlying skills before expecting the actual karate performance. That is a good metaphor for improving handwriting. We need to back up to work on some underlying skills then move toward efficient production. So let's review some suggestions to increase strength and coordination of the fine muscles used in handwriting.

- 1) Use small sports balls, clay (not play dough), squeeze toys, etc., to strengthen fine motor skills.
- 2) Add some resistance around the fingers (rubber bands work well) to open and close the fingers. Proceed to some coordination/ articulation by pulling one finger at a time in and out of the rubber band.
- 3) Practice lots of cutting with scissors. Start with heavy straight and soft curved lines. Move toward cutting more precisely with difficult/ more intricate shapes. Cutting clay or foods with kitchen scissors works well also. Old newspapers and magazines are wonderful for making collage pictures to send to grandmother.
- 4) Play games that require precise finger movements – copying finger movements, string games for two (check online resources), peg boards, tweezers to pick up small beans, buttoning and unbuttoning, adding a time element, etc.

Our next focus is using writing instruments.

- 1) All kinds of finger-tracing and drawing along with all kinds of mediums – dirt, sand, pudding, whipped cream, whatever seems fun. The idea is to track, and later copy shapes, pictures, letters, etc. You can also use a wet finger to draw/ write on a chalkboard.
- 2) Use larger barrel writing instruments at the beginning. Water-based markers are great, kindergarten pencils, grips around regular pencils, chalk in a holder, etc.
- 3) You can use a broad-tip highlighter to draw shapers and pictures, and the child can trace them. You can also use broad chalk lines and various colors of chalk. Practice lots with the basic shapes of printing: straight lines tall and short, slanted lines both directions, tall and short, circles, half circles, curves over, curves under, etc.
- 4) Practice these basic shapes on a chalkboard. The resistance of the chalk leads to a deeper memory trace due to the strength of kinesthetic/ physical feedback. Mount a medium sized one in the kitchen and keep a small one in the car. They have a multitude of uses!!
- 5) Move to practice of various letters. It's important to learn correct strokes from the beginning so that errors don't have to be unlearned later. Basically, the movements are always left to right, top to bottom. Circles always start at the top and move to the left first. Ask the teacher for directions or check on-line at [ZanerBlosser.com](http://ZanerBlosser.com). Practice easy letter first. As successive letters are learned, make patterns on the chalkboard for students to copy. For example: L H L H T  
H L E M N M N V A V A C c C c P R P R.

- 6) Step up to calling out letters and a number. Write 5 C's and 5 D's, for example.
- 7) Do not confuse b and d at the beginning!! A child needs to get b straight, then all similar letters will be contrasted to the basic letter. The sequence is b to p to d to g to q. This is important only if a student is struggling with the confusion. To get b solidified in memory for a right-hander, encourage the student to think of the ball in his right hand. The b always has the circle to the right of the bat (left arm straight). It's easier for a left-hander as long as we have taught left-right movement. She always starts with the line down.
- 8) Continue practicing at a chalkboard until the student is very comfortable with a set of letters before moving to paper. Start with unlined paper until a student is comfortable making the shapes. The space can be smaller by simply folding the paper in two, then four, then eight blocks. Only then do we add lines – first at the chalkboard then in smaller and smaller spaces until the student is comfortable with regular lined-paper and pencil size for his grade.
- 9) A young student is always motivated to write/ spell her own name, names of people in the family and the sentence: I love you! It's fine to put these in the process when the student shows interest. The easiest way is to use a broad marker, highlighter type, to print the information and let the student trace it then copy it until she is comfortable doing it independently. Teach and encourage correct strokes so that there is good transfer later.
- 10) A variety of on-line helps exists, but be aware that some don't provide sufficient practice with a sequence of moving from large motor movement to the more finite movements of printing. However, if interested, check out the application Ready to Write or the ZanerBlosser.com site.
- 11) Begin writing short notes to your child and encourage them to write notes back to you and to others. A technique called Dialogue Journaling sets up a periodic conversation in print where you say something about your day then ask a question. The child reads then answers in print, perhaps asking you a question. You respond but never correct the child's production because you want to keep the emphasis on the communication, not process. Instead, in your response you provide a correct model of any error (spelling, letter formation, etc.). You will begin to see the child make his own corrections as he notes the differences when responding back to you. It's a great process and, over time, allows you to see progress throughout the elementary years. This, of course, is secondary to the nurtured relationships and insights accomplished.
- 12) Speaking of time! Nothing will be accomplished without consistent effort. About 12-15 minutes a day is an excellent way to approach the challenge. Keep the emotional tone positive and the activity fun. Your child will take her cues from you! Memory patterns in the brain are established over time by repeated experiences. You will see the results – it just takes a little extra time.