

## Handwriting in the Early Years

In order that children eventually acquire a legible, fluent and fast handwriting style, they need to develop skills including:

- good gross and fine motor control
- a recognition of pattern
- a language to talk about shapes and movements
- the main handwriting movements involved in the three basic letter shapes are: l,c,r

What is the difference between gross and fine motor control?

*Gross motor control* is the term used to describe the development of controlled movements of the whole body, or limbs (arms or legs). Of particular importance in relation to handwriting is the development of good posture and balance. Activities such as dance, football, use of small apparatus, cycling, gripping climbing frames and building with large-scale construction kits all develop gross motor control.

*Fine motor control* is the term used to describe smaller movements, usually of the hand and fingers. Fine motor control is best developed through activities which involve small-scale movements.

Until children have gained reasonable fine motor control through art, mark making and other activities, formal handwriting worksheets are not appropriate

### Ideas for developing gross motor control

Consolidate the vocabulary of movement by talking about the movements children make, such as going round and round, making curves, springing up and sliding down, making long, slow movements or quick, jumpy movements.

Show children how to make large movements in the air with their arms, hands and shoulders. For example, fix ribbons on to the end of sticks for the children to swirl in the air. Encourage the use of both sides of the body.

Let the children make different body shapes/actions in response to music to help them to remember the shapes.

### Developing letter shapes using gross motor movements

- Encourage children to skywrite with both hands.
- Ask another adult or a confident child to model the movement with her/his back to the rest of the children. Stand behind the children to check they are all following the movement correctly.
- Let children make patterns in the air or on each other's backs.
- Make a letter shape in the damp sand tray

Reinforce the vocabulary of movement, for example *the curly caterpillar*, *the long ladder* and *the one-armed robot*. Talk about the movements as you make them, using a 'patter', for example for the one-armed robot: 'Start at his head and go down to his feet. Bounce back up and go over for his arm.' While this is helpful in the early stages, it is purely to help to establish the movement. Reinforce a letter movement by asking the children to write the letter with their eyes closed.

### Some ideas for developing fine motor control

- Let the children make patterns using pegboards.
- Provide sewing and weaving activities.
- Involve the children in chopping and peeling in cooking activities.
- Provide woodworking tools – pliers, screwdrivers, hammers.
- Use finger rhymes, counting fingers, playing with words and sounds, etc.
- Provide small construction toys.
- Structure sand and water play to include sieving, pouring, picking up toys using tools, etc.
- Develop the pincer movement: show the children how to use tweezers to pick up and sort sequins, small beads, etc., sprinkle coloured sand, glitter, salt, etc. on pictures.

- Provide the children with paints, finger paints, etc. for making big patterns on differently shaped paper, for example fish, balloons, kites. Talk about the patterns they make. Focus on developing the *curly caterpillar*, *long ladder* and *one-armed robot*.
- Encourage the children to strengthen their fingers by using clay, play dough, Plasticine, etc., for modelling. They can make letter shapes and patterns using the modelling media.
- Encourage dexterity by asking the children to cut out large letter shapes or patterns. They can use different coloured marker pens for tracing along inside the shapes. Emphasise that circles and curly caterpillars need to be traced from the top and anti-clockwise.
- Give the children thick paintbrushes and water to paint patterns on walls, fences, etc
- Children should be offered activities which encourage them to develop controlled movements – both in terms of fine and gross motor control – through all kinds of play and cross-curricular opportunities. Children should be allowed to pick up the writing implement themselves and decide which hand they prefer.
- Only then should they be given help with the pencil hold. As children begin to discover their preferred hand for holding a pencil and once they are confidently using flowing movements, they can be introduced to smaller, more controlled activities.
- Through these, you can reinforce left → right hand movements, moving from the top to the bottom of a letter and reinforcing the anti-clockwise movement, etc.

### When should I introduce handwriting?

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### How does handwriting practice link into emergent/developmental writing?

Ideally, children need to be supervised when they are practising handwriting until letter formation is secure – bad habits reinforced in the EYFS are difficult to eradicate later on. Children who have experienced the multi-sensory approach to learning letter shapes are less likely to develop bad handwriting habits. The holistic approach to learning handwriting and phonics together is an ideal basis for emergent writing, because children become used to thinking about letter shapes and sounds together. As children begin to join letters to write digraphs and some high frequency words, their writing and spelling will become increasingly accurate.

### Should I use formal handwriting sheets?

Not to begin with. While children are experimenting with shapes and letter forms, fluency of movement is most important. Size and neatness do not matter at this stage. Children enjoy experimenting with making patterns in sand or salt, using finger paints, marker pens, etc. and incorporating these into drawings, etc

Once children have had plenty of experience in drawing the letter shapes without constraints, they can then move on to using pencils and finer pens on smaller sheets of paper.

### Why is a good pencil grip important?

If children are to develop a fluent and fast handwriting style, they must learn to hold a pencil with a grip that is relaxed but allows for efficient control of the pencil. If children grip a pencil too tightly, they won't develop a free-flowing movement and they will tire very quickly. Experts agree that children should be encouraged to hold the pencil between the thumb and forefinger with the pencil resting on the third finger. The thumb and forefinger should also be able to move slightly so that very fine movements required for writing are possible.