

# HANDWRITING SKILLS

Handwriting is a complex skill that requires postural control, fine motor skills, visual perceptual skills and motor planning. In Primary School, children learn how to form letters in print and cursive, develop pencil control, spatially organise their written work and become skilled in using handwriting to demonstrate their learning.

**The following strategies are commonly used in Occupational Therapy and are recommended to develop your child's handwriting skills;**

- **POSTURAL CONTROL, CORE STABILITY AND SHOULDER STRENGTH**

are required to allow the child to sit in a stable position and use their hands efficiently when drawing and writing. Refer to the fine motor and gross motor skills handout for further details on how to develop shoulder stability and core strength. Activity ideas include: Animal walks such as the crab and mule/donkey kick, holding the crab position for up to thirty seconds and pushing/pulling games such as tug of war.

- **SITTING POSTURE:** Ensure the child's desk and chair are at the correct height, feet should be flat on the floor, knees and hips at 90° angle (or hips a little higher than knees) with back straight and shoulders relaxed when forearms are resting on the desktop.

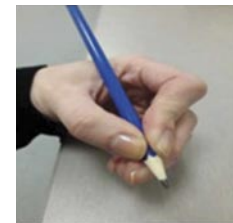


*"Chair in to begin Feet flat, Bottom back, Hands on the table Tall and able"*

- **PAPER POSITION:** The page should be in line with the forearm of the writing hand.



- **PENCIL GRASP:** A child's pencil grasp typically develops by the age of six/seven years of age. Your child needs to have sufficient strength in their shoulder, arm, wrist, hand and pinch to hold a pencil. Please refer to the pre-writing skills handout for details on developing an efficient pencil grasp. Efficient pencil grasps include a tripod pencil grasp (Pencil is held by the thumb and index finger whilst resting on the middle finger) or quadrupod pencil grasp (Pencil is held by the thumb, index and middle finger whilst resting on the ring finger). Practise picking up and positioning the pencil. When picking up the pencil remind your child to 'pinch it and flip it'. This is in relation to pinching the pencil and flipping it so that it rests in the webspace.



- **LETTER FORMATIONS:** Practise forming letters in shaving foam, paint, in sand, using pipe cleaners on paper. Trace over letters before copying independently. Place a letter/number chart in front of the desk where homework is completed.



- **IT IS EASIER TO LEARN LETTER SHAPES IN GROUPS:** The "Handwriting Without Tears" resource book by Jan Z. Olsen provides a technique of teaching letters by similarity of formation e.g. "magic c" letters include a,c,d,g,o,q. The web site for this resource is [www.hwtears.com](http://www.hwtears.com)

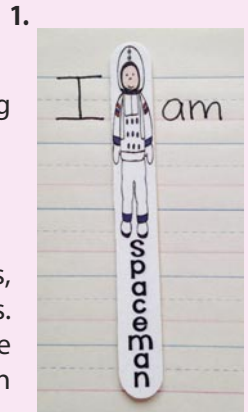
- **PENCIL CONTROL AND FLUENCY:** Doodle, consider using dot to dot patterns, trace over lines/ shapes, use mazes/drawing trails-encourage continuous movements and prompt child to keep pencil on the page. Practice letter/fluency patterns-start large and progress to smaller patterns e.g.



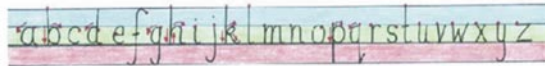
The Teodorescu Perceptuo-Motor Programme "Write from the Start" by Ion Teodorescu and Lois M. Addy is a useful resource book that helps to develop fine motor control with the aim of developing fluency and accuracy.

- **PENCIL PRESSURE:** This refers to both the pressure on the pencil and the pressure on the page. Applying too much pressure can cause the child's hands to tire quickly and can result in poor endurance for written work/ slow speed of handwriting. Strengthening the pinch grasp, writing hand, wrist and upper limb is important to develop your child's endurance and awareness of how much pressure needs to be applied to the pencil. Please refer to the prewriting and fine motor skills hand-outs for strategies on how to strengthen the upper limb. Practise writing on tissue paper when a child is leaning too heavily. Practise using carbon paper for a child that does not exert enough pressure onto the paper. Use mechanical pencils where the pencil lead will break when too much pressure is applied. Play writing detective. Your child can check if the pressure being used is too light, too heavy or just right. Continue to strengthen the hand and pinch grasp. Consider the use of an angled writing surface such as a slanted handwriting board which can help to position the wrist for handwriting. Your child may need to be reminded to stop and rest to reduce pain and fatigue.

- **SPACING:** Use a finger space, lollipop stick, create a spaceman by asking your child to draw a spaceman/astronaut onto a lollipop stick. You can help a child learn the importance of spacing by playing "Writing Detective" where the child corrects a poorly spaced sentence. Writing on graph paper or on the page of a maths copy could also be used when your child is learning about spacing.



- **LETTER SIZING AND WRITING ON THE LINE:** Use lined handwriting paper. Use the sky, grass, mud concept from the Handwriting Without Tears programme. All letters must sit on the grass. Grass letters are the same size and stay in the grass including c,o,u,i,n,m. Mud letters start in the grass and go into the mud including g,q,y,p,j. Tall letters go all the way up to the sky and sit on the grass including b,d,h,k,l,t. Colour in the lines for your child or draw the sky, grass, mud symbols as seen. Templates with the sky grass mud writing lines can be found online on websites such as: <https://www.sparklebox.co.uk/>



- **DIRECTION OF WRITING:** Develop awareness of right and left on themselves and in their environment. For example practise games such as point to something on your left, put your right hand on your left elbow, is the door on your right or left? Use a green margin on the left side of the page to indicate where to start writing and a red margin on the right to indicate stop and move onto the next line.



- **LETTER REVERSALS:** Work on one reversal at a time and use rhymes, words and stories to help the child remember. Cancellation games can be useful such as asking your child to circle all the b's and cross out all the d's in a paragraph. Use rhymes b=draw the baseball bat before the ball d= draw the c first and then turn into a d.



- **SELF-CRITIQUE OF HANDWRITING:** Encourage your child to critique their own handwriting. Create a checklist incorporating the questions; Have I used capital letters, full stops, spacing between words, was my helper hand holding the page steady, did I move onto the next line, are all my letters sitting on the line. Your child can use a tick box checklist to help with carryover day to day and learning. Encourage them to be a writing detective. There are many more tips and strategies available online such as on [www.teachhandwriting.co.uk](http://www.teachhandwriting.co.uk).

- If there are concerns regarding speed and the quality of your child's handwriting seeking an Occupational Therapy assessment may be required. If speed is significantly impaired your child may need to develop touch typing skills along with handwriting skills. Websites such as [typing.com](http://typing.com) can be useful to develop touch typing skills if required.

- If literacy skills such as spellings are negatively impacting on your child's free writing/writing their own stories consulting with the child's class teacher would be beneficial to explore reading and spelling skills. Seeking an Educational Psychology assessment may be required to formally assess literacy skills.

- When developing handwriting skills it is important that your child practises handwriting in school and at home. Encourage your child to write into a diary, write out the shopping list or write to a pen pal.



Cork & Kerry Primary Care Paediatric Occupational Therapy Departments