

Ideas for Teaching Handwriting to Children with Dysgraphia

1. Determine the child's hand dominance. This is crucial for the child's future success in writing. See *Determining a Student's Hand Dominance for Teachers and Activities to Encourage Hand Dominance* by Carrie Lippincott, OTR/L for additional guidance in this area.
2. Assess a child's visual motor skills. Is the child able to copy (look at a model and draw it) the following shapes? Horizontal line, vertical line, both diagonal lines, a square, circle, X, and a triangle. A child needs to be able to copy these shapes to be successful in learning how to write. (Beery, 1989)
3. Assess the child's fine motor and determine if they have a need for a pencil grip or writing utensil. For thumb wraps, the Grotto Grip or the Pencil Grip Crossover work well. For a little help in finger placement, Stetro grips work well. Try a variety of grips and see which one works well to help the student maintain an "O" in their pencil grasp. In the meantime, work on increasing the child's hand strength and improve his or her thumb use.

Also try a variety of writing instruments. Some children do better with heavier writing utensils. Larger diameter triangular pencils can be easier for children with poor fine motor control to manage. Soft leads require less pressure and may reduce writing fatigue.

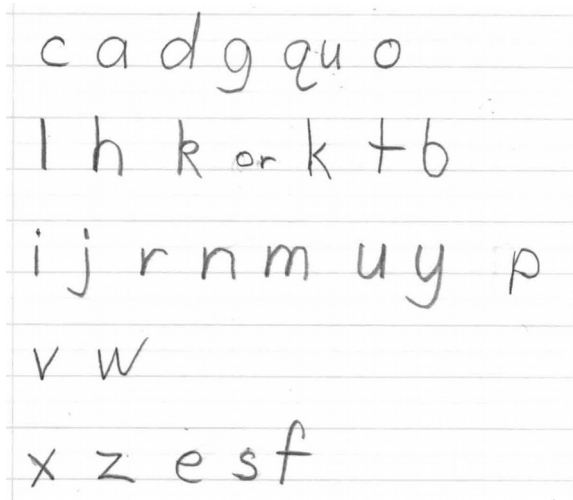
Start working on improving the child's hand strength and fine motor control, so that he or she will be able to eventually write without the pencil grip. Focus on having fun with tweezers, tongs and manipulatives to build the student's ability to use and maintain a pincer grasp with all of the finger joints of the thumb and index finger flexed. For activity ideas see *Developing an Efficient Grasp and Hand Strengthening Activities* by Carrie Lippincott, OTR/L.

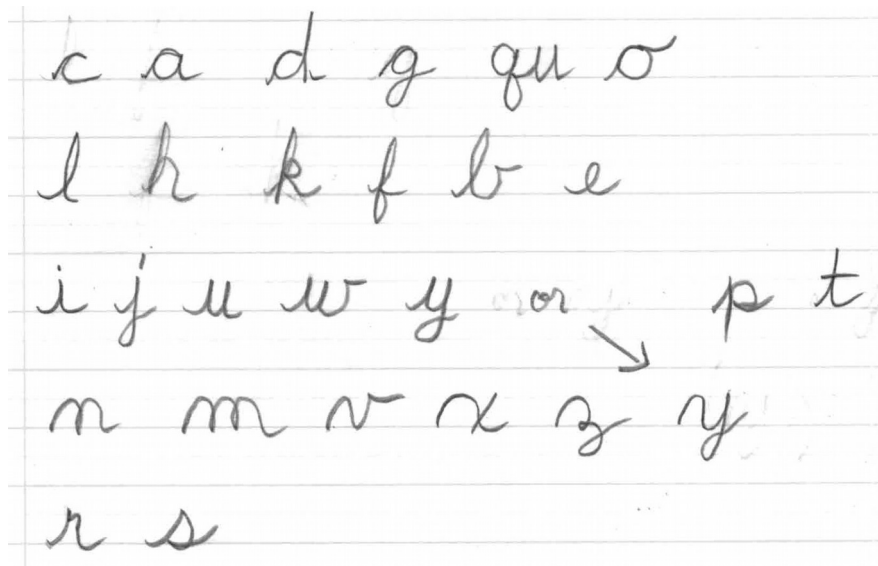
4. Do a lowercase alphabet writing sample to determine the child's baseline level of writing. A child needs to be able to automatically write the alphabet. Otherwise his or her working memory is being devoted to remembering how to form a letter, not leaving space to focus on ideas and grammar. It is helpful to mark a dot on the starting points on letters that are formed properly.

As a general goal, every child should be able to write the lowercase alphabet in manuscript or cursive in 25 to 40 seconds. If it is under 25 seconds, the child is writing too quickly and will have poor form. If the child takes longer than 40 seconds, the child's writing is not automatic. (McCleskey, 2005,)

The focus should be on mastering the lowercase letters first. The uppercase letters are only used in 2% of writing and initially should only be introduced as needed for student names and sentence beginnings. (Berninger, 2009, p. 84-85). *The volume of writing requested from a child should be minimized until his or her lowercase writing is functional.*

5. Introduce or review letters by grouping of letter formations, such as:





6. When learning new letters write large and preferably on a vertical surface. Writing large gives more input to the child so he or she can use gross motor movements to learn the motor patterns. Due to poor fine motor skills and feedback from the hands, these children can not reliably learn how to form their letters writing in a normal size. So instruction should start at a chalkboard, white board or on a strip of butcher paper taped to the wall. As the child learns the letter, instruction can move to smaller spaces: 6-8 inches (folded unlined paper), to 3-4 inches and finally 1" spaces.

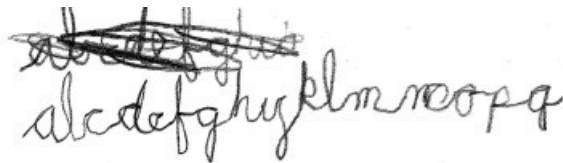
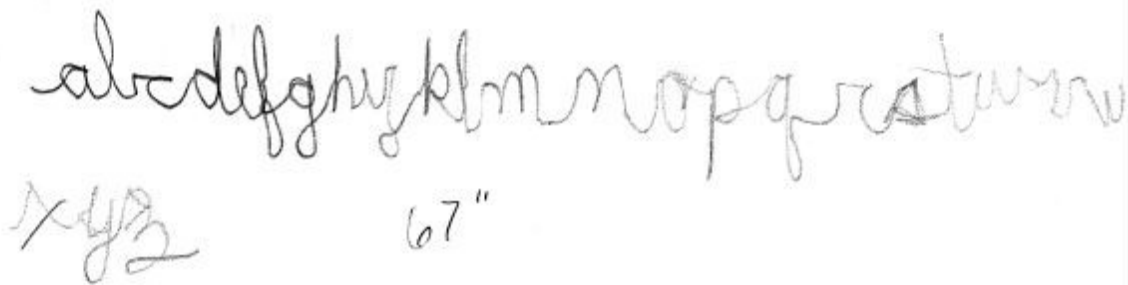
It helps to pair verbal prompts with each letter. Example: for a lowercase d say, "start like a c, go up to the top, and then down to the bottom." As the child learns each letter, make sure they can name it and know what sound(s) it makes. Children may also need to practice naming the letter and saying its sound as they work.

7. As soon as the child has learned a few basic letters, have him or her start to practice the letters in short words, such as: add, dad, gad, cat, lad, etc. Encourage the child to keep the focus on making the letters right, not to slip into writing quickly and poorly. (At this point of the learning, children should be discouraged from writing too quickly, the focus is on learning the letter formations.) Have a child write a word such as "lad" three times and ask them to put a smiley face by the one that he or she thinks looks the best (to practice self-evaluation). Working on a vertical surface (chalkboard, whiteboard, butcher paper taped to the wall) helps to support improving fine motor control of the wrist and thumb.
8. An easy way to track progress in learning the letters is to circle the letter on a chart when it is introduced/reviewed with a student. The next session, check to see if the letter formation is remembered without any models or prompting. Put a slash through the letter to mark mastery. Given a chart with the alphabet, children can mark off or put a sticker on letters as they master it. They often enjoy earning a small prize of some type when the lowercase alphabet is learned.

9. When teaching cursive, start with teaching the child how to make a series of 4-6 c's on a piece of butcher paper taped to the wall. Use crayons that provide a smooth feeling to help the child to get a sense of fluency (such as Crayola's Twistable Slick Stix, Colorix Silky Crayons, or oil pastels). Let the child use multiple colors to make rainbow designs. When starting, provide a child hand over hand assistance, so he or she can feel the movement pattern. Cursive c's can be compared to waves crashing over a little. Do not move on from the letter c, until the child is able to fluently make the letter with his or her eyes closed. This can take a while, but when a child masters this first, the subsequent letters are much easier.



- When practicing a cursive lowercase “l,” be sure to point out, how the downstroke portion of the letter is vertical. (Often beginning writers will try to come down moving diagonally. They need to feel the vertical portion in this letter.)
10. When moving to writing on paper, make sure the child positions the paper right. The edge of the paper should be parallel to the child's writing arm. Right-handers should write with the right corner of the paper higher and left-handers with the left corner higher than the right. This helps to prevent the hooking motion sometimes adapted by left-hand writers.
 11. Once a child knows how to form all of the letters of the alphabet, move to increasing their speed in writing the lowercase alphabet. The student should be able to write it in 25 to 40 seconds. Have the child practice writing the alphabet in the air with a plastic sword first, watching that he or she forms the letters properly. Then give the child a blank piece of paper and ask them to write the alphabet from a to z in lowercase letters. Time how long the child takes.



If the child finds it stressful to write the whole alphabet, start with practicing 6 to 10 letters from the beginning of the alphabet, focusing on learning this sequence first. Then slowly add letters to the series:

12. Another way to work on speeding up a child's writing is to give him or her a paper bag and colored markers. Give the child a short word (containing letters he or she has mastered) to write such as "cat," challenging the child to do it in less than 6 seconds. Time the child writing the word, and write it next to the word. Write it two more times, timing it each time, to see if the child can "beat" his or her time. (Continue to monitor that letter formations are acceptable.) As the child progresses, shift to longer words or phrases. (Boardman, 1994)
13. Once a child has mastered the formation of the lowercase alphabet letters. The focus can shift to increasing a child's writing speed and fluency and learning how to form capital letters. This can be done by timing how long it takes a child to write sentences. Be sure to write it 2 or 3 times. On the first trial the child figures out how the word order, how the words are formed and spelled. Then on the 2nd and 3rd trials, they can focus on increasing writing speed. Be sure to let children have a turn using the stopwatch, they love using them.

Special Notes on Cursive

Children with dysgraphia have often learned how to write poorly in manuscript, before their difficulty with handwriting is diagnosed. The children have learned to habitually form letters wrong, causing their handwriting to be hard to read. There is enough of a motor change between manuscript and cursive that children when they are older, can with careful guidance, successfully learn cursive and then have a legible method to write.

In addition, the fact that cursive has fewer start and stops can make writing easier for children with perceptual difficulties. Some children find cursive easier because it consistently starts on the foot line.

Provide specific instruction for children when learning how to connect letters that connect at the midline: *b, o, v and w*. One handwriting program calls these “tow truck letters.” Their connecting stroke “pulls up” the beginning connector of the next letter.

Many of the capitals used in cursive can be substituted with manuscript capitals to decrease how many capital letters the child needs to learn how to write in cursive. It is helpful to go through each of the capital letters and help the child to decide how he or she will form them use in cursive.

References

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