

the school years toolkit

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Handwriting

You have been directed to this Advice Sheet due to handwriting concerns for a child you are working with.

If you have used this Advice Sheet and not seen improvement after four months, please contact CYPIT.

Difficulties with handwriting can be caused by many factors eg poor sitting position, lack of fine finger movements, sensory awareness, incorrect pencil grip and visual perception.

Poor sitting position

Sitting in a good, comfortable position with a firm stable base will enhance the child's ability to control the pencil and allow them to concentrate on their writing skills.

- Make sure that the table and chairs are at the appropriate height for the child's size. This means that when sitting, the child should be able to put their feet flat on the ground with their knees at right angles and the table should be at elbow height.
- Teach the child to "check" their posture before starting to write with bottom back as far as possible in the chair, chair pulled into the table, feet flat on the ground.
- Incorporate positioning games before writing, for example, get the class to make outrageous positions in their chairs and then when you shout "Writing" the children have to resume the correct position for writing.
- An angled writing slope can also help to achieve a more upright sitting position.

Sensory Awareness

This involves interpreting the awareness of thumb and finger position and judging the correct force to use excessive (hard) pressure or insufficient (light) pressure.

Very dark writing – hard pencil pressure

Sometimes some children use deep pressure to provide them with additional sensory feedback as to how the pencil is moving on the paper.

- Have the child play "ghost writing" by writing a word very lightly on the paper and then erasing it without leaving marks.
- Try holding a soft sponge with ring and little finger to free up movement in the thumb, index and middle fingers.

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- Place a piece of carbon paper underneath the child's work and tell him that you do not want his writing to come through onto the underlying paper. The child may need to practise this first with writing shapes and then with letters.

Very light writing – soft pencil pressure

These children typically do not have enough finger dexterity or have a very weak grasp. If they were to push hard on the pencil tip, the pencil would slip out of their hands.

- To keep the pencil from slipping, start with using larger pencils or use pencil grips over the pencil. You could wrap a rubber band around the pencil about one inch up from where the point begins and the child can place their fingers on the rubber band to reduce slippage.
- You can get the child to rub a crayon hard on large paper to cover a picture.
- Activities to enhance overall shoulder girdle strength are also important. These activities include weight bearing activities on the arms such as wheelbarrow walking, animal walks, climbing up a climbing frame, pushing activities (keep the arms straight).
- Writing on a vertical surface, such as the chalkboard, whiteboard or wall, for part of the day is good for developing shoulder girdle strength.
- Try using a sloping desk or desk top.

Hand warm up

The following activities need to be carried out as a block of exercises together. They should be worked through before any written or dexterous work is to be carried out. Think effort: the more effort used to carry them out, the greater the sensory feedback received. They can be carried out by all children in a class at the same time.

1. Start by making stars with both hands by stretching out the fingers wide. Now make a tight fist with both hands and stretch the fingers wide again.
2. Link/weave their hands together. Ask them to extend their index fingers and push these fingers together.
3. Put their palms together and open and close their fingers. While in that position ask them to keep the tips of their fingers together and move their wrists apart. Make sure they are putting pressure through their fingertips pushing each fingertip pair in turn.
4. Chair push ups – sit on hands, palm side towards the floor or chair. Lift bottoms off the chair by extending elbows and pushing down. Repeat this pushing activity at least 10 times.
5. Monkey grip – hook fingers together and pull with elbows extended away from the body.
6. Wring hands as if it is a really cold day.

The above can be added to using your own ideas – think of ideas that involve squeezing or pulling.

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Poor pencil grip

By the age of nine, most children have developed a grip that is comfortable for them and it is very difficult to change this. Here are some suggestions that could be tried:

- If the child has difficulty placing their thumb in the correct position, put a coloured dot on the place where this thumb needs to go to provide a visual reminder.
- Use pencil grips to help the child use the thumb, index and middle finger to hold the pencil.
- For children who have a hard time keeping their ring and little finger tucked in as they write, ask them to hold a small piece of paper in these fingers as they write.
- To ensure that the pencil rests in the webspace, place a weight at the end of the pencil. Alternatively, place a rubber band around the wrist and around the end of the pencil and allow the band to pull the pencil down.
- Trial different types and sizes of pencils and pens. Some children work better with roller pens, pens with indents for fingers and others with fountain pens. It is sometimes just a case of trial and error.
- Writing on a chalkboard using very small pieces of chalk encourages the use of the thumb, index and middle finger.

Very small writing

- Allow the child to write on the chalkboard / whiteboard using large movements resulting in large letters (for the children in the back of the class to see!).
- Writing on triple lined paper will help them to see the borders of the letters as they improve slowly progress to one line only.

Very large writing

- Ensure that the child understands why they need to write smaller and demonstrate to them the size that you would like the letters to be.
- You can play the game “Human Copy Machine” where you provide the child with a good handwriting sample with letters the appropriate size and height. The child must try to copy it exactly and review their own work and give themselves a tick/point for every letter or word that matches the sample.
- Try using small squared paper prompting the child to contain the letters in the squares.

Very slow writing

- Ensure that the child knows how to form each letter before asking for speed.
- See alternative methods of recording (below).

No spaces between words

- When practising writing, have the child say the word “space” after each word to remind themselves to leave a space.
- At first, encourage the child to leave an exaggerated, exceptionally large space between each word. One can expect that under stress, the child will shrink the size of the

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spaces.

- The child could draw squares in the places where the space should be to make them more aware of CYPIT presence. You could also use coloured, round stickers in the place of the spaces to increase the child's awareness of spaces.
- For children who are beginning to understand the concept of leaving spaces, but are still not consistent in demonstrating it, you can help the child by making a "spacebar". This is a piece of paper, lolly stick or preferably cardboard, one or two centimetres wide. Encourage the child to use this after every word to help them keep the spacing a consistent size. Check their work with them by placing the spacebar after each word and indicating which spaces are too small.

Difficulty copying from the board/book

- Teach the child to scan only for the last two letters of the last word instead of re-reading the entire text. Practise this by asking the child to look for a specific word by just giving the first two letters.
- Teach the child how to recognise words by their length so they can scan for them more rapidly.
- Teach the child to memorize larger groups of letters and words when copying, so they won't have to look back at the source so often.
- Encourage the child to write without having to look so closely at their writing hand as the letters are formed. Try writing activities with eyes closed or hand covered.
- Use Post It note stickers or a ruler under the sentences for the child to find their place.

Alternative methods of recording

For some older children or young people, it is beneficial to promote alternatives to handwriting. This is particularly so when handwriting problems prevent the child achieving their academic potential.

For the student:

- Use a dictaphone to dictate a story or homework.
- Try using a word processor system - especially for when presentation is required.
- Use diagrams, spider diagrams and mind maps where possible.
- It may be necessary to allow the child to use a laptop in the class. A good resource for IT information is Ability Net. Telephone: 0800 269545 or www.abilitynet.co.uk. Their helpline provides up to date information about suitable IT equipment and suppliers.
- Write key points only when taking notes.
- Use plans when writing a story - divide into sections and write key points.
- Use answer sheets where the gaps need to be filled in.

For teachers:

- Give out photocopied notes where possible.
- Mark for quality of content rather than presentation.

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- Allow extra time for children with handwriting difficulties.
- Recognise that a child may be concentrating so hard on their writing that they miss the verbal instructions.
- Sit the child at the front of the class near the board.