

## Pre-writing skills

Before beginning to form letters, children need to:

- Have sufficient concentration to complete desktop tasks for at least 10 minutes at a time.
- Be orientated to written language.
- Be positioned well with feet on floor, sitting square onto a work surface which is the correct height.
- Maintain a steady wrist position that will enable controlled finger movements.
- Have a good ability to control pencil strokes.
- Be able to form some basic shapes that are required to form all letters, such as a circle and vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines.



- Be shown how to form the shape, before being able to copy pre-drawn shapes, as children learn to imitate shapes first before copying them.
- Be able to remember the movement patterns associated with forming shapes, to replicate the actions when copying.

The following are some activities and advice on how to facilitate pre-writing skills in children with special needs.

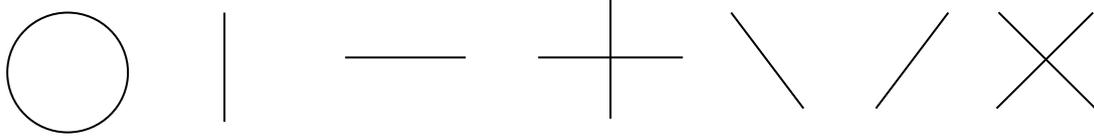
### Developing control of pencil strokes

- Use pre-writing/drawing activities to develop stroke control, where the child has to draw between two lines (ie mazes or follow the trail activities). You can increase the difficulty of the task by decreasing the width of the lines.
- Practice drawings of defined shapes and patterns on a large vertical surface, such as a blackboard, easel or paper pinned to the wall.
- Use activities where the child has to free draw to join the items, eg joining lines to match items that are the same, or crossing or making a circle around pictures that are the same.
- Colouring pictures will encourage the child to stay within the boundaries of item to be coloured. You can highlight the borders to emphasise following the limits of the picture. Keep pictures large until the child gets better stroke control and then progressively reduce the size of the picture. When colouring small items, the child will need to learn to change stroke direction.
- Give lots of opportunities for drawing, tracing, painting and colouring activities to gain practice in controlling the pencil.
- Use puzzle books and worksheets with activities such as connecting objects (eg matching), mazes and dot to dot games that require accuracy. Gradually increase the level of difficulty and accuracy required.



### Teaching pre-writing shapes

This is an appropriate developmental sequence of shape production in children:



- Teach the child to make simple marks and then form circles, horizontal, vertical lines and other shapes when drawing together. Use simple drawings that can include these shapes, for examples a circle and a vertical line can become a balloon, etc.
- Use activities such as simple dot-to-dot games, tracing, making shapes in the air, in clay, sand, shaving foam or finger-paints. This can be done using a finger or different tools or materials that can be used for mark making, eg paint brushes, modelling tools, chalk, sticks, crayons, felt tips, pencils, etc.
- Use different mark making surfaces, ie blackboards, whiteboards, Magna Doodle (magnetic drawing toy), Etch-a-sketch, etc.
- Diagonal lines: These usually take longer to recognise and learn for a child with special needs. Point out and talk about diagonals in the child's surroundings. Make small squares or give a square block of colour and teach the child to draw diagonally from corner to corner. Gradually, you can withdraw the visual clues, ie fade the coloured square and use dot to dot.
- Ensure that the child has acquired the basic patterns for pre-writing shapes before moving on to letter formation.
- 'Walk' shapes and letters that have been marked on the floor. Make shapes and letters with the body.
- Emphasise continually that work should be from 'top to bottom' and 'left to right' (if not teaching cursive).
- Make shapes or letters out of Playdough, pipe cleaners, in cornflower or any other sensory materials.
- Some appropriate commercial programmes to develop pre-writing skills are:
  - Hands at work and play (Pearson assessment)
  - "Write from the start" (Teodorescu Perceptuo – Motor Programme) Ion Teodorescu & Lois. M. Addy (LDA)
  - Handwriting without tears (J Olsen) (Pearson assessment)