

Developing handwriting

Handwriting develops as children develop increased control over their bodies and a desire to communicate through mark making. The *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* pages 61–62 sets out some basic elements of the developmental pathway that leads from babies playing with their own fingers and toes to the early learning goal for five-year-olds: **Use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.**

This guidance is designed to provide some additional support for practitioners working with children in Reception classes.

What should I teach about handwriting in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)?

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 as exemplified by: l, c, r.

What is the difference between gross and fine motor control?

Children can develop and extend their gross and fine motor control through much of the effective practice, planning and resourcing for Physical Development recommended in the *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*, pages 92–105.

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 (or of the feet and toes for children who communicate using touch sensitive pads with their feet). Fine motor control is best developed through activities which involve small-scale movements such as those described in the EYFS Physical Development 'Using Equipment and Materials' pages 103–105 and Creative Development 'Exploring Media and Materials', pages 110–112.

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

Many early years practitioners find that boys develop fine motor control more slowly than girls.

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. Invite each child in the group to trace over the shape, going a little deeper each time. The object is to get down to the base of the sand tray without the sides falling in.
- 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.

What kinds of letter patterns should I teach?

When you introduce patterns for writing to children, it is useful to focus on features which keep recurring in letter formation, for example:

- focus on patterns which build on the three basic letter shapes:
 - l, for example *the long ladder*
 - c, for example *the curly caterpillar*
 - r, for example *the one-armed robot*
- include patterns that move across the body, from left to right
- use pattern-making for different purposes.

Sometimes, allow children to produce the pattern across the entire line. This encourages fluency of movement and helps to emphasise the right to left direction of our writing system.

At other times, it may be useful to restrict the number of repetitions to four or five so that the child learns a little about the need to leave spaces between words.

- keep talking about the movements you make in the patterns
- let the children invent 'sounds' to make as they draw their patterns, for example a bouncing sound as they bounce up from the one-armed robot's feet, a buzzing sound as you draw anticlockwise spirals, a **shsh** sound as you make wave patterns, etc.

- some children find drawing patterns in time to music helpful. Arches can be formed to slow, relaxed music and the tempo can be changed to a marching rhythm and children encouraged to produce angled movements.

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's names

Children's names are a useful source of learning for both phonics and handwriting. However, some children who come to school already able to write their names may associate the wrong movement with certain letters (the common error is forming o and a using a clockwise movement). A sensitive approach is needed here, but when the child has learned the correct movement he or she will have acquired over a third of the alphabet! Close home–school links really pay off in this area, and a sheet of letters showing correct formation should always be available for parents.

Choice of paper

As children begin to write letters, having practised the letter shapes through skywriting and other large-scale activities, provide them with a large piece of paper (turned landscape) with a single line.

Lined paper is important because so much about handwriting is to do with the letters' orientation to the line. Line guides are useful for older children.

When should I introduce handwriting?

Skills for handwriting can be introduced from a very early stage. Some children with special educational needs (SEN) may require specific support or provision. It is important that an accurate assessment of needs is completed to ensure that the appropriate support and provision can be planned. It is also important that where appropriate, children with SEN are included in group handwriting practices and that the highest expectations are maintained. On occasions it might be necessary to consult local SEN advisory and support services for guidance on approaches and resources but largely, practitioners will find that these children are on the continuum of learning handwriting skills and will respond positively to good quality first teaching, reinforcement of skills and appropriate small steps targets. They will need skilled practitioner input. Most importantly teachers need to assess accurately where the child is, and plan carefully for the small steps of progress which will support them in eventually achieving the Early Learning goal. Practitioners should offer activities which encourage children 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 (see sections on pencil grip and left-handed children). 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. Some children's previous experience of print forms in languages other than English may have prepared them for the movements required to write English letters. Other children will need to learn there are differences between the directionality of English and that of other print systems.

Specific advice and guidance can be obtained from local ethnic minority achievement services.

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.

Is there a recommended style of handwriting?

Each school should have a handwriting policy which aims to teach children to write in a way that is legible, fluent and fast. This entails a style which enables the letters to be joined easily. If children find the physical act of scribing taxing, they will be unlikely to develop into confident effective writers.

Continuity from EYFS through Key Stages 1 and 2 is vitally important. Not only should a school have an agreed style, but also an agreed 'patter' for helping children to recall the required movement for each letter. Teaching assistants and student teachers should be aware of the style and the 'patter'.

Using 'shape families' to teach letter formation

For simplicity, the letters of the alphabet can be sorted into four main movement groups. Some letters have different forms – b, k, y, v, and so these fall into two groups.

Some letters e.g. f, s, have some affinity with a group but could be taught separately.

The advantage of aligning letters with a key letter is to help children to remember the starting point and subsequent movement of the letter. This is particularly effective in discriminating b from d.

The four groups are:

- down and off in another direction, exemplified by the letter l (**long ladder**): letters i, j, l, t, u (v, w with rounded bases)
- down and retrace upwards, exemplified by the letter r (**one-armed robot**): letters b, h, k, m, n, p, r; (numbers 2, 3, 5 follow a clockwise direction)
- anti-clockwise round, exemplified by the letter c (**curly caterpillar**) letters: c, a, d, e, g, o, q, f, s; numbers: 0, 6, 8, 9
- zigzag letters: letters: v, w, x, z; numbers: 1, 4, 7.

Preventing confusion between the letters 'b' and 'd'

Introduce each letter of the alphabet in association with its key letter (l, c or r). The letter d is a 'curly caterpillar' letter: it starts exactly like a c, but then 'goes up to the top in a straight line and then down again'. The letter b is a 'one-armed robot' letter: it starts higher than the letter r, but when it touches the line it goes back again, over and round. In this way children learn letters as movement rather than as visual shapes, and so they have a mechanism for remembering letters that are visually confusing. In *Letters and Sounds*, the letter d is learned in Phase 2, Set 2 and the letter b in Phase 2, Set 5. If the letters are taught effectively, the motor memory of each letter will be paired with the phoneme and will not present a problem.

Why is good posture important?

Developing a good posture is as important as developing a good pencil grip. Over the years children spend a great deal of time writing, and sitting in an awkward position can cause headaches, fatigue and pain in the shoulder, arm or hand. It can also slow down a child's writing.

Children will be able to sustain writing for longer if they become used to sitting comfortably.

- Ensure that they have a good pencil grip – use commercial pencil grips only if other methods have failed.
- Check that tables are large enough for the children not to be jostling each other's arms.
- Check that the height of tables and chairs allows children to sit comfortably, with their feet flat on the floor. Their legs should be free and not come into contact with the underside of the desk top. They should be able to sit up at the table without having to lean over it or stretch to reach it.
- The lighting should be good, so that the children can see what they have written.
- Children should use their non-writing hand to steady the paper and bear some body-weight.
- The paper should be tilted slightly.
- Provide a slanting board for those who need it (a partially filled A4 file is a useful shape).

Should I use formal worksheets to teach handwriting?

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. (*Mark Making Matters: young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development* (DCSF ref 00767-2008BKT-EN) provides more guidance on the significance of practitioners' role in fostering and celebrating this early mark making.

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. For instance, you could cut out some green cabbage leaves for them to draw lots of caterpillars (letter c). The children could then cut a short slit up the stem, and with adult help, fold and staple a number of leaves together to form a cabbage. Similarly, they could draw apples lying under a tree (a) or oranges growing in a tree (o). To start with, the children could trace over 'the apples' and you may want to put a mark at the point where the 'letter' begins.

Then they can go on and do some more by themselves. This sort of handwriting 'worksheet' has motivational appeal and will help in the development of fine motor control.

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.

Commercial pencil grips, or triangular pencils, can be used to encourage this pencil hold but their use must be monitored as they can be misapplied. Care should be taken that children do not grip the pencil too tightly, as this produces tenseness in the arm and shoulder and also increases pressure on the paper.

Left-handed children

At least ten per cent of the population is left-handed – a slightly higher proportion of these are males. There is no need for left-handed children to be disadvantaged when writing, if a few simple strategies are employed:

- Model letter formation, skywriting, etc. specifically for left-handed children, with your left hand.
- Make sure that left-handed children sit on the left of right-handed children, otherwise their writing arms will clash.
- Put a mark at the left side of the page to indicate where writing begins, as some left-handed children mirror-write from the right.
- Left-handed children usually need to have the paper slightly to the left of the centre of their body and should be encouraged to tilt their work clockwise so they can see what they have written.
- Experiment with seat height – some left-handed children may need a higher seat to view their work clearly and to prevent the elbow locking into their side as they work across the paper.
- To avoid smudging their work:

- left-handed children should be encouraged to position their fingers about 1.5cm away from the end of their writing implement
- the pencil should sit in the 'V' between thumb and forefinger, sitting parallel to the thumb
- the wrist should be straight.
- Writing from left to right is more difficult for left-handed children. They should, therefore, be given more attention in the classroom to ensure that they do not learn bad habits of position, posture and pen hold which will hinder the development of a fast, fluent and legible hand.

Ascenders and descenders

Getting the movement of the letter right is one aspect of securing good handwriting. Establishing the relationship between the position of the letters is another. Lined paper (or the fine squared paper used on the continent) is essential. Show the children that the 'body' of the descenders (g, j, p, q, y), the part which sits on the line, is the same height as the x letter (a, c, e, i, m, n, o, r, s, u, v, w, x, z). In most styles, the letter t is shorter than the other ascenders b, d, h, l. The letter f is distinguished by the variety of ways in which it is written.

When should I introduce joined up writing?

As soon as possible once children are secure in the movements of each letter.

Words such as: at, am, it, in, up make good starting points. Some rimes work well: pin, win, tin, bin, din, etc. Rimes containing the vowels a and o are harder to join into from the base because the pencil has to travel up and round to the starting point of the letter, e.g. cat, dog, and should be avoided at the beginning. If you introduce each digraph as one joined unit, that reinforces phonics and handwriting, using multi-sensory channels to reinforce both. As soon as possible, you can start encouraging the use of joined up writing for practising some of the high frequency words too, to help to reinforce the fact that these words need to be remembered as wholes, e.g. the, little, was.

Most letters join with diagonal lines, e.g. man. When children start joining into n and m, there is a tendency to go into the base of the letter rather than using a diagonal join to the top of the letter. Draw children's attention to the letters which join from the top: o, v, w. The actual shape of the letter e depends upon whether the preceding letter finishes at the top of the x height or the bottom. For instance, when e follows d, it will simply be a loop; when it follows f, it is more likely to have the traditional e shape. Joining all letters has been shown to inhibit fluency. Many styles do not join after letters that finish to the left (s, b, j, g, y).

Handwriting policies

A handwriting policy should include information about:

- what the school's specific aims and objectives for handwriting are
- how the curricula for the EYFS and National Curriculum are to be covered with direct reference to Strand 12 'Presentation' of the Primary Framework for Literacy
- how handwriting will be assessed with reference to APP (Handwriting and Presentation)
- how letters are to be formed and the agreed 'patter' to accompany the movement (ideally there should be a sheet showing both individual letter formation and which letters are joined and how)

- how the school's preferred style of handwriting is to be shared with parents
- the extent to which children are encouraged to develop individual writing styles
- provision for left-handed children
- how handwriting is to be taught throughout the school, including in the EYFS
- recommended writing materials and implements, e.g. paper sizes, line spacings, when children are expected to write with pens
- provision for children with SEN
- advice on classroom management, e.g. balance of whole class, group and individual instruction; furniture layout
- provision for children who join the school in Year 1 or Year 2 with a different, but equally acceptable style of writing.