

Handwriting Essentials

Universal strategies to support handwriting development

Children and Young People Integrated
Therapies – (Occupational Therapy)
September 2023



Aims of this training



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

- To gain knowledge about the foundation skills of handwriting.
 - To be able to identify difficulties experienced by the child impacting on their writing ability.
 - Provide a range of strategies/advice that can be readily implemented at home and at school to address handwriting issues independently and confidently.
-

What skills do we need for handwriting?

The background features a large, faint, light blue handprint graphic. The handprint is composed of several smaller handprints, suggesting a child's drawing. The overall aesthetic is clean and professional, with a white background and a thin green horizontal line at the bottom.

Handwriting - what's involved?

Attention /
Concentration

Motor
planning and
organisation

Cognition and
language skills

Sensory
awareness

Hand / finger
strength

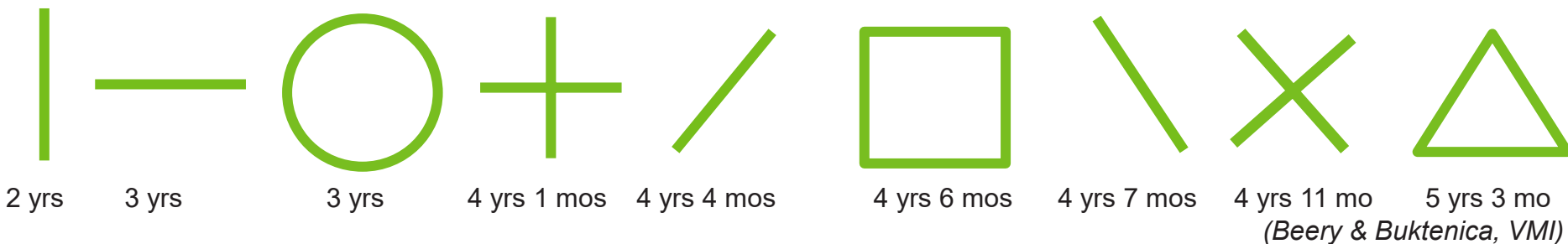
Hand-eye
coordination

Effective pencil
grasp

Good
postural
stability

Readiness for Writing Letters

Learning pre-writing shapes is important. Pre-writing shapes include the directional movements of horizontal, vertical, diagonal and curves which are the foundation for letter formation.



It is important for the child to practice pre-writing skills, including the pre-writing shapes, before they are expected to write.

Activities to help develop pre-writing skills

- Messy play – use sand trays, water, mud kitchen, shaving foam – use pipettes and scoopers
- Mark making using different writing tools e.g. paint (finger painting), shaving foam and sand to make it fun
- Aquadoodle
- Blackboards or use chalk on a playground/pavement/wall
- Playdough – use the tools such as shapes, rolling pins, pinch and pull and knead the dough
- Big gross motor movements such as animal walks and using playground equipment to build shoulder stability



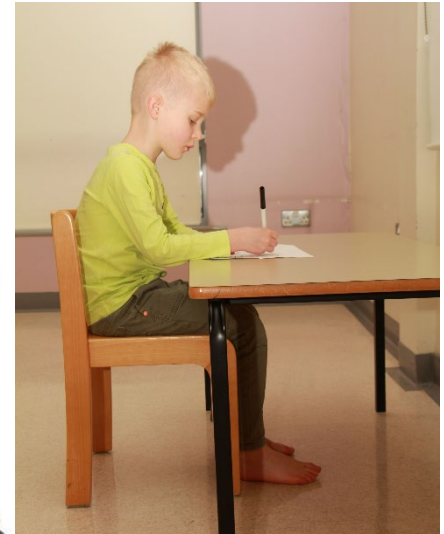
5 Ps of handwriting

- ✓ **Posture**
 - ✓ **Pencil grasp**
 - ✓ **Paper position**
 - ✓ **Pressure**
 - ✓ **Placement & Letter Formation**
-

Posture - what you want to see

Sitting in a good, comfortable position with a stable base will enhance the child's concentration and ability to control the pencil.

- Upright comfortable sitting position - back supported
- Hips and knees at 90 degrees- '90, 90, 90'
- Feet flat on the floor/footrest
- Chair tucked in
- Forearms resting on the table



Posture - tabletop strategies

- If the child cannot touch the floor with their feet flat, use a footrest (e.g. a wooden block, upturned box, etc.).
- Check if the size of the chair and table is suitable for the child's height.
- If the child is slouching, try using a move 'n sit cushion and an angled writing slope (or an A4 ring binder with a matt surface).



Posture - alternative positions

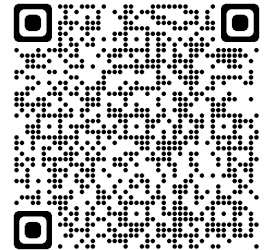


Posture - additional strategies



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

- Practice handwriting using vertical surfaces, e.g. stood up with sheet taped to the wall or use an easel or whiteboard/chalkboard.
- Shoulder strength and stability are important for improving hand function. Activities to strengthen the shoulders include wall and chair push-ups, lifting a big ball overhead and throwing it to a target, and activities that involve reaching above head height (e.g. arranging bookshelves).
- If the child has poor core strength, follow the core strengthening exercises/activities on the CYPIT website, follow the link or QR code: cypf.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/core-stability
- To help with attention, offer movement breaks.



Pencil grasp - functional grasp

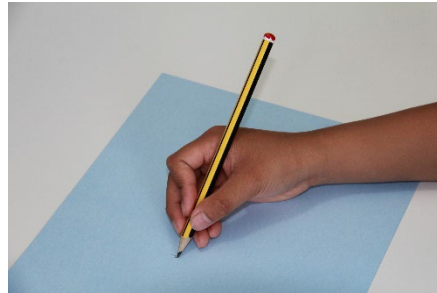
Having a functional pencil grasp allows the child to hold and move the pencil with ease and comfort which supports writing legibility and speed.

A functional grasp doesn't need to be a perfect tripod grasp, it just needs to be one which is efficient for writing.

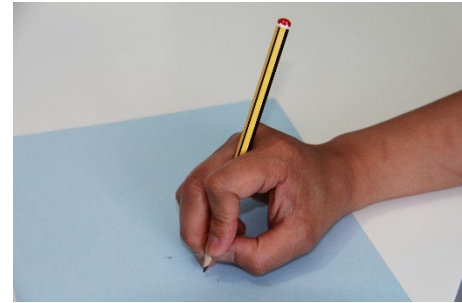
Efficient pencil grasps:



Tripod grasps



Quadrupod grasp –
four-fingered grasp



Adapted tripod grasp – pencil is held
between the index and middle fingers
supported by the thumb

Pencil grasp - inefficient grasp

An inefficient pencil grasp limits the movement of the pencil/pen making it challenging for the child to produce neat writing, complete written work in time and may cause discomfort or fatigue.

Inefficient pencil grasps:



Pencil grasp - what can you do

- Use very small pieces of chalk or crayon (approx. 2cm) to encourage the use of the thumb, index and middle finger and more of a tripod grip.
- Trial different types and sizes of pencils, pens and pencil grips to help the child hold the pencil effectively – this is **trial and error** to see what works and what doesn't.
- Complete some fine motor activities such as threading/sewing, posting coins, completing pegboards, using tweezers, Lego, etc.
- Practice drawing, writing or painting using a vertical surface (e.g. whiteboard, chalkboard, paper taped to wall) to encourage a good wrist position.



Pencil grasp - useful resources

Remember, finding the right pencil grip / pencil type is trial and error



Handiwriter



Claw pencil grip



**Cross-guard
pencil grip**



Ultra pencil grip



**Stabilo easy
original**



Penagain



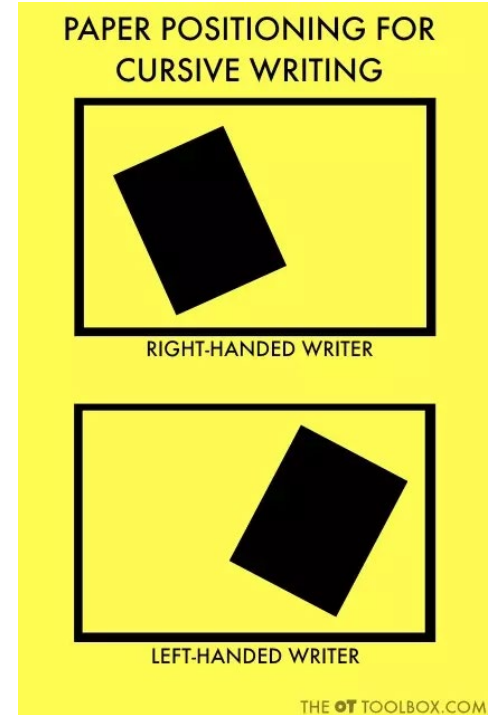
**Stabilo easy
ergo**

Paper position- what you want to see

- Right-handers– angle the paper to the left
- Left-handers– angle the paper to the right and move it to the left.

Paper position- what can you do

- Seating plan – Left handers to face forwards on the left-hand side of the classroom
- Encourage the use of the other hand to hold the paper when writing
- Give verbal prompting / reminders or print a visual prompt of this on their desk



Pressure- what you may see



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

Using appropriate pencil pressure improves fluency and reduces the risk of pain and discomfort when writing.

- **Heavy pencil pressure:** can cause pain and fatigue in the hands and can increase the amount of time it takes to write.
 - **Light pencil pressure:** this can make the child's writing difficult to read as the words are barely readable.
-

Pressure- what can you do



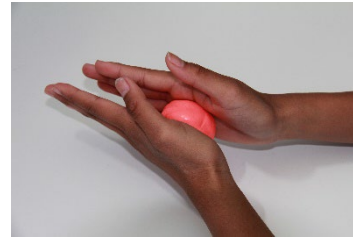
Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

- For children who use **too much force / pressure**:
 - Trial alternative pens/pencils, e.g. weighted pen/pencil, retractable pencil.
- For children who use **less force / pressure**:
 - Use softer leaded pencils so that writing appears darker.
 - Ask the child to write a word very lightly on the paper and erase it without leaving marks.
 - Warm up by squeezing a stress ball.

Top tip: Complete pushing, pulling and pinching activities, these activities provide increased sensory feedback to the joints and muscles and can help children who use either too much or too little pressure.

Pressure- what can you do

- Complete **hand warm-up exercises** before handwriting tasks, these could include:
 - Rub palms briskly together
 - Shoulder shrugs
 - Make a fist with both hands and stretch fingers x 10
 - Wring hands as if it is a really cold day
 - Press palms together with elbows away from body x10
 - Hook fingers and with elbows away from sides and pull x10
 - Shake hands out
- **Theraputty exercises** - please refer to CYPIT Handwriting online advice sheet: cypf.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/handwriting



Placement & Letter Formation- what you want to see

- Letters sit on the line with good alignment of ascending and descending letters
- Consistent size and spacing of letters and words



Placement & Letter Formation- what can you do

- Stages of teaching letter formation:
 - 1) **Imitation** – an adult demonstrates how to write the letter and the child imitates
 - 2) **Copying** – the child copies a letter which is already written
 - 3) **Independent letter formation** without copying
 - Teach them letter formation in groups of similar formations. For example, curly letters = c, a, d, g, o, s. Diving letter = b, r, m, n, p, h. Zig-zag letters = v, z, w, x, y, k.
 - Give the child an alphabet sheet to keep next to them as a visual prompt to help them with independent letter formation.
 - Be consistent with the style of writing, e.g. decide whether to use print or cursive, taking into account the child's preference and the legibility of their writing.
 - It is important to first work on the quality of writing, e.g. correct letter formation, before focusing on the speed of writing.
-

Placement & Letter Formation- what can you do



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

- Write on lined handwriting paper – make the line bolder as a prompt
 - Highlight the left margin of the page to help the child remember where to start writing
 - Create a spacebar using 1cm wide cardboard and encourage them to use this after every word to keep spacing consistent. Children can personalise their own spacebar by decorating it.
 - Encourage the child to check their work using their spacebar or a small dot sticker for immediate feedback
 - Practice visual perceptual skills through activities such as word searches, spot the difference, Where's Wally books, Dobble, copying patterns using Lego or pegboards, play I-Spy, jigsaw puzzles.
 - Practice visual-motor (hand-eye) coordination skills through games/activities such as ball games, sewing, mazes, cutting with scissors.
-

Alternatives to writing



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

Handwriting should not be discouraged and is an important skill to learn.

However, it is not always the most effective method of recording work. When handwriting becomes a barrier to a child reaching their academic potential and/or is impacting on their confidence, alternatives to writing should be explored.

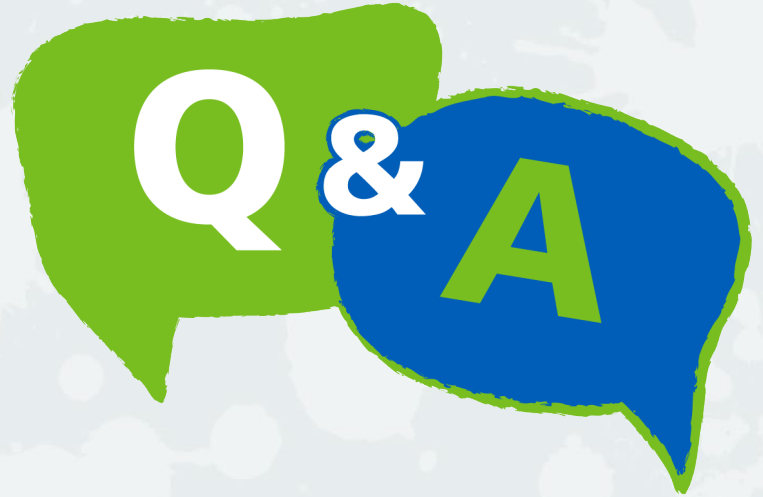
Alternatives to writing - Strategies



Berkshire Healthcare
Children, Young People and
Families services

- **Typing on a keyboard** – free online touch typing courses are available online, e.g. BBC Dance Mat. Computer/laptop's can be used to write longer pieces of work.
 - **Dictation** – different dictation software is available or a Dictaphone can be used.
 - **Scribe** – a child can record some of their work verbally and an adult write it for them.
 - **Clicker** – this is a child-friendly word processor
 - Use **diagrams** and **mind maps** where possible.
 - Write key points when taking notes and use answer sheets where gaps need to be filled in. Photocopy notes where possible.
 - Allow extra time for the child to write.
-

Questions?



Thank you for listening



Further help can be found via our website:

cypf.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/fine-motor-skills