

# TIPS FOR TEACHING

National Handwriting Association   
Promoting good practice

## Handwriting Difficulties

Identifying difficulties early and providing assistance will greatly enhance the child's ability to develop handwriting skills and enjoyment of writing.

This leaflet provides a checklist of indicators that a child is finding handwriting difficult and suggestions of ways to help.

If this boy does not receive help he is likely to:

struggle to keep up at school as there is still a great deal of school work written by hand;

have low self esteem that will affect all aspects of his life;

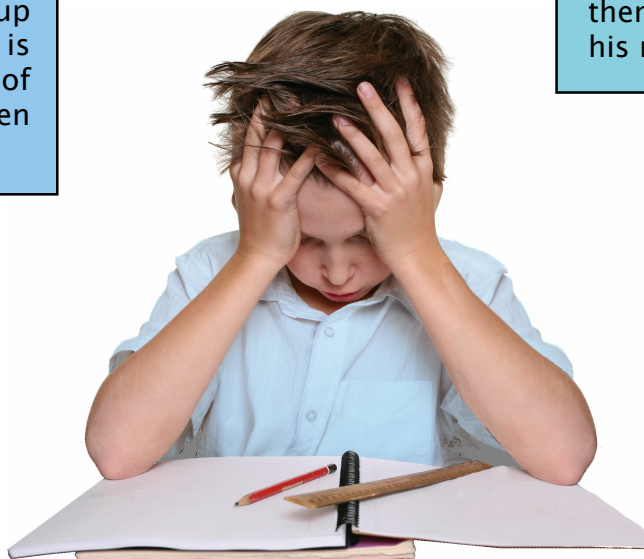
be reluctant to tackle writing tasks and therefore not fulfil his full potential.

He can be helped if:

his particular difficulties are recognised so that action taken to address them can be tailored to his needs;

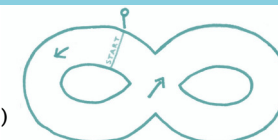
his difficulties are addressed as early as possible as changing habits is more difficult at a later stage;

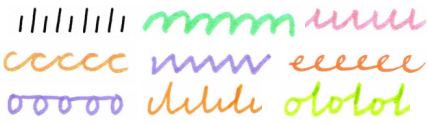
his ability and stage of maturity are taken into consideration when planning intervention so that he is not being asked to perform tasks for which he is not ready.



Not all causes of difficulty are addressed in this Tips sheet, especially those originating from visual and medical conditions, but the common causes are listed together with suggested approaches for intervention.

| Why is the child struggling?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | What can help?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| <p><b>Q Is s/he developmentally ready to write?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can s/he form an oblique cross?<br/>(It should have diagonal lines - not +)</li> <li>Is hand dominance established? Check by placing a pencil in a neutral position in front of him/her and note which hand is used to pick it up. Repeat regularly.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     | <p><b>A Develop pre-writing skills</b> (see p 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>draw 'lazy 8' - perhaps as race tracks</li> <li>other pre-writing patterns (see <i>Tips for Teaching</i> - Patterns)</li> <li>Most children have established dominance before they start school. If a child of ~6 years old is still unsure which hand to write with consult a paediatric occupational therapist.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <p><b>Q Does the child sit correctly for writing?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can s/he sit with good posture?</li> <li>Is the table is the correct height?</li> <li>Does s/he fidget on the chair?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p><b>A Encourage good sitting posture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feet should be flat on the floor and knees at 90°</li> <li>Hips should be at the back of the chair</li> <li>S/he should sit 'square on' to the desk</li> <li>Ideally the table should be 4 cm higher than the child's elbow</li> <li>Give verbal prompts to correct bad posture</li> <li>Introduce a rigid/air-filled wedge cushion to encourage active sitting.*</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>Q Does the child hold a pencil efficiently?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there pain in the hand when writing?</li> <li>Does s/he get tired when writing for a period and/or the quality of the writing deteriorate greatly?</li> <li>Can s/he control and manipulate the pen effectively?</li> <li>Is there a good space between the tips of his/her fingers and the pencil point?</li> </ul> <p>(see <i>Tips for Teaching</i> - 'Writing Grip' for further detail)</p> | <p><b>A Encourage an efficient pencil grasp</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage the child to pinch the pencil with thumb and first finger, with the middle finger behind (making a dynamic tripod) with an open and stable thumb web space.</li> <li>Use an adaptive grip - There are a variety of grips that can be put on a pencil to encourage a tripod hold and/or keep the fingers further from the point. Some elastics help position the pen/cil in the web space and even a rubber band on the pencil can keep the fingers away from the point. There are also pens designed to guide the fingers into a tripod grip. Trial which the s/he finds most effective and is happy to use. *</li> </ul> |



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| <p><b>Q Does the child maintain a stable wrist?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the writing hand kept below the writing line? (not hooked)</li> <li>Are the wrist and forearm in contact with the writing surface - and the wrist 'stepping along' when writing?</li> <li>Is the pen angled towards the shoulder?</li> </ul> | <p><b>A Encourage wrist stability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put a sticker on the side of the hand below the little finger that should be kept hidden.</li> <li>Can s/he make it impossible for a ruler to be slipped under their forearm when writing?</li> <li>Try writing on a sloping surface. (An angle of <math>\sim 20^\circ</math> is about right).*</li> </ul>                                                                                           |
| <p><b>Q Is the paper positioned well?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can s/he see the pencil point when writing?</li> <li>Is there a triangular space between the upper arm and the side of the child's body?</li> </ul>                                                                                                       | <p><b>A Encourage correct paper position</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Angle the paper anti-clockwise by <math>\sim 35^\circ</math> for right-handers</li> <li>Angle the paper clockwise by <math>\sim 35^\circ</math> for left-handers</li> <li>Position paper slightly to the right for right-handers</li> <li>Position paper slightly to the left for left-handers</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Q Can the child see what is being written?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This is a difficulty more commonly experienced by left-handers and is a big disadvantage when writing creatively and in spelling correctly.</li> <li>Does the writing often get smudged?*</li> </ul>                                           | <p><b>A Help to adjust writing position</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with him/her to find a way of holding the paper and tool that is comfortable and enables them to see the words they have just written. This might mean adapting some of the conventional rules about paper position and pen hold.</li> <li>As above and/or trial pens that do not smudge easily*</li> </ul>                                                                               |
| <p><b>Q Is the child using undue pressure on the pencil or paper?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look for white knuckles.</li> <li>Does the back of the written paper feel bumpy?</li> <li>Does s/he feel pain in the writing arm or neck?</li> </ul>                                                                          | <p><b>A Encourage light pressure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give verbal prompts about pressure on the pen</li> <li>Write on sheets of paper interleaved with carbon paper* and challenge him/her to make marks on fewer sheets</li> <li>Use a light-up pen as a training tool*. It should flicker as the child writes; on all the time - too heavy, off all the time - too light.</li> </ul>                                                                      |
| <p><b>Q Can the child make flowing movements?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watch as s/he writes.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p><b>A Encourage fluency*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Try lazy 8s (as above)</li> <li>make use of patterns and scribbles</li> </ul> <p>(see <i>Tips for Teaching - Patterns</i>)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                         |

\* Information about suppliers on p4

## Suppliers - some suggestions

### Development of pre-writing skills

Several programmes are marketed to help with physical motor co-ordination essential for the fine pencil control needed for handwriting e.g.

*Start Write, Stay Write!*; *Write Dance* and *Callirobics* from [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)

*Write from the Start* by Ion Teodorescu and Lois Addy

*Mark-making and Creativity*, Foundation 1 Teacher's Book, Penpals for Handwriting. CUP

### Sitting correctly and Stability

Table and chairs – several educational and specialist suppliers market varying height tables and chairs for optimal writing posture e.g. [www.backinaction.co.uk](http://www.backinaction.co.uk)

Support cushions - Movin' Sit from [ldalearning.com](http://ldalearning.com) and above.

### Pen/pencil hold

Adaptive grips – many different designs are available for adapting standard pencils. It is useful to have a variety of different designs available as the design that works for one child will not necessarily work for another. There is a wide selection on, for example, [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com); [www.taskmasteronline.co.uk](http://www.taskmasteronline.co.uk)

Specialised pens – many different designs are available, some with non-slip grips, and shaped grips for left and right-handers such as Stabilo 'Easy' range and Pelikan Griffix pens and pencils. Different types can help individuals depending on the weight, width of the barrel, type of tip, whether fine-liner, gel pen etc. Trialling is the best approach for finding which work best for an individual.

### Wrist stability

Sloping boards – make at home or purchase from several suppliers but check the angle before purchasing. [www.backinaction.com](http://www.backinaction.com) [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)

'Write Angle' from [philipandtacey.co.uk](http://philipandtacey.co.uk) 'Writestart Desktop' from [ldalearning.com](http://ldalearning.com)

Non-slip surface – Dycem from Nottingham Rehab Supplies: [www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk)

### Non-Smudging pens

There is a wide variety of pens which smudge very little. E.g. Edding Easy Writer, Stabilo Easy pens, Manuscript handwriting pen, Berol fineline - and many gel pens.

### Pressure on the paper

Carbon paper available from Ryman's stationery shops or Mi5 paper from [www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)

Light -up pens - [ldalearning.com](http://ldalearning.com) [www.sensetoys.com](http://www.sensetoys.com)

### Encouraging fluency

*Write Dance* and *Write from the Start* (see above)

### Further reading:

*Handwriting Pocketbook*. Julie Bennett, [www.teacherspocketbooks.co.uk](http://www.teacherspocketbooks.co.uk)

*Handwriting, the way to teach it*. Rosemary Sassoon (2003) Paul Chapman publishing.

*Start Write, Stay Write!* By Alison Harris and Janet Taylor (see above)

*Writing Left-handed* published by NHA [www.nha-handwriting.org.uk](http://www.nha-handwriting.org.uk)

*Tips for Teaching* by NHA - *Patterns, Writing Grip*