

## Early handwriting skills

### Handwriting as a meaningful activity

Handwriting is an essential skill learnt in childhood. It helps children to communicate and in most school settings, reflects academic ability and understanding. When handwriting is legible, it supports school staff to accurately assess whether a child is reaching their academic potential. There may be lots of factors impacting the development of this skill. As Occupational Therapists, we break down an activity to understand what is required to participate successfully. A child's fine motor skills, learning needs, posture and visual perception are just a few factors that impact engagement levels. The following information aims to support the development of handwriting skills.



### Developmental milestones for handwriting\*

Age	Developmental handwriting skills / milestones
<b>1–2 Years Old</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Starts to scribble</li><li>• Imitating vertical lines, horizontal lines and circular scribbles</li></ul>
<b>2–3 Years Old</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Imitating a cross</li><li>• Copying a vertical line, horizontal line and a circular scribble</li></ul>
<b>3–4 Years Old</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Drawing a circle independently</li></ul>
<b>4–5 Years Old</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Starts to imitate a square</li><li>• Copies a cross, square, right and left diagonal lines, X shape, some letters and some numbers</li></ul>
<b>5–6 Years Old</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Starts to copy a triangle</li><li>• Printing own name</li><li>• Starting to copy most upper and lower case letters</li><li>• Drawing a person with at least 6 body parts</li></ul>

\*These milestones are intended as a guide only. The way in which a child develops their pre-writing skills is highly dependent on experience and opportunities to practise, family/cultural expectations and the child's choices and motivation. Please also consider your child's developmental levels, this can be impacted by a number of factors. For more information please visit the National Handwriting Association: <https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/handwriting/help-for-teachers/ages-and-key-stages/>



**Have a think about the last time you learnt a new skill; what was it that helped you learn this? How did you feel? What kept you motivated to keep going, even when it got difficult? How many times did you practice before the new skill became automatic? If you were to do it again, is there anything you would do differently?**

## Things to consider in early writing skills

When considering handwriting practice, start by considering the “Four P’s of Handwriting”: pencil, paper, posture, and paper. Approaches to one or more of the P’s can influence techniques which may limit engagement in the activity. For instance, positioning of the child, pencil grip and type of pencil may increase the likelihood of experiencing fatigue and/or pain.

The Four Ps	Things to consider
<b>Pencil</b>	What writing tool works best for the child: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thickness of the pen/pencil</li><li>• If using a pen, is it a ballpoint, gel, roller or a fountain pen? All have their own pros and cons</li><li>• Grips to support position of fingers</li><li>• Visibility of mark making</li></ul>
<b>Paper</b>	What type of writing surface works best for the child: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lined, squared or plain paper</li><li>• Spacing between the lines, prompts to support the positioning of letters</li><li>• Colour of paper</li></ul>
<b>Posture</b>	Consider the desk, chair and posture of the child: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Right size of chair and desk</li><li>• Feet fully supported on the floor/footrest</li><li>• Hips and knees bent to 90°. When seated knees are about the same height as the hips with the feet slightly forward, thighs should be well supported by the chair and parallel to the floor</li><li>• With elbows bent, forearms should be straight, parallel with thighs and the floor</li><li>• See our “Getting Seating Right” advice sheet for more information</li></ul>
<b>Pressure</b>	What pressure is being applied when handwriting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is it too heavy or too light?</li><li>• Do they complain about hand pain?</li><li>• Do their knuckles appear white from holding the pencil too hard?</li><li>• Can you see/feel the words at the back of the sheet? Have they ripped a hole in the page?</li><li>• Can you see their words if it is too light?</li></ul>

## Setting the ‘just right’ challenge with your child

It is important to enable your child to gain a sense of achievement when learning a new skill. The ‘just right’ challenge ensures that you are encouraging your child to develop their skills and independence, whilst ensuring that the goal they are working towards is realistic. The sense of achievement that they experience acts as a great motivator to encourage your child to keep working towards mastering these skills. Setting realistic and achievable goals with your child can help them to develop pre-mark making skills.



## Things to consider:

- How much writing is expected to complete the task?
- What is the expectation in style of writing (ie cursive vs print) and is this necessary to complete the task successfully?
- How confident is the child in the subject/topic they need to write about?
- How much time is allocated to the task?
- How will feedback be given to support the development of skills?
- What will the child be writing with? Is there another method they're more confident with?

## What can you do to support your child with developing pre-writing skills?

When we are interested in the activities we do, we are more likely to participate and experience success. Therefore, encouraging motivation will help to facilitate the development of handwriting skills. Research has shown motivation is impacted by a person's sense of autonomy (A), belonging (B) and competence (C). When all three can be addressed, performance and development are positively impacted.

ABC's of Self-Motivation	Facilitating handwriting skill development
<p><b>Autonomy</b> What choices can children make when engaging in the activity to increase motivation?</p> <p>How can you involve the child actively through the stages of skills development?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are there opportunities to try different writing tools? e.g. chalk, paint brushes</li><li>• What style of writing tool are they using? e.g. textures, thickness, colour</li><li>• Are there opportunities to work on a variety of surfaces? e.g. tin foil, tracing paper, shiny card</li><li>• Where is the activity taking place? e.g. in a classroom, outside</li><li>• How is the child positioned and how does this impact engagement? e.g. sitting, lying on tummy, kneeling</li><li>• How can a child's interests be incorporated into handwriting practice? e.g. content of writing, making their own space marker based on favourite characters, writing in their favourite-coloured pen</li></ul>
<p><b>Belonging</b> How is the activity facilitating opportunities to connect to others?</p> <p>The feeling of being cared for, respected, and supported by others can increase motivation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are there opportunities to work together with others?</li><li>• Are those with similar skills able to share knowledge and co-create?</li><li>• How can handwriting practice support the development of a child's role as a friend, family member or student? e.g. helping a family member to write the weekly shopping list</li><li>• How does writing support the development of relationships? e.g. writing a birthday card</li><li>• How are others showing their support and celebrating the child's success?</li></ul>
<p><b>Competence</b> Feeling competent happens when a person experiences pride in seeing their accomplishments and notices their own improvement.</p> <p>How will progress and improvement be made and celebrated?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is there opportunity to experience frequent feelings of pride and success?</li><li>• What are the goals and who has set them? What role has the child played in this process?</li><li>• Does the child have choices about rewards and how to celebrate their achievements?</li><li>• Are the goals set creating the 'just right challenge'? See above for more details.</li></ul>

## Further learning resources:

The National Handwriting Association (NHA) is a good resource when exploring handwriting techniques, developing skills and the requirements followed by school:

<https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/handwriting/>


The NHA have also created a 'Hand Writing Good Practice' document available here:

<https://nha-handwriting.org.uk/shop/good-practice-for-handwriting/>. This document explores the Four Ps in more detail, providing hints and tips for assessment and intervention.


## Contact us

### Children's Therapies

Occupational Therapy  
Chelmsley Wood Primary Care Centre  
16 Crabtree Drive, Chelmsley Wood  
Birmingham, B37 5BU

 0121 722 8010

 [paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net](mailto:paediatric.occupationaltherapy@nhs.net)

 [childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk](http://childrenscommunitytherapies.uhb.nhs.uk)