

## Developing Early Handwriting Skills for Children with Autism

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### Introduction

If you have a young child with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), you may think it's too early to start thinking about handwriting. This is not the case, it is never too early to start thinking about your child's handwriting skills.

### Why Does Handwriting Matter?

Technology is rapidly changing the way we live and work and some feel that handwriting is a lost art. However, we write cards, sign documents, take notes and write lists. Handwriting is the task that dominates a child or young person's school day and continues to be the primary way that pupils demonstrate their knowledge (Case-Smith, 2002).

IMPOSSIBLE  
UNABLE

### Handwriting Development

Being able to write is something that most of us take for granted. But it is something that takes time to learn. Typically, handwriting development begins at an early age. First, the underlying features of handwriting like directionality and linearity, begin to appear in scribbles, wavy lines, pseudo letters and pictorial representations. Next comes geometric shapes and then letter formation (Feder & Majnemer, 2007). Although children vary in the rate they progress, all children follow this general sequence, as do children with additional learning needs (Cabell, et al., 2009).

Handwriting is a complex skill that involves interactions among physical, motor, cognitive and sensory systems. An impairment in any of these systems suggests a heightened risk of handwriting difficulties for children with autism (Hellinckx et al. 2013).

### Skills to Succeed: Look Beyond the Pencil

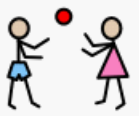


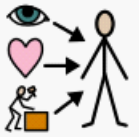


Addressing handwriting difficulties can be challenging and the importance of establishing handwriting skills in the early years cannot be underestimated.

There are many ways to help children to develop these

skills and learn to write. Firstly, learning to write takes several years. Patience and support are required. Children begin their writing journey by making marks, not by producing letters and words. They will need help to develop a variety of skills prior to formalised writing activities at a table.

## Offer Early Writing Opportunities

Adults should offer time, space and attention to children's mark making. Celebrate children's efforts, attempts and innovations so that confidence and positive attitudes to learning are affirmed.

 Gross motor activities	 Fine motor activities	 Use a variety of tools	 Work on different surfaces
 Offer sensory experiences	 Hand gym box	 Make writing purposeful	 Utilise special interests

## Encourage Lots of Gross Motor Activities

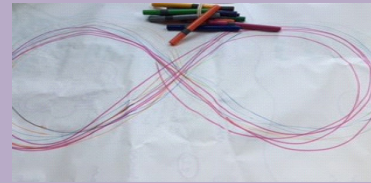
Children first need to experience gross motor activities prior to developing fine motor skills:

- Spend time outside on playground equipment like climbing frames, slides, balance beams and swings.
- Encourage the child or young person to learn to ride a bike or scooter.
- Practice walking forwards, backwards and sideways.
- Try balancing activities such as walking on logs, tree stumps or garden walls.
- Climb over obstacles, jump over low hurdles, balance on one foot, kick and throw balls.
- Encourage the child or young person to help with household chores, such as putting away the washing, vacuuming, using a dustpan and brush, washing up and baking.

## Inspire Large Dominant Arm Movements

- Write in the air using ribbon sticks, feather dusters, torches or laser lights. Try keeping to the beat of music, using language "up down, over, top, bottom and around" whilst you are moving.
- Paint outside walls with water using a large paint brush. Draw circles, curves, smiley faces and waves.

- Draw large lazy eights to practice crossing the mid-line.



- Make a food picture using raw spaghetti, rice crispies, noodles, rice, or flour. Crush the crispies to make sand and build houses out of pasta and flat noodles, sticking it together with syrup, honey or chocolate spread.

## Engage in Fine Motor Activities

- Provide a variety of tools for fine motor activities: make stamps out of potatoes, vegetables or fruit. Offer different sized wax crayons, bingo pens, cotton wool buds to create dots and dashes, felt tip pens, sponges, pencils, sticks, paint brushes, bath crayons or crazy foam.



- Work on a variety of surfaces: these could include whiteboards, paper, shiny card, sand paper, tracing paper, textured wall paper or corrugated card. Use the underside of a desk to create an adventurous place to write. Put cling film around the upturned table legs and paint an underwater scene on the sides.
- Offer sensory experiences: make patterns in a range of different materials including shaving foam, paint, sand, flour, hair gel or food coloured yogurt paint. You could make shapes and letters using play dough, ice biscuits, or draw using cheese spread tubes on crackers.



- Create a 'Hand Gym': this could include bubble wrap, velcro, squeeze toys, lego, pegs, tongs, cotton wool balls, pasta beads to string, bulldog clips, paper clips, nuts and bolts, jars with screw lids, a hole punch or playdough in a box. Encourage your child to spend five minutes per day choosing and playing with items in the box (Jenkinson, et al. 2010).



### **Make handwriting meaningful and purposeful:**

write invitations, cards, secret messages, shopping lists, plan a journey, give a parking ticket or fine.

### **Utilise special interests to motivate a reluctant writer:**

children and young people will be more motivated, independent and focused if the activity is intrinsically interesting to them.

**Keep language simple:** it's surprising how much of our language does not mean what it says. Use fewer words, simplify instructions in order to support children and young people in understanding verbal instructions.

**Perfectionism:** some individuals with autism don't like to make a mistake so writing on a small whiteboard is less permanent than on paper. Mistakes can be wiped away quickly.

**Make it fun:** avoid tedious writing activities with paper and pencil. Create enjoyable activities with the child or young person. They will show you when they are ready to write with a pencil.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers, therapists and parents should work together to support the development of handwriting skills. Writing is an emerging skill and takes time.

We should have high expectations for our children with autism and provide the appropriate adaptations for success. Utilising strengths in conjunction with evidence-based practices can help children to become confident writers (Asaro-Sadler, et al. 2015).

## **Handwriting Support at Options**

Here at Options Autism we acknowledge that handwriting is a complex skill to learn and that our learners with autism are likely to experience difficulties learning to write. Evidence suggests that handwriting difficulties may persist into adolescence and beyond if appropriate intervention is not given. Therefore, our teachers, therapists and parents work together to support the development of handwriting skills.

Writing is an emerging skill and takes time to learn. We implement a range of intervention strategies to promote the acquisition of writing skills as well as a sense of enjoyment for our learners. We have high expectations for our learners with autism and provide the appropriate adaptations for success.

Utilising strengths in conjunction with evidence-based practices can help children to become confident writers (Asaro-Sadler, et al., 2015).

## **References**

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## **Useful Resources**

- National Handwriting Association - [www.nha.org.uk](http://www.nha.org.uk)

## **Spread the word...**

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our clinical team. If you would like us to cover any particular subjects around autism in future editions then please let us know by emailing [info@optionsautism.co.uk](mailto:info@optionsautism.co.uk)

The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website [www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources](http://www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources)