
Developing Handwriting in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Handwriting develops as children develop increased control over their bodies and a desire to communicate through mark making. (In the revised EYFS 2012 the links to handwriting can be found under Physical Development)

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.

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. This will help with the actual formation of letters when children are ready.

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 damp sand, salt or cornflour. Invite each child in the group to trace over the shape. Model the correct letter formation to the children as a teaching point.

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. Have laminated large letters so that children can trace the shape with cars, trains etc.

Use tactile letters for children to trace over

Developing the muscles for writing is crucial, particularly for boys. Make sure that children have experience of climbing, using malleable materials, finger and action rhymes etc

Write Dance – this is a programme which uses music and movement to introduce handwriting to children. It aims to improve fine and gross motor skills which in turn provide a strong foundation for writing.

Handwriting and the discrete phonics session

When teaching a new letter sound during the daily discrete phonics session, the children should be given the opportunity to practise the formation of the new sound. This could be by 'writing' the letter in the air, on their hands or on a partner's back. If possible they should also have the opportunity to correctly form the letter on a whiteboard. Guidance for the formation of each letter is given in Letters & Sounds (Page 196 or see Appendix 1).

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. 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*

(See more information on Page 4 below)

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.

Relaxed music and the tempo can be changed to a marching rhythm and children encouraged to produce angled movements.

Some commercially produced phonics schemes, such as Read, Write Inc and First Fast Phonics provide useful mnemonics to help children associate a movement with a particular letter.

Leave laminated handwriting pattern sheets/ letters in the writing corner so that children can practise the movements needed for forming letters correctly. These can be sent home to parents, but make sure that

they are aware of directionality and correct formation.

Some ideas for developing fine motor control

Let the children make patterns using pegboards.

Provide sewing, threading and weaving 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.

Encourage the children to strengthen their fingers by using clay, play dough, plasticine for modelling. They can make letter shapes and patterns using the modelling media.

Give the children thick paintbrushes and water to paint patterns on walls, fences, etc.

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. Children in the EYFS can be introduced to lined paper but in an informal way, for example in the writing corner, provide paper with wide lines to start.

White boards or chalk are a good way to encourage reluctant mark makers to write, attempts can be rubbed out!

Children with SEN

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. 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.

Children with EAL

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.

It is important to display scripts in other languages in the setting and to discuss the differences in them.

Preferred hand

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.

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.

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 letter formation difficult, 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. There are commercially produced handwriting schemes that use specific language. For example, Nelson, RML

Using 'shape families' to teach letter formation

For simplicity, the letters of the alphabet can be sorted into four main movement 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.

Should children practise letter formation in a more formal way?

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 example, you could cut out some green cabbage leaves for them to draw lots of caterpillars (letter c). 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.

Children shouldn't be pressurised to hold a pencil correctly and this element of handwriting should be treated sensitively according to the child's age and stage of development. The ultimate goal is for children to be fluent with their handwriting.

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), alternatively they may write their name in upper case letters. 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.

Working with Parents

It is important to inform parents about the school's policy and practice around handwriting. This can be introduced at an introductory meeting at the beginning of reception or more specifically through a workshop on early writing. Advice packs that go out to parents should have a copy of how to form each letter of the alphabet.

Handwriting Policies

A handwriting policy should include information about:

- what the school's specific aims and objectives for handwriting are
- The importance of the development of handwriting in the EYFS , for example, developing fine and gross motor control, emergent writing
- 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
- recommended writing materials and implements, e.g. paper sizes, line spacings, when children are expected to write with pens
- provision for children with SEN

Cursive and continuous cursive handwriting in reception

It is important for children to be taught the cursive style of each individual letter (with a 'flick') so that when they are introduced to continuous cursive handwriting this will be easier. (see example of letter formation below).

Some schools introduce continuous cursive script in reception. (joined up, starting on the line). This is only recommended if children are able to confidently form letters in the correct way and are ready in terms of their fine motor skills and pencil control. If continuous cursive handwriting formation is introduced it is suggested that individual letters are practised as a follow up to the sound taught in the discrete phonics session. Practise sessions should be short and as informal as possible.

a b c d e
f g h i j k
l m n o p
q r s t u
v w x y z

References

Mark Making Matters , The National Strategies DfE, 2008. Still available as a download from www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Write Dance in the Early Years, Oussoren, RA , 2010, SAGE publications

Revised Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, 2012, DfE
www.foundationyears.org

Read, Write Inc , Miskin R & Archbold T, 2011 (Various resources including handbook available from Amazon)

Letters & Sounds, The National Strategies DfE, 2007. Still available as a download from www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Fast Phonics First – scheme available to subscribe to, this scheme has good interactive whiteboard games, including letter formation practice.
www.pearsonschoolsandcolleges.co.uk

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**With special thanks to:
Tracy Batchelor – St Jude’s & St Pauls Primary School
Eleanor Church – Hargrave Park Primary School
Jessica Corbett – Ashmount Primary School**

The above teachers were part of a working group who advised and helped to edit this guidance.

Early Years Foundation Stage Team 2012

