



HELP FOR HANDWRITING

Lindsey Biel, OTR/L

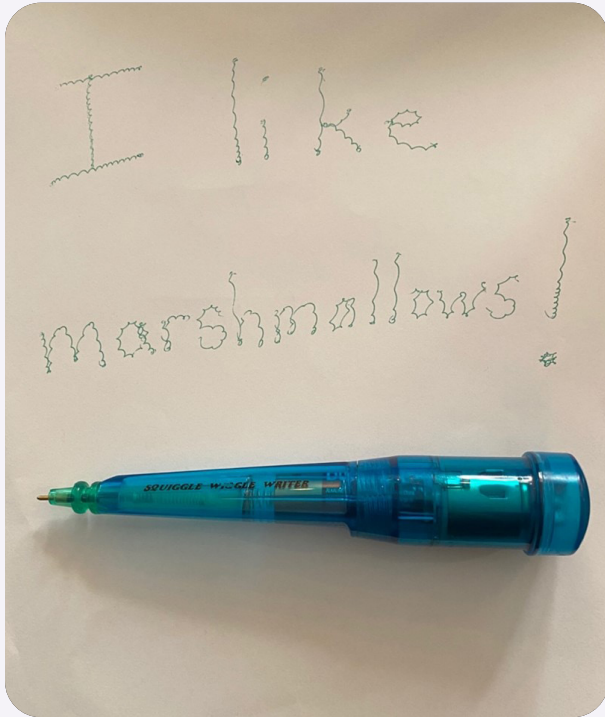
Messy handwriting is one of the most common reasons why children are referred to occupational therapists. Writing legibly is a complex developmental skill that requires clear vision, core and upper extremity strength, dexterity, perception, visual memory, and, perhaps most importantly, motivation. Handwriting can be especially challenging for autistic students. As an occupational therapist, I would like to share some strategies that can help address handwriting challenges.

Prepare Bodies and Brains

When kids are tired or wired, they are not in the optimal zone of arousal to do their best work. Energize your under-aroused child or reorganize an over-aroused one by engaging in the following preparatory activities.

- Run an obstacle course, play “Simon Says,” jump on a mini-trampoline or climb some stairs.
- Play catch. If playing solo, your child can play bounce-catch with a bouncy handball, first catching with both hands, and then 10 times each with the dominant and the other hand, then from hand to hand. The latter helps the two brain hemispheres to communicate. Level up by catching two balls with two hands.
- Make 10 big circles with arms stretched out to the sides to activate the upper body. Change direction and do 10 more circles the other way.
- “Karate fingers” involves making a fist and then extending the fingers. This exercise wakes up wrists and knuckles. With arms held straight in front, make two fists and then extend the fingers 10 times. Turn the hands over to palms-up position and do 10 more fist-finger extensions.





Set up for Success

- Make sure the table and chair are an appropriate size for your child. Provide a seat cushion and footrest if needed.
- If your child struggles to hold a pencil comfortably, try a molded grip that helps position fingers on the pencil. You can also try wrapping some colorful tape around the pencil about half an inch above the point. This prompts your child to place the fingertips, not the finger pads, on the tape. Make sure the pencil rests in the “web space” between the thumb and index finger, and the wrist can rest on the tabletop.
- If your child’s wrist seems to bend in, place paper on a slant board, looseleaf binder or easel, or tape paper to a wall or even beneath the table. By repositioning the paper, you reposition your child’s wrist, making it easier for little finger muscles to make the tiny motions needed to carefully form letters.
- If your child gets calluses from pressing so hard on the pencil or tears through the paper, teach your child to lighten up by playing “Who can write the lightest?” or by trying a mechanical pencil. If your child writes too lightly, ask him or her to press harder or give your child a heavier lead pencil. You may need to increase strength with hand exercises, art projects incorporating squeeze glue or clay, and construction toys that require some physical effort to attach.
- Learn to control the writing tool first by doing dot-to-dots, mazes, and tracing using a fat crayon, chubby markers or a vibrating pen to increase control.

Learn to Form Letters Without Picking up a Pencil

It can help to separate knowledge of letters from learning to mechanically reproduce them. Help your child learn the difference between the right and left sides of his or her own body and then move on to other people, objects and letters. Teach your child to recognize uppercase and lowercase letters in the environment and note which side the curve is on in a “b” versus a “d,” or the differences between an “S,” a “5” and a “2.” This will help to reduce letter and number reversals, a common problem for new writers. A little practice usually resolves this issue quickly.

- Use a multisensory approach to learning letter formations. Roll out Play-Doh ropes to form letters. Draw with a finger or stick in sand, shaving cream, or even pudding.
- Use the “wet-dry-try” method from *Handwriting Without Tears*. Write a letter on a rectangular chalkboard. Then have your child imitate your steps using a small damp sponge to make a wet letter, a small ball of paper towel to make a dry letter, and then chalk to try writing the letter.



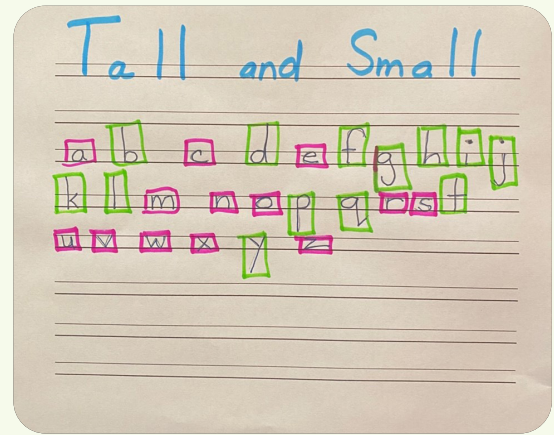
Have Your Child Trace over Letter Formations

- Have your child trace letters using crayons that have been broken in half to be easier to hold in a proper grasp. Color-changing marker or a dark marker over a light marker could also be used. Markers and crayons usually have “holding stripes” for fingertip placement.
- Reinforce hands-on learning using an app such as LetterSchool and iTrace to learn formations and even some sight words. The child can start by using a finger and then try using a stylus.

Size and Alignment Matter

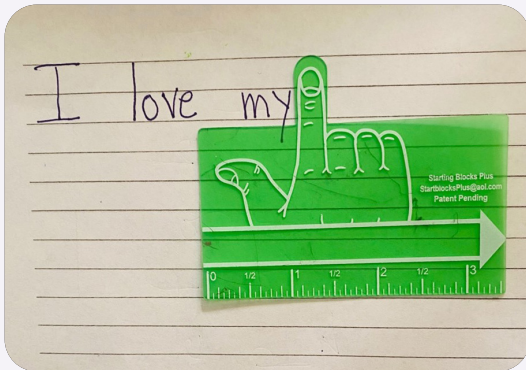
Many children find it easier to learn uppercase letters because they are all the same height. Most quickly recognize the need to start letters at the top and to touch both the top and bottom lines. Lowercase letters can be more confusing since they combine small and tall letters with some starting at the top line, some starting in the middle, and others going beneath the bottom line.

- Use paper that provides clear top and bottom lines. For younger grades, paper with middle lines is often used but the different lines should be clearly distinguished. You can draw a green line for the bottom, like the grass, a blue line for the top, like the sky, and a dotted line for the middle.
- The bottom line or baseline is the most important anchor for writing. If you do nothing else, try darkening that line and tell your child to make sure his or her letters sit on the line.
- Teach tall versus small letters. The letters “a, c, e, m, n, o, r, s, u, v, w, x, z” are all small letters. Letters “b, d, f, h, l, k, l, t” are tall going up, or climbers, while letters “g, j, p, q, y” are tall going down, or divers. Show children how small letters can fit in squares while tall letters can fit in rectangles. Most kids enjoy doing this!
- Shrink loopy, large letters by playing “mouse writing.” This encourages children to write the tiniest legible letters they can produce.



Space It Out

When letters and words are crammed together, they can be very hard to read. Adding a small space between letters and larger spaces between words can help kids quickly increase neatness.

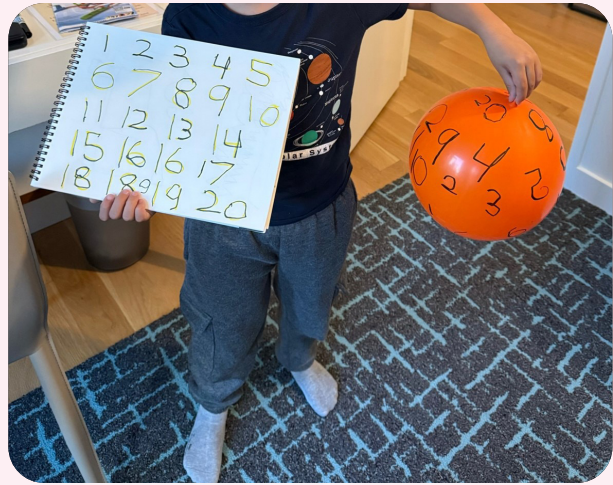
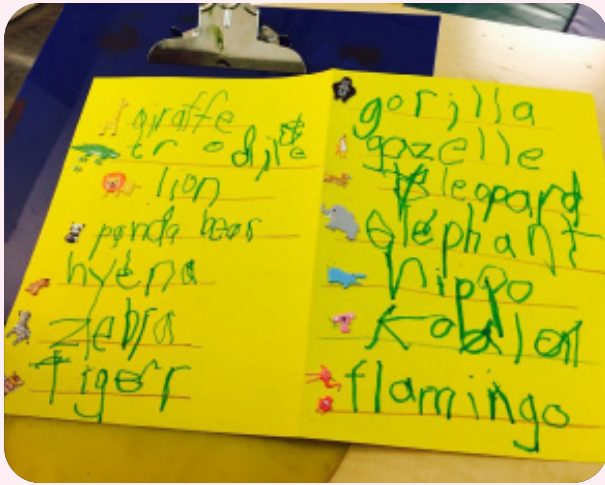


- Look at favorite books together. Take note of the space between words and how the letters never touch each other.
- Teach your child to leave “spaghetti” spaces between letters and “meatball” spaces between words. Note that some letters, like “s,” don’t start on the side so they need more elbow room to avoid touching their neighbors.
- Teach your child to use a finger, pencil or other word spacer between each word. Newer writers need extra space between words while more advanced writers can leave just one letter space.
- If your child still struggles to leave space between words, have him or her draw a dot between each word until he or she gets the hang of it. You can also use a piece of dental floss or thread to show the space between letters.

Make It Fun!

Most children enjoy sharing about themselves and expressing their ideas in writing. Some find writing a laborious and frustrating task, especially if they think more quickly than they are able to write.

- Let kids know it’s okay to make mistakes, especially with first drafts.
- Distinguish ideation from formation. Let your child dictate a story to you that you write down. Then have your child copy what you wrote. This empowers the flow of creativity and improves handwriting. When copying what you wrote, teach your child to “see it, say it, write it.” For example, your child should say the word, spell it orally and then write it down.
- Some kids love writing about personal experiences and making up stories. Others prefer writing non-fiction on a topic of special interest. Tap into personal passions. If your child loves Minecraft and wants to write about it, let him or her do it!
- Writing can be perceived as a serious, challenging task even at a very young age. Help take the edge off by playing Mad Libs, doing beginner crossword puzzles or writing a letter to a grandparent, friend, favorite musician or celebrity.



When to Seek Help

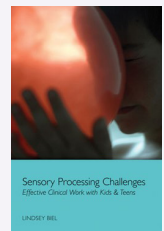
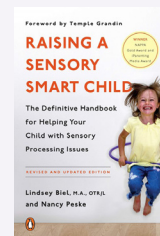
Some kids need extra practice when it comes to handwriting. I remind kids that practice doesn't make perfect; it just makes it easier. Some writers blossom when they learn cursive writing rather than printing because there are fewer starts and stops and it is more "artistic." Others find keyboarding to be liberating since they can focus on what they want to communicate rather than how to form each letter. There are a number of tools available to help establish good keyboarding early on, including typingclub.com or edutyping.com.

When kids have a lot to say verbally but only write two- or three-word sentences, it indicates there is a discrepancy between their knowledge and their ability to capture what they know on paper. They can find this very frustrating. This issue can best be addressed by an occupational therapist who carries out an in-depth assessment and recommends specific classroom and test accommodations for autistic students. The therapist can also help determine whether handwriting, keyboarding or other assistive technology is the best method of communication.



Lindsey Biel, OTR/L, is an occupational therapist with a private practice in New York City where she evaluates and treats kids, teens, and young adults with sensory processing issues, autism, developmental delays, and other challenges. She is co-author of the award-winning *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin and author of *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids & Teens*.

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