

Occupational therapy – tips for left handed writing

For:

Introduction

Teaching a child to write with his or her left hand is *not* just the opposite from teaching how to write right-handed. Languages that are written left-to-right, like English, are more difficult to write with the left hand – a right-hander writes away from his body and pulls the pencil, while a left-hander must write toward his body and push the pencil.

If a left-handed child is only permitted to write with the left hand but not *taught* how to write, the child may develop a needlessly uncomfortable, inefficient, slow, messy way of writing that will be a lifelong hardship. Therefore, it is especially important for parents and teachers to understand how to teach left-handed children to write correctly.

The most important factors are: the position of the writing paper, the position of the arm and wrist, and the grip on the writing instrument.

The "hooked" style of writing that one often sees in left-handers (see Figure.1.) results from lack of proper training -- this is *not* how a left-hander should write. Left-handers adopt this posture because they are trying to see what they are writing and not smear what they have just written with their hand, while maintaining a right-slant to their letters -- these problems are better overcome by paper positioning and pencil grip (with the understanding that a right-slant is not mandatory, that upright or left-slanted letters are acceptable) (REFS: Clark 1959:7; Szeligo et al. 2000).

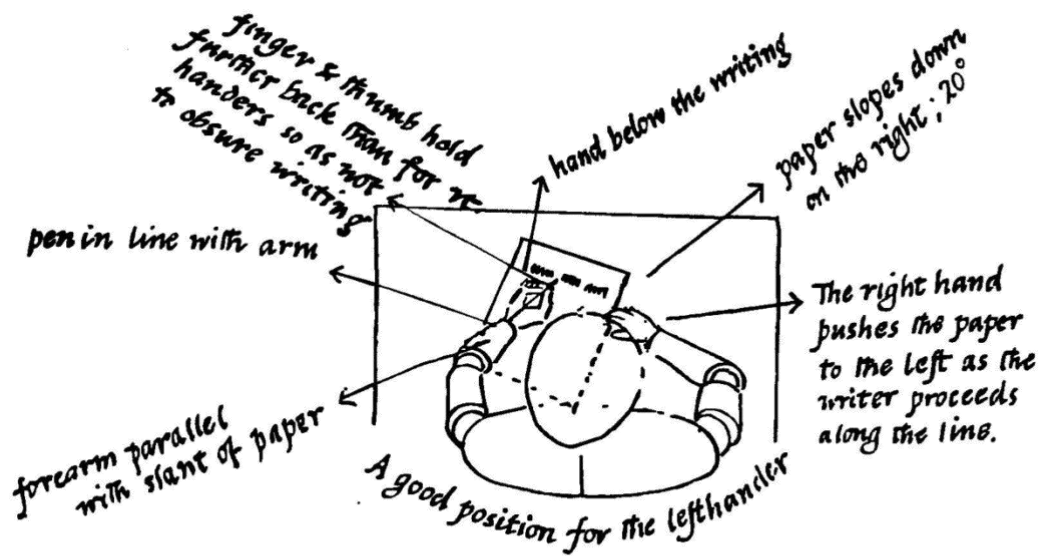


Figure.1.

Sitting position

Position a left handed child on the left side of the table so they do not bump writing hands with their neighbour, avoid placing them with a wall to immediately to their left. These children may need special directional help with letter formations and left to right orientation. The left- hander needs to keep the forearm slightly out and away from the body without pushing the elbow too far out. The fingers need to be further away from the pencil tip than a right-hander, approx 2 – 3 cm's from the point. This allows the children to see what they write. (see Figure.2.)

Figure.2.



Handwriting Review 1992. J Alston et al.

Paper position

The non-writing hand should always hold the paper steady which allows the writing hand to move freely across the page. For a right handed child the paper should be slightly to the right of the child, tilted to about 45 degrees, for a left handed child the paper should be slightly to the left of the child tilted to about 20 degrees to the right. The angle that the paper is tilted will vary according to individual children – the important thing for the child to remember is to keep the arm perpendicular to the bottom of the page. The wrist should be straight (not bent). And the writing hand should be *below* the writing line. (see Figure.3.).

Teach left-handed children to remember three things as they learn to write :

- ▶ Grip the pencil ~ 2.5 cm (1 inch) to 3.8 cm (1.5 inches) from the point, **which is further away than other children generally grip!**
- ▶ Tilt paper so that arm is at right-angle to bottom edge of paper.
(and the top right corner of page is toward writer),
- ▶ Write with the hand below the writing line and the wrist straight.

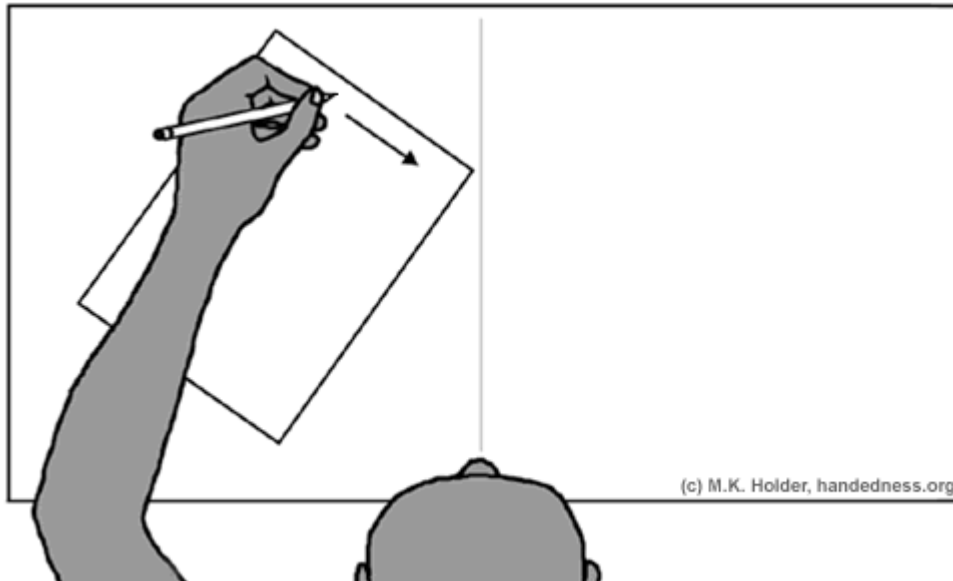


Figure.3. Proper posture, paper position, and grip for left-handed writing

Because the act of writing involves the whole arm, tilting the paper affords a writer the most efficient and comfortable position for the wrist, elbow, and shoulder. Some teachers have found it helpful to let the left-handed child start writing, or practice writing, on a chalkboard mounted on the wall (or on the ground, using a stick in soft, smooth soil). This allows the child to move the entire arm freely, keep the wrist straight, and not worry about seeing or smudging the writing, making it easier for the child to concentrate on learning to form the figures (REFS: Gardner 1945; Clark 1959).

Pencil/pen grip

Left-handed writers need to grip the writing instrument far enough back from the point to be able to see what is being written, and also to not smear what has just been written. Teachers and researchers recommend the child grip the pencil around 2.5 cm (1 inch) to 3.8 cm (1.5 inches) from the point (REFS: Gardner 1945; Cole 1955; Clark 1959).

If the child tends to hold the pencil too close to the point, the teacher can make a mark on the pencil at the right distance, to remind the student where to grip the pencil. The wrist should be fairly straight, not bent sharply. A common problem for all young children learning to write is gripping the pencil too tightly, making writing tense and tiresome. Usually the child learns to relax his or her grip as writing develops, but teachers can remind students to hold the instrument gently. Frequent practice and letting the child write large letters, also helps children learn to relax their grip. The child will tend to naturally reduce the size of the writing as s/he attains better motor control (Clark 1959). **Pre Writing Patterns & Writing Skills for Left Handed Writing**

MARK MAKING SKILLS – PENCIL/CRAYON IDEAS

The pre-writing activities for preschool children below are a great way to build essential, foundational fine motor skills.

These skills will include hand strength, directional movement patterns, and effective hand position, which will then facilitate making lines, letters, and shapes.

All development comes in predictable stages. Before a child can write, he must have the prerequisite fine motor skills necessary to use his wrist and hands properly and effectively. Have fun trying all of these great ideas below so that your child is ready to write!

METHODS THAT CAN BE USED: -

- **Hand over hand** – guide your child with your hand over their hand talking about the movement as you go e.g. down (for vertical lines), round (for circles), across and down (for a cross +), and up etc. This is particularly effective method of learning for children who have difficulties interpreting proprioceptive and tactile sensations.
- Joining up dots in the direction of the marks you want to produce and move to more dots as control improves, (like dot to dots).
- Making marks in sand, with finger paints etc.
- Pre writing sheets – straight - top to bottom, left to right, circular, diagonal, zigzag – design your own with the child's interests as a theme e.g. trains, cars, animals
- Simple mazes
- Tracing over the top of pre writing shapes
- Scribble and doodle pictures to make hair or clouds
- Colouring within boundaries – large areas e.g. pictures of interest

PRACTICE

Choose from the activities above and practice a little on a daily basis.

Choosing a writing tool

Try a variety of writing tools; fat, thin circular, octagonal, triangular. Many pens/pencils are shaped and have moulded grips built in. Different pens will have different properties; you need to find one that suits – consider how it smudges, flows, if it is easily damaged by excessive pressure e.g. fibre tip nibs. Different pens will offer more or less resistance. Different leads will suit different hands. There are a range of pens/pencils available and your Occupational Therapist will be able to give advice on what may best suit your child and where you can order them from.

The Stabilo Easy Move been made with a special left handed version pencils for under 5's and over 7's. Ball point and roller ball pens are also available that have with the grip moulded for a comfortable fit in the left hand.

The Yoro Pen/Pencil is a unique ergonomic design that is perfect for left-handers. It is angled so you can clearly see your writing with an off-set portion that prevents the fingers slipping down towards the tip that creates the perfect pen grip, requires far less effort to use, and banishes smudging forever! They are available in a small version designed for ages 3-8 and adult size. These are available online through Amazon and can also be found in some educational supplies catalogue

Pencil grip aids

There are many types of grip around; the one your school stocks may not be the best for all children. Your Occupational Therapist will be able to give advice and recommend the best type for your child and where you can order them from. (An internet search for 'pencil grips' will high-light a vast choice, many of the same types of grips are marketed under different names e.g. 'Stubbi' and 'Stetro' are the same.

- Ultra grips
- Cross Guard Ultra pencil grip
- Stetro grips (also known as Stubbi and Grippy Grips – dependant on supplier)

- Triangular grips – large and standard
- Comfort grips- ridged and smooth
- Tri – go pencil grips
- Solo pencil grips
- The Handiwriter
- Triangular pencils fat & thin

Available from:

Many items may be available online these days and can be found by searching the internet for the grip name.

Mirror writing

Mirror writing is writing left-to-write languages (like English) backwards AND also reversing the letters so that the writing only appears normal when held up to a mirror and the reflection viewed (see Figure.4.).

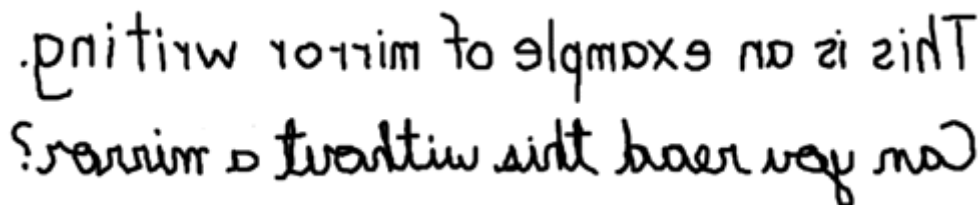


Figure.4. Example of Mirror Writing

Some people are able to write quite easily and naturally this way (for instance, the Italian inventor and artist Leonardo da Vinci famously kept his notebooks in mirror script). If a left-handed child has a tendency to mirror write, the teacher can help him or her overcome this by making sure the child always begins writing on the left side of the page. This can be done by placing a mark on the left side of child's paper showing which side to start writing from. If the mirror-writing persists, the teacher can try other strategies to help the child establish the correct direction and orientation of the letters. For instance, the child can be instructed to slowly and carefully copy text from a correctly written page. If the child has trouble even copying text, the teacher can have the child trace over correctly written words (in either case, remember to mark the starting point on the left side).

Ideas to correct left handed writing habits

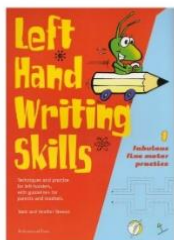
If a child has already started writing the wrong way, a parent or teacher may wish to re-educate the beginning writer. Cole (1955) reported good results re-training young children after a period of six weeks. To be successful, parents and teachers must agree on the process and work closely with the child. During the re-training period, the child should be excused from all regular classroom written work -- otherwise, s/he will revert back to the old style because, for the moment, it is faster than writing the right way. Explain to the child that you're going to show him or her how to write easier, and that it will take a few weeks to master. Demonstrate the proper grip, paper position, arm and wrist position, etc. Work closely with the child for short (10 minutes to start) but frequent (at least once a day) practice sessions. Remember that it is hard to break old habits and replace them with new ones, and that this will be a temporary strain for the child. Therefore, the child should do no writing other than the practice sessions for two or three weeks, or until s/he has become so comfortable with

the new writing style that s/he uses this spontaneously. Be sure to give the child lots of encouragement and support during this difficult period.

Handwriting programmes

There are a variety of left handed writing skill programmes available for parents to purchase or which school may already have as part of the resources this is just an example of one.

Left Hand Writing Skills 1 – Fabulous Fine Motor Skills



This book helps the child to establish good basic habits of paper positioning and pencil hold and to develop the fine motor skills needed for accurate, consistent writing. The book includes exercises on letter formation and small words using a mix of entertaining games and puzzles. There are 3 books in the series which are designed to develop successful left handed writing. It is also available in CD Rom Format.

Left-Handed Writing Skills is available in many places on line including “Anything Left-Handed Ltd” online at www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk by mail order on tel: 020 8770 3722 or from their shop at 57 Brewer Street, London W1. An internet search will highlight best value!

Other left handed equipment e.g. rulers, can be found at

www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk

N.B: Occupational Therapy Services do not provide any of the equipment listed within this information.