



THE INCLUSIVE LINK

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READINESS FOR WRITING

When should children learn to write? Children begin early to develop fine motor skills that lead to writing. By 12 months, they typically learn to pick up tiny objects using a neat pincer grasp (using tip of thumb and index finger). At this stage, they can hold a crayon in a palmar / fistful grasp to make marks on paper.



Between two to three years of age, children start to hold the pencil away from the palm with fingers and thumb facing downward near the paper. Between three to six years of age, they typically develop and refine the tripod grasp.

Preparing for writing involves more than just learning the techniques of pencil grip and control. Children need to develop other pre-requisites for writing such as **hand preference**, **directionality** (concept of reading/writing print from left to right, top to bottom), the ability to **cross the midline** (i.e. right side of the body moving across to the left side and vice versa) and maintaining a **good balance and posture** for writing.

One common reason for incorrect pencil grasp among children is they are writing before their hands are developmentally ready for this activity. This is becoming more common as parents start preparing children for school with writing activities from an early age. Children with special needs may have increased or decreased muscle tone, and difficulties in motor planning that can affect their development of pre-writing skills and pencil grasp. Helping them develop these skills can promote successful handwriting.

THE TRIPOD GRASP

The tripod grasp is the most efficient way for holding a writing tool (pencil, crayon, markers, chalk etc.). It enables the muscles in our fingers to efficiently control the pencil, and create neat and clear writing.

When using a tripod grasp, the pencil is held between the thumb and index finger and rests against the side of the third finger. The thumb and index finger form a circle.



Did you know?

Learning only from listening is difficult for many **children with special needs** (i.e. children with Down syndrome and autism). Their strength is in visual learning. Some tips to remember:

- Trace over solid lines instead of dotted lines so that children see the whole shape of the letter
- Change colors for tracing over lines so that they can see how well their tracing has been
- Bold and darken lines/shapes/letters so that children can easily see and discriminate them

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE READINESS FOR WRITING

1. **Bilateral activities** and **hold-and-do activities** help children develop hand preference. Bilateral activities require both sides of the body to do the same movements such as clapping to music, ball games, playground equipment, jumping on a trampoline, and bicycling.
Hold-and-do activities are activities whereby one hand holds/stabilizes the object and the other manipulates (i.e. stacking, posting, screwing, pouring, scooping, threading and lacing).
2. The ability to cross the midline enables children to use their preferred hand to write, draw and paint across the page. **Crossing the midline activities** include batting ball games, drawing/painting across the midline and Brain Gym exercises (cross crawl, lazy 8, double doodle, neck rolls etc.).
3. Give children lots of practice in scribbling/drawing/writing on wide vertical surfaces. **Writing on vertical/slanted surfaces** enhances correct wrist position for writing.
4. Start by drawing big lines/shapes before moving on to writing smaller and more precise letters. When writing on paper, start by giving children **bigger space for writing** before asking them to write within smaller spaces.
5. For beginners, writing should be on **blank paper rather than on lined paper** as it pressures the child to keep either on or in between the lines. The main focus is for the child to form letters correctly; first by tracing, then copying and after that remembering the shapes of letters.
6. To foster **tripod grasp**, break crayons, pencils or chinks into smaller pieces (approx. 1" in size). Otherwise, get them to hold something in their palm with their ring and little fingers when holding a pencil.
7. For children who have difficulty using the correct pencil grasp, there are a variety of writing tools and **pencil grip aids** in the market that may be useful, i.e. pencil grips, bulb shaped crayons, triangular crayons and pencils.
8. In the optimal **position for writing** the ankle, knee and hip is at 90 degrees with the forearms resting on the desk. The child's feet should be flat on the floor. Teach using the non-dominant hand to stabilize the paper. Rotating the paper towards the writing hand will increase success.
9. Use **clear verbal prompting** to cue the child (i.e. long line, short line, down, across, big curve, small curve).



(References: Dobson, Smith and Taylor (1997) *Activities for Little Fingers*; www.docstoc.com; www.brightclub.com; Down Syndrome Society of South Australia)

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FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

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