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Teaching Left-Handed Students to Write in a Right-Handed World

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How does one determine his or her handedness or dominance?

We do not choose our handedness or dominance. It chooses us. As children, when our fine motor skills are developing, our handedness or dominance reveals itself. According to the Handedness Research Institute, forcing a child at the readiness or early primary level to use a hand that is not comfortably dominant can be disastrous to the child's writing and possibly to the child's learning ability and personality. If a child uses both hands equally well, it may be better to train the right hand for handwriting. However, if there is doubt as to which hand is your child's dominant one, several procedures can help reveal his or her preference.

We live in a right-handed society. Thus, our right-handed society has created hand tools, machines, and even doors without much regard for left-handed citizens; but, this is changing. The number of left-handed children has increased in recent years due partly to parents and schools not discouraging and retraining children showing a preference for using their left hand as has happened in the past. Left-handers now make up between 10-15% of the population, and recent studies indicate that this percentage is rising. School teachers and parents should instruct left-handed children with as much guidance and help in their handwriting development as for those who are right-handed.



1. In a play situation, place a hand puppet on a table, and observe to see which hand he or she puts inside the puppet.



2. Padlock a cupboard or cabinet. Place the key on a table. Ask the child to take the key and open the padlock. Then ask for him or her to reach inside and bring something to you from the cabinet.



3. Place a toy hammer and nails or pegs and pegboard on the table. Observe the child as he or she hammers the nails or pegs into place.



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4. Place jars of several sizes with removable lids on the table. Place lids in a separate pile. Ask the child to match the lids, put them on the jars, and screw them on.



5. Ask the child to pick up a ball and throw it to you.



6. Observe the child when he or she is eating with utensils.



7. Using scissors and several sheets of paper in different colors, ask the child to cut each paper into strips. Have child take a break between colors and see if he or she resumes holding and cutting the paper with the same hand as before.

If your child reveals that his or her left hand is dominant, teach him or her how to write properly using the left hand. More so than right-handers, left-handed children will develop an uncomfortable, inefficient, slow, and messy way of writing if they do not learn proper handwriting techniques. If a child develops bad handwriting habits, they can be very hard to correct.

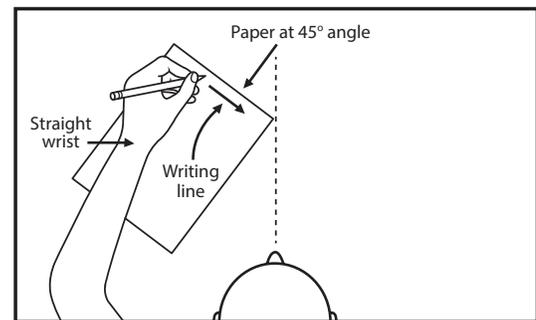


The most important factors in teaching handwriting to left-handed children are: the position of the paper, the position of the arm and wrist, and the grip on the writing tool. If not trained properly, left-handers will often develop a "hooked" style of writing because they are trying to see what they are writing and not smear what they have just written. Parents or teachers may insist that their left-handers maintain a right slant to their letters; however, a right slant should not be

mandatory; upright or left-slanted letters are perfectly acceptable.

The following instructions are for preparing the left-handed child for handwriting.

1. Position the paper on the desk so it is completely left of the child's midline. Never in the writing process should a left-handed child cross the midline. Angle the paper so that it lies parallel to the child's forearm – close to 45 degrees. Encourage the child to learn how to position the paper himself. To ensure correct positioning of the paper, tape an outline on the writing surface to indicate where the paper should be.



2. Grip the writing tool 1 inch - 1 ½ inches from the point between the thumb, index, and middle fingers. The child should grip far enough from the point to see what he or she is writing, and not smear what he or she has written. Mark a line on the pencil to remind the child where to grip, or place a pencil grip at the appropriate spot.
3. Remind the child to grip the writing tool gently as to not cause hand fatigue. Writing large letters at first helps children learn to relax their grip. As children gain fine motor



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control, they will naturally reduce the size of their writing.

- 4. The wrist should be almost straight, not bent.** The hand should always be below the writing line and never cross the midline. For beginning writers, writing on a sloped surface can help with hand and arm positioning.

Many left-handed children have a tendency to “mirror write” (write left to right and backwards). The teacher or parent can help a child overcome this by placing a mark on the left side of the paper indicating where to start writing.

Correcting Bad Habits

If your child is a beginning writer and has already developed bad habits (i.e., a “hooked” wrist or “ulnar” or four-finger grasp), you or the teacher should try to re-educate him or her. The parents and teacher must agree on a process and work closely with the child. Explain that you’re going to show him or her how to write easier and that it will take a few weeks to master. Demonstrate proper grip, paper position, arm and wrist position, etc. Work closely and frequently at least 10 minutes per day. Old habits are hard to break and replace with new ones. The child should have

no other lengthy writing assignments until he or she becomes comfortable with the new writing style and begins using it spontaneously. Give the child lots of encouragement and support, as this can be a frustrating and difficult period.



What handwriting letter system should my child learn?

School districts adopt different types of handwriting programs. Check with your child’s school to see which type of handwriting program is in use in your district. Cursive and manuscript letter formation guides for left- and right-handed students to practice at home are available online as well.

Resources:

- Holder, M. K. Handedness Research Institute. *Teaching left-handers to write*. Retrieved July, 2012. <http://handedness.org/action/leftwrite.html>
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- Hackney, Clinton. Zaner-Bloser. *The left-handed child in a right-handed world*. Retrieved July, 2012. <http://www.zaner-bloser.com/news/left-handed-child-right-handed-world>
- Anything Left-Handed. *Help and advice for left-handed children, their parents and teachers*. Retrieved July, 2012. http://www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk/kids_help.html

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