

The Handwriting Clinic

1506 Capital Ave, Ste. 150 Plano, Texas 75074 972 633-1974 www.TheHandwritingClinic.com

E-NEWSLETTER FOR TEACHERS Written by: Jan McCleskey, MA, OTR

Do most students have a good grip on a pencil?

My daughter did a science project at a local elementary school and tested 94 students in 5th grade to determine if they had a manipulative grasp on a pencil. 78 percent of the students did NOT have a manipulative grip on a pencil!

In contrast, in 1990, Bergmann found that in a study of 447 adults, 80 percent used the dynamic tripod grasp!

So why the change? There is more of an emphasis on handwriting at an early age. Even 3 year olds have had exposure to crayons and markers through their pre-school curriculum. Most adults remember their early years running and climbing in the backyard. There may have been a couple good tv shows on in the limited programming for children each day. But most older adults did not spend hours each day in front of the television. Video games were not available. Children played outside, or played with manipulative toys inside.

I think of my youngest of four children. He spent his early years in a carseat taxiing his older siblings to soccer, Tae Kwon Do and various activities. While we did take him to the park, he did not spend his childhood in the backyard. We also put him on his back as an infant due to the latest recommendations on SIDS. He was later crawling than the other children because he did not like his stomach.

Children that are blind, often have soft hands with flat arches in their hands due to limited time running and climbing. There are many preschoolers with soft, flat hands today, but who are not visually impaired.

Best bet, encourage your student to run and play! During the preschool years, the best thing for fine motor skills, is running, climbing, swinging, and developing those strong hand muscles!

Pencil Grip and the Older Student

Does pencil grip affect handwriting skills? Some research suggest that it does affect younger children's handwriting (Schneck and Henderson, 1990). Other research suggests that it does not often affect speed or legibility of handwriting, but many researchers caution that there is much more research that it is needed in this area. One thing that most researchers agree on, is that by 2nd grade, grasp on a pencil is kinesthetically locked in as a habit. Amundson states that by 2nd grade, changing a child's grip is so stressful, that the effort should be abandoned.

At The Handwriting Clinic, we have found that in our older children's classes, we cannot simply show students how to change their grip and expect results. We put the child through a grasp class, where they work on using isolated finger movements to color art projects. Many children move their hand in a repetitive up and down pattern, rather than use isolated finger movements to color. We teach students how to hold a pencil, and then how to manipulate the pencil to do "finger and thumb push-ups" when coloring! With practice, many students CAN change their grip.

It is often important to let an occupational therapist look at pencil grip. There are so many grips available on the market, and often parents, teachers or therapists will use a grip without analyzing the BEST grip to use biomechanically. At The Handwriting Clinic, there are only a few grips that we use, with the goal of eventually getting the child to progress to NOT using a grip! Also, many funny looking grasps on a pencil may not warrant trying to change a grip.

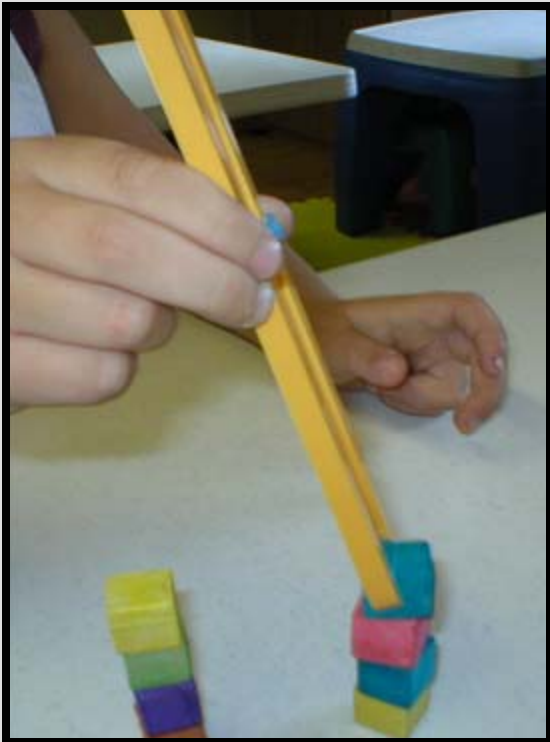
Reasons to Change a Child's Grip:

- Grips that occlude a child's vision with the tip of the pencil
- Primitive grips (fisted grips)
- Biomechanical stress to a joint - many funny looking grips may actually be providing stress to a joint that may result in problems in the future!
- Any time the child complains of pain or fatigue in the hand
- Hyperextension of the thumb IP joint (the joint toward the tip of the thumb) within a grasp on a pencil
- Severe hyperextension of the index finger DIP joint (the joint towards the tip of the index finger).



What Can a Teacher Do in the Classroom?

Preschool through Kindergarten teachers should have fine motor centers in their classroom. Use of tweezers, tongs, scissors, and coloring labs within the classroom can help develop fine motor skills needed to hold a pencil. Purchase some tweezers, or “toaster tongs” from the drugstore or kitchen supply store. Think of all the manipulatives already available in the classroom, and have the student place their fingers in a tripod grasp on the tongs to do the center activities. This will allow the student to isolate the thumb, index and third fingers for manipulation, and allow the 4th and 5th fingers to provide stability.



Without intervention, the child's grasp that he or she starts Kindergarten with, is likely to be a lifelong grasp without intervention. Fine motor skills and grip develop through the Kindergarten year, and with intervention, most children can change their grip.

The Handwriting Clinic sells a Pencil Gymnastics Kit for \$24.95 which has an instructors manual, and center based activities for classrooms. It can be purchased through our products website at: www.firststrokeshandwriting.com or by calling Tammy at 972 814 1296.

The best part about this kit, is that it comes with reproducible handouts for parents so they can work together with you, on how to best work with their student on pencil grip.

What Can the Clinic Do for Grasp?

We can look at children's grasp patterns and determine the intervention needed for those children who truly struggle with grip or handwriting! If a student has a hyperextended thumb IP joint within a pencil grip, it is very important for us to intervene with this child. We have FUN, grasp classes 2 Saturdays a month for a total of 4 hours of intervention with an occupational therapist for a very reasonable price (First through 5th graders).

Also, the most important class we offer is our preschool and Kindergarten print classes. This is the age where we can do intervention for grip, fine motor skills and handwriting skills BEFORE bad habits develop! For this age child, we incorporate grip techniques and activities within the class curriculum. Most of our students would rather be out riding their bike than sitting down coloring and working on fine motor skills at home. That is why we have the coolest, and most developmentally appropriate activities in our preschool through Kindergarten print classes. The students also work on multi-sensory handwriting during these classes. We even have a gym.

80 percent of our business is group classes. We have gifted students, and students with dyslexia and learning disabilities in our classes. We also do private therapy for children with autism and developmental disabilities. We love to start these children at age 4 1/2, before bad habits develop!

Does Grip Affect Legibility of Handwriting?

Many parents call the clinic and think that their child's poor legibility of handwriting results from their pencil grip. This may be slightly true, but almost always, the legibility problem is due to other reasons. Even a slight delay in visual or fine motor skills can affect handwriting. More often, the child really needs a systematic, multi-sensory handwriting course that also has reversal techniques and remedial strategies built into the program.

While grip may or may not affect handwriting, it is SO important to think about the influence of grip on stress to a joint, fatigue or pain. Also, if grip occludes vision to the tip of the pencil, it likely DOES affect handwriting for beginning learners!

My student sequences letters bottom to top, and in funny ways!

There is good and bad news here! If you ask most 4 1/2 year olds to copy letters, they often can make the letter LOOK like the letter, but the child may use too many strokes, or poor sequencing to write the letter. Gifted children often have the worst sequencing, because they were even younger when they began writing letters. The problem is that the bad habits for sequencing letters usually begins BEFORE kindergarten! We often have parents that are mad at their child's Kindergarten teacher because "the teacher never taught my child how to sequence the letters". The problem, is that the bad habits usually developed before Kindergarten.

Developmentally, most children have the fine and visual motor skills to learn to write at age six, when most older adults learned to write when they were children. Today, most children learn handwriting before Kindergarten, and in Kindergarten, the handwriting curriculum is fast paced. The good news, is that often a child CAN learn correct sequencing of letters at the Kindergarten age. The bad news is that after the middle of first grade (often younger for gifted students), most children cannot change the sequencing of their letters! At The Handwriting Clinic, we have little luck changing the older child's sequencing of print, but we CAN rapidly change legibility, letter reversals, and work on speed and memory skills. For 2nd grade and above, we have some special techniques that are quick and easy, to learn better legibility. But, we cannot change the sequencing of the bottom to top patterns, clockwise circles, or other "funny" ways of letter formation. This is why we love to get students referred to us in preschool through Kindergarten! We can usually change the legibility of the older student quickly, but often have to accept that the letters may be formed bottom to top, or in the wrong sequence.

What Can the Teacher Do?

Kindergarten teachers should teach the formation of the letter "large motor" by having the students close their eyes and draw the letter in the air in the correct sequence, BEFORE doing small motor work on a worksheet. Take the students who sequence letters incorrectly, and put them in a lab, where they practice sequencing it correct, before giving the child a worksheet. Test and monitor students to make sure they can write the letters in the correct sequence.

The older child has another opportunity to learn sequencing when cursive handwriting is introduced. By doing large motor practice, a teacher sets that student up for optimal learning of the sequence of the letter! The one thing we tell parents of students that struggled with print, is that cursive handwriting is another opportunity. If a child is placed in our cursive program, they can learn correct sequencing and develop functional cursive. The good news is that a child is often a little older when they learn cursive, and their visual motor and fine motor readiness skills are at a more mature level.

DOES MY STUDENT HAVE DYSGRAPHIA?

Dysgraphia is a term that is way overused, and commonly is used to describe "bad handwriting". If a student has a poor grip or sloppy handwriting, they are often labeled as having dysgraphia.

To diagnose true dysgraphia, there are three main types:

Dyslexic dysgraphia - students who can copy written work but have difficulty with composition due to visual memory problems with spelling, putting thoughts together to compose, etc. These students have great thoughts in their head but are challenged when they have compose.

Fine Motor dysgraphia - this is usually unrelated to pencil grip! These students have some fine motor and eye hand coordination challenges, and the physical act of controlling the pencil is difficult.

Visual Motor dysgraphia - these students have trouble seeing a symbol and reproducing it on paper. These kids just have trouble learning to write the letter, and often have reversals.

Why Do Older Children Revert to Print after They Learn Cursive?

SPEED and VISUAL MEMORY! Most children in 3rd, 4th and 5th grades do not learn cursive well enough to functionally use it! The Handwriting Clinic, along with some graduate students at Texas Woman's University School of Occupational Therapy, did a study in May of 2006 at a local elementary school. We tested 3rd, 4th and 5th graders to determine the speed of handwriting in cursive. The norm time for writing cursive a - z, connected together, is 23 - 25 seconds, for an adult. At The Handwriting Clinic, we try to get our students in the 40 seconds club! If our students, many of whom really struggled with the writing process, could get into the 40 seconds club, then we were interested how they compared with local elementary school students.

The results were that the average time for the 3rd graders to write a - z was 2 minutes, 5 seconds. The 4th and 5th graders still averaged over a minute. This was at a school that was "handwriting friendly", where the teachers did put an emphasis on teaching cursive. One good aspect of the study, was that almost all of the students actually did know cursive well enough to write all the letters of the alphabet in cursive.

I think back to my own children. My oldest daughter learned cursive by independently going through a cursive workbook after she finished other assignments. There was no "teaching", but independent practice. After she finished the workbook, she received her "cursive handwriting license" and was expected to write in cursive in class. I was very excited to see my 4th child come home with cursive homework sheets. Later I realized that the only cursive practice he did at school, was primarily the homework pages for cursive.

The problem is that most teachers cannot adequately spend enough time on cursive, especially for the struggling student. Referring students with dyslexia, dysgraphia or learning disabilities to The Handwriting Clinic could really help these students. But, a great technique for teachers, would be to have the students write the letters in the air as they are introduced. Then do visual memory practice as they progress, writing letters and words in the air with eyes closed. Give the students a stretch break, and practice writing a few words in the air as they stand by their desk. Have no time? Then when your class is standing in line for the restroom, your class can be the quietest class in the hall as they quietly practice words or the alphabet, by drawing letters in the air with eyes closed!

Keyboarding versus Handwriting?

This is not an "either or" question now days. ALL kids need to learn keyboarding as it is a life skill. By middle school and high school, students should be proficient in using the keyboard. We have been taking data on our keyboarding classes. The students who take our multi-sensory keyboarding class, on average, type as follows:

2nd graders: 6 to 8 words per minute using home row positioning and all fingers

3rd graders: 10 to 12 words per minute using home row positioning and all fingers

4th graders: 12 to 15 words per minute using home row positioning and all fingers

5th graders: 15 - 30 words per minute using home row positioning and all fingers

Most students can write on average, between 10 and 15 words per minute, in elementary school. So, keyboarding skills can be as functional as handwriting skills even in elementary school!

How to teach keyboarding? A frequent question I get, is, "What software program is best?" The answer is that for initial teaching, no software program is best with out direct monitoring. Just like handwriting skills, bad habits can be locked in! We take the kids through a manual with short typing passages that are not overwhelming. We have on and off keyboard typing and memorization skills. The students use a variety of multi-sensory approaches to learning keyboarding.

In summary, keyboarding is something that can be mastered at the elementary level. Keyboarding is essential for students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, a disorder of written expression, or who will need spell checking as a life long skill. It is very important to teach these students keyboarding skills "as a process" through the elementary school years, so that the child can maintain written expression at their cognitive level. Your school district has an assistive technology team who can evaluate special education students and determine if keyboarding will help written expression. As part of the ARD process for your student, you may need to recommend a referral for an assistive technology evaluation for your students.

We have our program and its curriculum for sale with our handwriting products. We also have great keyboarding classes where we use our curriculum! We teach students in a small group with a 1:4 ratio of teacher to students! Have students that need extra help or have portable keyboards to sue in your class - we would love to help!

*Published by: The Handwriting Clinic Sept. 2007
1506 Capital Ave, Ste 150, Plano, Tx 75074 972 633-1974
www.TheHandwritingClinic.com*

WHAT AGE IS BEST FOR WORKING ON HANDWRITING?

Developmentally, children should have all the fine and visual motor skills by age 6, to learn handwriting. Most adults began handwriting training around age 6. Of course, children learn handwriting in preschool now days, and should have handwriting down before Kindergarten. It is especially hard on boys, who would rather be out riding their bike, than inside coloring and practicing letters! That is why we have multisensory handwriting lessons and even a gym, to learn handwriting! We can teach the top to bottom patterning, and counterclockwise circle strokes for the circle letters (o,a,d, g, q, c). We do fun art projects for the phonic sounds. The kids developmentally work on age level fine motor skills to specifically develop a refine grasp pattern on a pencil.

We often hear parents ask us about gifted children. They usually have some of the worst handwriting! This is because their visual motor skills develop early on to where they can copy letters, but not necessarily in the correct sequence of letter formation. This leads to huge problems later on, because their pattern of letter formation becomes habit, and then difficult to change. We see countless numbers of first graders who have unbelievably different approaches to letter formation (bottom to top, clockwise circles, and sometimes even extra motions to make the letters. We cannot change letter formation habits from the middle of First Grade. That is why it is so important to see children early—especially if a child is precocious, or if a child just needs some encouragement in FUN ways to work on fine motor and handwriting skills. We have wonderful preschool classes that start in the Fall or in January. During the summer, we do not work on handwriting with this age group, but we do have some fine motor camps for this age - as our summer camps are only 2 weeks. We need to see preschoolers over a 4 month period for handwriting - this allows us to see them develop over time. We always do parent training at the end of each class so that parents can work at home with their child! This is way more fun than copying letters in handwriting books - our preschool classes are a blast - even for those children who do not like to color or practice letters!



Can Older Students and Teens Change Handwriting?

Yes! In fact, older students and adults can usually change their handwriting after only an hour or two of instruction! There are legibility problems that develop when speed handwriting develops somewhere around age 10. The brain is faster than the hand! As students write, their hand is on the letter they are forming but their brain is several words or sentences away! The student begins to do poor closure of letters and several other handwriting errors, to “shortcut the letter” in order to have better speed! Many parents and teachers will tell a child to “use better handwriting”. However, a child really does not know the techniques to “use better handwriting!”. By teaching the child some common handwriting errors and working on sizing of letters, poor legibility can be changed rapidly! We have a WHAM class for older print legibility for 2nd - 5th graders, and we usually devote 2 private sessions to students or adults 6th grade and above, to change legibility!

We also sell the One Hour to Legibility Program to school districts nationwide. This program teaches many of the legibility techniques that we use in the clinic.

Products available from:
www.FirstStrokesHandwriting.com

For more contact information or questions, please visit:

www.TheHandwritingClinic.com

Be sure and look at the “Examples” section for our “before” and “after” handwriting samples from one session of summer camps”/

For product information, please visit:

www.FirstStrokesHandwriting.com

If you would like to be on our mailing lists for newsletters, upcoming handwriting inservices, or new clinic brochures, please email us at:

lists@thehandwritingclinic.com

FINE MOTOR SKILLS AND GRASP DEVELOPMENT IS JUST PART OF WHAT OUR CLINIC WORKS ON!

Please print out our brochure or go to www.TheHandwritingClinic.com for more information on our classes!

Preschool Finger Gymnastics Class (3/4 year olds)
Preschool Sensory Motor ABC Class (4/5 year olds)
Kids Beginning Print Class (K/1st graders)
Wipe Out Number Reversals Class
Sensory Motor Print Class (1st/2nd graders)
WHAM Class (legibility techniques for handwriting and math)
(2nd through 5th graders)
Sensory Motor Cursive Class (2nd - 5th graders)
Grasp Class - 1st - 5th grade
Keyboarding Class - 2nd through 5th grade

Zany Pirates Writing Literacy I: works on punctuation/grammar/sentence structure and paragraph writing.

Zany Heroes Writing Literacy II: works on more advanced punctuation/grammar, sentence structure and paragraph writing.

*Published by: The Handwriting Clinic Sept. 2007
1506 Capital Ave, Ste 150, Plano, Tx 75074 972 633-1974
www.TheHandwritingClinic.com*