

Handwriting: What's Normal, What's Not

Good handwriting is an important skill for young children. Handwriting is a basic tool that children use in the classroom for expressing their ideas, creating stories, and test-taking. Handwriting, reading, and spelling skills reinforce each other. If your child is able to write letters easily and clearly, he can spend more time focusing on his message and forming interesting sentences.

Is my child's handwriting "normal?"

Here are some developmental milestones in writing:

Preschool: Writing first appears as scribbles drawn in a large circular motion. As your child attempts to write her own name, shapes that resemble letters begin to appear.

Pre-K and kindergarten: Your child may enjoy drawing and labeling objects, using invented spelling with no vowels ("bed" becomes "BD"). He will write in upper case letters — most of them correctly formed — and begin to string separate words together to express more complex thoughts

First grade: Fine motor skills are stronger and your child gains better control in writing her letterforms. She is learning the difference between upper case and lowercase letters. Invented spelling is still common. Writing is fun as your child gains confidence and "automaticity."

Second grade: Your child's handwriting may become smaller and neater. Your child is able to focus more on what he is writing than on the mechanics. Journal writing in class provides lots of practice for strengthening handwriting skills.

Third grade: Your child will begin to learn to write in cursive. Writing speed will slow down, and close attention to letter formation will increase. Some class assignments will be in cursive, which will provide practice with this new skill.

Poor handwriting and learning disabilities

Children who struggle with handwriting may be exhibiting signs of a learning disability called dysgraphia. Dysgraphia affects a child's ability to write with a pen, pencil, or crayon. It also affects other tasks that require fine motor skills, such as using scissors or buttoning a shirt. Dysgraphia often overlaps with other learning disabilities such as dyslexia and ADHD, but not always. If you suspect that your child has dysgraphia, consult with your school's special education staff to have your child tested.

Some common signs of dysgraphia:

- Awkward pencil grip and body position
- Illegible handwriting, letters of different sizes
- Unfinished words or sentences
- Inability to write for very long
- Avoidance of writing or drawing activities
- Difficulty organizing ideas on paper

If your child continues to struggle with handwriting through the later grades, consult with your child's teacher about the possibility of being tested for special education services.

For more information on handwriting and dysgraphia, visit: www.ReadingRockets.org/article/c37

