



Pre-Writing

Before children are ready for writing, they need to develop their hand skills along with strength and control in their arms and shoulders. It is important that children understand where their hands are and what the movements feel like. These are skills children can learn through play and through practice their movements will become faster and more accurate. Here are some examples of activities that will encourage the necessary skills for writing. This is not an exhaustive list, you and your child/children could develop your own ideas.

Arm and Shoulder exercises

- Tug-of-war
- Tummy-lying activities on the floor, with arms propped on forearms to read books, colour or do puzzles.
- Wheelbarrow walking
- Animal walks
- Playground equipment, such as the climbers and monkey bars, at your local park.
- Obstacle courses
- Ball/balloon activities, throwing and catching, volleyball or hand ball.

Hand Exercises

Hand exercises for warming up the hands before writing but also for when hands are getting tired from writing.



Rub the hands together, first the palms of the hands then rub the back of the hands.



Hold hands together in front of you with elbows out to the side. Push your hand together as hard as you can for 5 seconds, then shake hands out in front to relax.



Place both hands on the table with palms facing up, flip your hand over so your palms are facing down, repeat this 10 times, getting faster if you can.

Finger Exercises for warming up the fingers before writing but also for when hands are getting tired from writing.



Starting with index finger press against the thumb, then complete with each finger in turn, pressing it against the thumb. Complete with both hands. Once mastered complete both hands at the same time.



Link fingers together in front of you, one hand on top of the other with elbows out to the side. Keeping fingers linked pull as hard as you can for 5 seconds.



Make stars. Clench fist as hard as you can then stretch fingers out. Repeat 5 times with both hands.

Thumb exercises for strengthening thumb muscles

- Thumb wrestling encourages the practice of thumb movements in both larger movements as well as in strength of the thumb.
- Draw a face on the thumb and get the thumbs to talk to each other in a 'thumbs up' position (hand fisted).



Play dough is a great warm up activity before other exercises

- Squeeze dough to warm up fingers
- Roll out a sausage with both hands
- Pinch a ridge along the top with index finger and thumb of writing hand
- Flatten the ridge with fingers and thumb in turn
- Roll small (pea sized) balls between thumb, index finger and middle finger gently. These can then be squashed between thumb and each finger in turn (keeping web space open in a circle) or flicked by thumb and each finger in turn.

Recipe

- Mix the dry ingredients (8 tbsp flour, 2 tbsp table salt) in one bowl and the wet ingredients (60ml warm water, food colouring, 1tbsp vegetable oil) in another.
- Pour the wet mixture into the dry and mix well with a wooden spoon
- Knead on a floured surface for a few minutes until a dough is formed.
- Store in a sealable bag or plastic pot

Try adding a little more food colouring for a darker colour and adding a few drops of essential oil to bring the senses alive!

With Supervision you could also add small objects/beads for the child to find.

To be able to achieve a dynamic tripod grip to use a pencil efficiently the hand has to have the following skills:

- Tip-to-tip pincer grip
- In-hand manipulation
- Finger isolation
- Joint stability
- Strength



We are often asked what activities a child can do to help them develop their hand skills but frequently it is not the activity itself but how they do the activities that is the key to improving their skills. For example - playdough can help a struggling child develop pincer grip but will not do so unless the child is shown how to or helped to stabilise certain joints of the hand and the activity is presented in such a way as to encourage pincer grip.

Tip-to-tip Pincer grips

This is the ability to bring the thumb and index finger together so they touch each other at the very ends of both digits and can hold objects very lightly or squeeze very hard without any of the joints in finger or thumb collapsing (hyper-extending). A child should be able to do this between his thumb and any of his fingers.

We find that children with poor hand skills cannot do this and have developed a pad-to-pad pincer grip instead or use a lateral pincer grip between the thumb and the side of the index finger – this makes moving the fingers during writing more difficult (try it).



A well-developed pincer grip is important to allow the formation of the web space which is the big O space that your thumb and index finger form when in a pincer grip. Integrity of this web space provides the basis of finger movement for handwriting



All other efficient grips are variations on this but the same basic rules apply in that the pencil is held by three digits and the pencil point extends beyond the fingers. Once the ring or little fingers are introduced it restricts the movement of the grip and encourages movement to come from the wrist and arm.

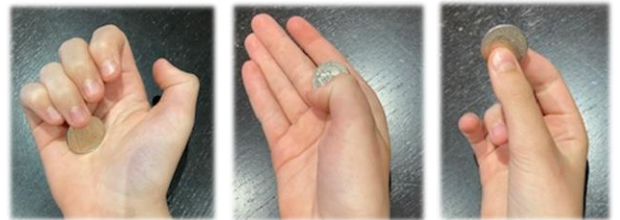
Activities to encourage pincer grip:

- Construction toys e.g. Lego, Meccano
- Games – using small figures or button / tiddlywinks sized markers. E.g. Connect 4
- Peg Boards – with medium to small sized pegs for the fingertip grip.
- Craft activities – gluing small objects, sticking stickers or threading.
- Threading activities – with medium to small beads, pieces of straws, or punched holes and a lace. Can progress to lacing more complex patterns.
- Picking up and sorting objects, gradually using smaller and smaller items e.g. pasta shapes, beans, lentils, screws, nuts. Tweezers or clothes pegs can be used for variety.
- Paper tug-of-war for two people. Use strips of paper or card and can be held with different fingertips and thumb.
- Put pennies into a piggy bank, play with finger puppets and spinning tops.

In-hand manipulation

This is an important skill for handwriting as it allows the child to position the pencil correctly in the hand, reposition the pencil at any time whilst writing, hold the pencil in different places for different tasks (e.g. drawing shapes) without interrupting the flow of work.

Place a small object in the palm of the child's hand. Get them to explore the object with their fingers, roll it around and see if they can get it to their fingertips using only that hand.



Activities to encourage in hand manipulation:

- Collect coins in the palm of hand, bring one coin at a time to fingers to place coin in piggy bank, repeat with each coin using only one hand. This can also be done with beads or counters
- Unscrew lids – e.g. bottle, toothpaste
- Pick up the pencil (as if going to write), and walk the fingers up and down the pencil keeping the three finger grasp.
- Use a pencil with a rubber at one end, and turn the pencil around in the hand to rub out, and back again to write.
- Use a click pen and keeping the pen in one hand, click the pen and then walk the fingers back to hold it ready for writing. Take the lid off a marker pen, while holding the pen in one hand



Hand-eye Co-ordination Games

- Roll, throw and catch large sized balls.
- Puzzles - support your child to match the picture to the box starting with the edges
- Copy block patterns
- Play balloon volleyball, scarf toss and catch.
- Draw and scribble
- Colour simple shapes using Paint with Water books (the colours magically appear).
- Pour, ladle and spoon soapy water into different sized containers at the kitchen sink.
- Play Simon Says and use terms such as "up & down," "back & forth" and "front & back."

Sensory Activities

- Hide pennies, beads or other small objects in Play-Dough, sand or rice tubs for your child to find.
- Draw shapes and lines on sandpaper or carpet squares.
- Put everyday objects such as a key, toothbrush, spoon, eraser, paper clips into a bag. Your child identifies the objects by feeling them.
- Whole Body Copying Games - e.g. Simon Says, a variety of animal walks.
- Make lines, shapes and letters by: finger painting, painting with food or shaving cream, painting with water on the path and even with your fingers in the sand.'

Finger Isolation

The ability to move the first finger on its own is needed to develop a mature pinch grasp and greater fine motor control e.g. when using cutlery and pencils.

Activities to encourage finger isolation:

- Poking holes with index finger in playdough or slime
- Finger painting
- Popping bubbles
- Using tablet to draw



Mark-making

Mark making is the beginning of the child's journey towards writing and is an important step in their development not just for writing but also for discovery, self-expression, creativity, coordination, critical thinking, brain and language development. Make this as interesting for the child as you can.

Try:

- Using marker pens
- Paint smearing
- Chalk on the floor/wall
- Stick in the mud



Pre-Writing Shapes

Children need to be able to draw pre-writing shapes before they are handwriting ready. We first learn to go up and down, then side-to-side and then circles, then diagonals. If a child is not yet able to form these shapes then they are likely to experience difficulties in forming letters and numbers.

The stages of writing are:



- The child is able to make scribble like marks in one direction
- Scribbles in different directions
- The child copies basic shapes – vertical and horizontal lines, circle
- Copying shapes from a picture without a visual demonstration



- Imitates shapes involving multiple movements - cross, square, diagonal lines, X and triangle
- The child is able to complete and continue patterns
- Trace over patterns and shapes to increase motor movements and fluidity

—	
○	
+	
□	
↘	
↙	
X	
△	

Drawing stick men and houses are great activities that incorporate the basic shapes required for writing.

CBeebies has some great interactive ideas for children who are starting to make the transition from mark-making to letter formation, try the Get Squiggling Programme:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/get-squiggling>

Activities to help a child learn and draw shapes include;

- Making shapes in the air and get them to copy you
- Try these shapes on a white board, large sheet a paper on the floor or write on the pavement with chalk
- Large shapes involving lines, for example drawing a house
- Use different tools paintbrush, foam shapes, chalk, crayons, pencils, pens, markers
- Make shapes in a steamed up window
- Use colouring books of their favourite characters or toys
- Use water crayons in the bath and make marks on the tiles that can be washed off after
- Finger painting
- Draw shapes in the sand or in talcum powder/flour on the floor/table
- Decorate a cake with lines and shapes
- Draw shapes on the child's back/hand with their eyes closed, can they copy it
- Use construction toys (e.g. blocks, lego) to form different shapes

Pencil Control Exercises

First, make sure the child is holding the pencil correctly with their forearm on the table and their two small fingers curled under. This helps to provide stability to the hand, so that the fingers are free to move when forming letters.

Activities to encourage pencil control;

- Scribbling –Encourage the child to use finger movements with circular scribbles, keeping the hand on the paper. Try to keep the scribbles slow and careful.
- Flowers/suns – start with a small circle and encourage the child to draw ovals as petals or sunbeams touching the circle each time and moving around the circle in all directions. They can often manage two directions but not all the way around and may need you to show them where to go with another pencil.
- Snails and whirlpools – start with a small c shape and draw a spiral, getting slowly bigger, without crossing any lines, keeping the hand in one position, stretching the fingers. The reverse can also be done, starting with a circle and drawing a spiral that gets gradually smaller.
- Highlighted scribbles – make small squiggles with a highlighter and the child tries to keep inside the coloured line.



Pencil Grip

Once the child has completed the above activities and have the skills required to write it is important that they are taught how to hold the pencil and given plenty of opportunities to practice using a pencil/crayon. Let them score off items on your shopping list as you put them in your trolley. Encourage them to do dot-to-dots and mazes.

The most functional pencil grasp is called a dynamic tripod grasp because it promotes fluency and correct letter formation:

- Dynamic - because it allows the fingers to move freely without having to involve the wrist, arm or shoulder in the movement
- Tripod because the pencil is held only by three digits, the thumb, the index finger and the middle finger. The free movement of the fingers whilst gripping the pencil is essential for good letter formation.

Other grasps are functional and a pencil grip is only a problem if a child has difficulty writing legibly, at a reasonable speed, or complains of a sore or tired hand when writing (a little discomfort is normal if they are writing more than they have ever written before!). If an awkward grip pattern becomes a habit it is more difficult to change later. Encourage your child to hold their pencil in a way that allows their hand and fingers to move freely and easily when writing or drawing.

Ideas to encourage good pencil grip;



Use a short pencil/crayon to encourage the child to use only their thumb, pointer and middle finger

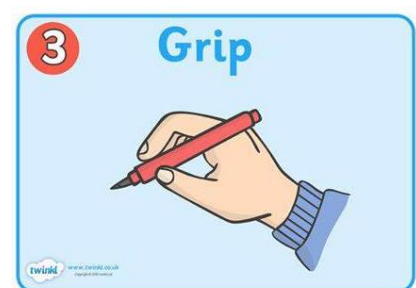
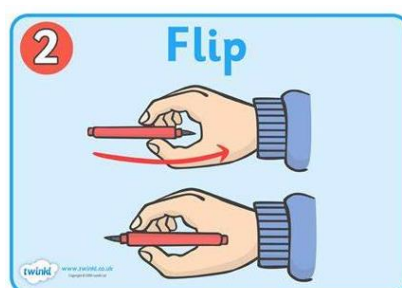
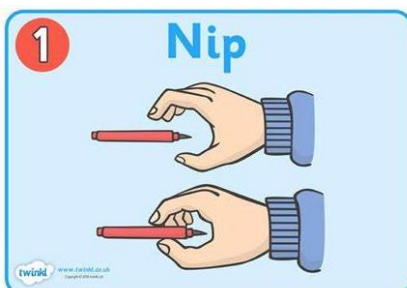


Put an elastic band or stickers around the pencil/crayon to reinforce finger positioning (approx 2cm from the top)



Use chunky triangular pencil/crayons to encourage a tripod grasp

The pencil flip is a fun way of teaching the child to hold the pencil correctly, encourage them to check each time to see if they are holding it write and encourage them to correct if needed.



Alphabet Knowledge

In order to be able to write and form written words a child needs to have an understanding of what the letters of the alphabet are, try interactive methods like Alphablocks on Cbeebies

An alphabet strip on the child's table can be used as a visual prompt of letter knowledge and placement of letters.

Letters around the home and as part of other activities can also encourage learning.

Activities to encourage alphabet knowledge:

- Letters around the home/classroom e.g. Fridge letters, bath letters, posters
- Treasure hunt – Hide different letters in sand and encourage child to find.
- Alphabet snap – Use alphabet cards to play snap
- Flash cards