

Letter Perfect: Helping Kids Learn to Write

Although handwriting is taught in most elementary schools, it may be done as seldom as once a week, according to a new study by Vanderbilt University, in Nashville. And the ideal time to start helping your kid with his penmanship is at ages 4 and 5. It's not always going to be easy, but don't get frustrated with your child. Instead, learn how to troubleshoot five stumbling blocks that many parents encounter.

By Megan Othersen Gorman

Problem: Your preschooler has zero interest in writing

Pointer: Create a buzz. "Many well-meaning parents buy workbooks and have kids sit quietly in a chair and trace letters over and over again," says Nellie Edge, a [kindergarten](#) and early-literacy specialist in Salem, Oregon. "That's totally uninspiring." Her zany alternative: Spray shaving cream on the kitchen counter or table and help your child write his name in the foam. The next day, draw letters with finger-paints. Wikki Stix, Play-Doh, and Lego blocks are toy-box favorites you can also use to shape letters. "You want to send the message to your child that learning to write is going to be one of the most fun things to do," says Edge.

Problem: You have absolutely no idea where to begin

Pointer: It's best to start by teaching your child to print her name. But even though capital letters are easier to write than lowercase ones, don't encourage her to write her name in all caps. "It's an incredibly difficult habit for kids to break in [kindergarten](#)," says Dawn Audibert, a kindergarten teacher in Rockville, Maryland. Once your child has her name down pat, then you can move on to the rest of the uppercase letters.

Problem: After lots of practice, your child's letters are barely recognizable

Pointer: Get a grip. Many 4-year-olds and even some 5-year-olds can't seem to get the hang of holding a standard-size pencil, which makes their handwriting ultra-messy. Slide-on rubber grips -- sold in school-supply stores -- may provide some help, but Audibert has another trick up her sleeve: a small golf pencil. "The length of the pencil is what gives some kids trouble, and grippers won't help with that," she says. Audibert also encourages parents to make time for activities that give the pincer grip -- the ability to hold objects between the thumb and index finger -- a good workout, such as stringing beads, playing Bingo with Cheerios, putting together puzzles, and building with blocks.

Problem: Your 4-year-old writes a lot of the letters backwards

Pointer: Don't freak out thinking that it's dyslexia! Writing letters backwards is a common problem in young children, says Jan Olsen, an occupational therapist who developed Handwriting Without Tears, a curriculum used in thousands of elementary schools. It usually resolves itself, but you can help by using an old-fashioned square blackboard with a wooden border. "Put a smiley face in the top left corner and call it the starting corner," says Olsen. Then have your child use that as the place to begin writing the letters he tends to reverse, like uppercase B and uppercase D. The border will prevent him from moving left with his lines.

Problem: Your child's letters are larger than the top line of an eye chart

Pointer: First, make sure your child fully understands the concept of big and small by asking her to write the same letters in different sizes on a piece of colorful construction paper. Make it a game -- and challenge her to fit as many letters as she can. Once you're sure she understands the concept, then mastering proportion is all about practice. "Encourage your child to mail an 'I love you' note to a relative or even help you write out the grocery list," suggests Edge. "These activities will help her begin to understand that space is limited and she needs to write in a size that will allow everything to fit on the paper."

How to Teach Letters

After a child learns how to write her name in uppercase and lowercase letters, teach the rest of the capitals. Go in the order of difficulty: Start with straight letters, then curvy ones, and end with diagonals, says Olsen.

First: E F H I L T

Second: B C D G J O P Q S U

Third: A K M N R V W X Y Z

Tricks to Help Kids Remember Letters

Fifty-two letter shapes are a lot for little heads to keep track of. Check out these clever clues for teaching tricky capital letters courtesy of Kara DeBonis, a [preschool](#) supervisor in Yardville, New Jersey.

The letter B is a line with a double bubble.

The letter D is a line with one big belly.

The letter E is for exercise -- two arms and a leg.

The letter I is a person with a hat and shoes.

The letter H is two roads with a bridge across.

The letter Q is a wheel with a kickstand.

The letter T is an "I" whose shoes fell off.

The letter Y is shaped just like a necktie.

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