

Handwriting is a complicated fine motor activity that seems to come natural for some and not so natural for others. If your child falls into the category of “not so natural” and is struggling to learn to hold the pencil and form the letters correctly, here are some tips that might help.

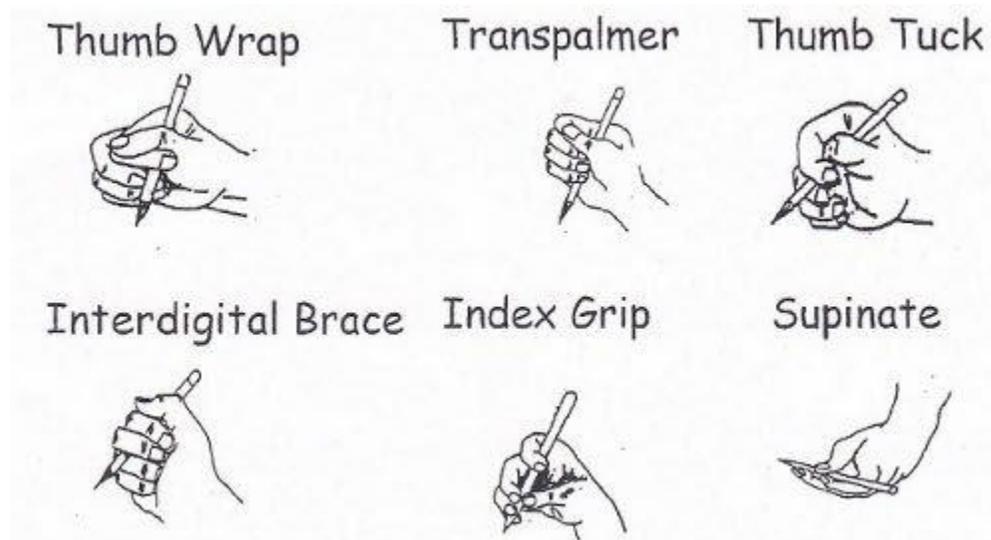
Holding the pencil correctly:



The most preferred pencil grip is the tripod grasp. This grasp is achieved by pinching the pencil with the index finger and thumb and then resting the pencil on the middle finger. This is the grasp pictured. The reason this grasp is preferred is that it allows for better control of the pencil by the fingers.

Here are some examples of non-preferred pencil grasps:

These grasps are non-preferred because they put added stress on the joints and are inefficient for smooth coordinated handwriting. When a child is young it is best to encourage the preferred tripod grasp pictured above, so from the beginning they learn an efficient way to hold the pencil. If a child is older and has already established one of these non-preferred grasps, the grasp should only be changed if it is causing pain or is causing handwriting to be slow and sloppy.



What to do if your child cannot easily assume the tripod grasp position:

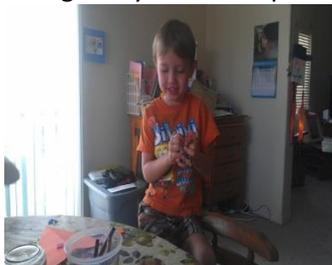
For some children, holding the pencil does not come natural, it could be due to weak muscles, holding the video game controller too much or some other reason. Whatever the case may be, we don't want to just nag and nag and nag about how to hold the pencil correctly, but at the same time we want to do things to help foster the more efficient pencil grasp. Here are some things that you might find helpful.

The first 3 are things build the skills without putting emphasis on "holding the pencil right". When something is hard for a child they will often resist it, but when something is fun or seems like a game they will often persist longer and put forth more effort. Once the muscles are working together then holding the pencil becomes easier for the child and hopefully they will be less resistant to adopting the tripod grasp.

1. Play pick-up games with tongs and tweezers. Using tongs and tweezers gets the thumb, index and middle fingers working together. You can use kitchen tongs to pick up cotton balls or small toys. Have the child pick them up and put them in a container.



2. Make small paper wads. With all the junk mail we get daily there is no shortage of scrap paper. Having a child make small paper wads is a good way to get the thumb, index and middle fingers working together. You can make a craft, play basketball, table hockey by flicking them...or whatever game you come up with on your own.



3. Use very small pencils or crayon pieces when you have them write or color.

While it hurts my feelings to break new crayons into small pieces, they are very effective for getting a small hand into a tripod grasp position. The small crayon pieces make it almost impossible for the child to adopt anything but a tripod grasp. The small muscles necessary for this grasp will be activated and strengthened so that this grasp becomes easy for the child.



4. Use a pencil grip:

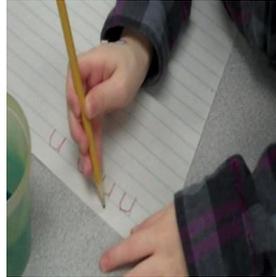
Pencil grips are tools to help a child find the correct position on the pencil. Unless the child just likes using the grip, it is to be used for a short time until the child automatically assumes the correct position with or without the grip.

- a. The grip is helpful is by letting the child know where to hold the pencil. Some children seem to know to hold the pencil near the lead and some seem to hold the pencil in the middle or far away from the lead. The pencil grip tells them where to put their hand.
- b. A specialized pencil grip is helpful by letting the student know where to position the fingers. There are a variety of specialized pencil grips on the market that are designed to put the fingers in the proper position for writing.



There are many different grips out there. The easiest grip to use is the triangle grip, the index and thumb pinching on top, the middle finger on bottom. This will work for some kids, while other kids need more cues as to where to position their fingers. Lakeshore Learning in Henderson offers a variety of grips at the checkout stand to try. See which one you or your child gravitates toward. Most grips are under \$2.

What to do if your child holds the pencil straight up and down verses resting it in the web space of their hand;



Holding the pencil upright verses resting it in the web space of the hand can produce pain and fatigue with writing. It also is not an efficient way to hold the pencil because it reduces movement at the pencil tip which equates to less control.

Use a “handi-writer”. They are specially designed wrist bands with charms that pull the pencil backward and engage the ring and little fingers so that they do not find their way to the writing end of the pencil. These devices can be purchased or later I will show you how to make one from things you can generally find at the dollar store.



These tools are very effective to help remind the child to keep the pencil back and to not use their ring and little fingers while writing. They can become cumbersome with erasing. Handi-writers are helpful teaching a child how to hold the pencil correctly. They are to be used as a training tool, when the child can assume the correct position with or without the tool it will no longer be necessary.



How to make the “Handi-writer” pictured above:

Materials Needed:



- Soft, wrist size hair band
- Soft, small size hair band
- String
- Charm

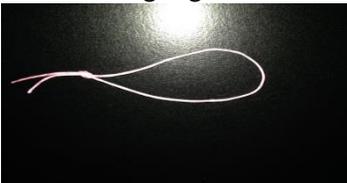
Step 1:

Attach small loop with the large loop by making a slip knot



Step 2:

Tie the string together to make a circle.



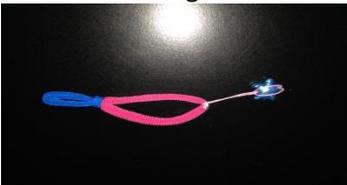
Step 3:

Attach your charm (bead) using a slip knot



Step 4:

Attach the string with the charm to the large loop using a slip knot



Time to teach letter formation:

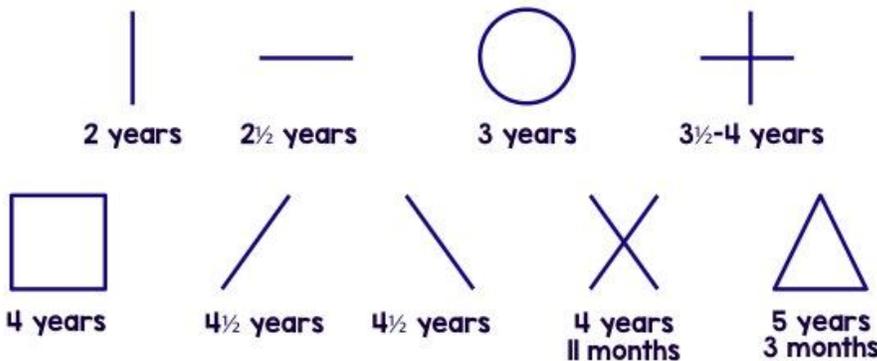
For some children, a few tracing sheets and exposure to letters is enough to teach them how to form the letters, but most children need someone to teach them how each letter is formed. There are several handwriting programs out there such as "Handwriting Without Tears", "Zaner Bloser", "Big Strokes for Little Folks" etc. Each handwriting program has value and can be helpful with teaching a child to learn how to write the letters of the alphabet and then form them into words, sentences and paragraphs; I do not recommend one program any more than another, choose the one you think you would be most comfortable using.

Recommendations – No matter what, if any handwriting program you choose:

1. Teach the pre-writing shapes first; when teaching them, give them names that describe the shape and /or the motion, such as straight line down, straight line across, circle, cross, square, diagonal, X and triangle. This helps them have not only a visual understanding but also an auditory understanding of how the shape is formed.

PRE-WRITING SHAPES

Children should be able to form these 9 pre-writing strokes before asking them to write.

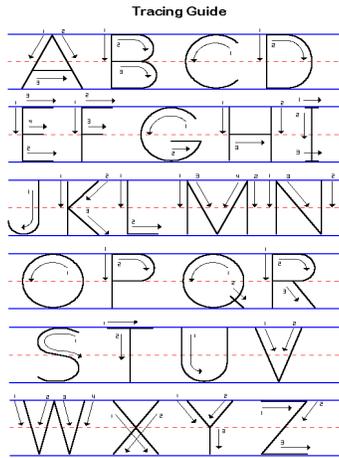


Children who can adequately draw the oblique cross can copy a significantly higher number of letters than little ones who cannot.

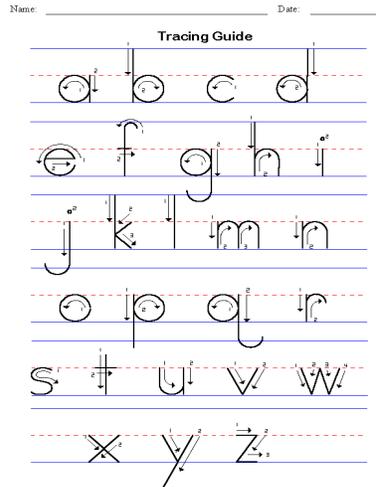
If holding the pencil is difficult, frustrating or seemingly impossible with your child, you can begin teaching, especially younger children by just using their finger to trace over the shapes or letters.



Please Note that tracing should begin with you teaching your child the correct way to trace the letter. If children are left on their own to decide where to start they may choose a starting position that is inefficient for forming that letter. Some children choose to begin at the bottom, some choose to break the letters down into individual parts, some children begin forming the letters from back to front; all of these things should be discouraged. Here is an example of the correct start position and direction of formation for all of the upper case and lower case letters.



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Multi-sensory ideas for practicing letters without the pencil:

If you don't mind the mess:

1. Spread out shaving cream on the table and make the shapes in the shaving cream; You can use cool whip if your child likes to put his hands in his mouth.
2. Spread out corn meal or sand or rice on the table or cookie sheet and trace the shapes in whichever substance you choose.
3. Making letters in the dirt also works...be creative.



If you don't want the mess:

1. Try doing shapes or letters in gel in a baggie.



You can make your own gel pad: All you need is a heavy duty, gallon size baggie, hair gel, food coloring and duct tape.

Directions:

1. Empty gel into baggie
2. Add food coloring to the gel to get the color you want
3. Seal up the bag on all four sides with duct tape.

