Writing Readiness (Pre-Writing) Skills

What are writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

Pre-writing skills are the fundamental skills children need to develop before they are able to write. These skills contribute to a child’s ability to hold and use a pencil, and the ability to draw, write, copy, and colour. A major component of pre-writing skills are the pre-writing shapes. These are the pencil strokes that most letters, numbers and early drawings are comprised of. They are typically mastered in sequential order, and to an age specific level. These strokes include the following strokes: \( \text{I, -, O, +, /, \( \Box \), \( \backslash \), X, and \( \Delta \).} \)

Why are writing readiness (pre-writing) skills important?

Pre-writing skills are essential for a child to be able to develop the ability to hold and move a pencil fluently and effectively and therefore produce legible writing. When these skills are underdeveloped it can lead to frustration and resistance due to the child not being able to produce legible writing or keep up in class due to fatigue. This can then result in poor self esteem and academic performance.
Building blocks necessary to develop writing readiness (pre-writing) skills:

- **Hand and finger strength:** An ability to exert force against resistance using the hands and fingers.
- **Crossing the midline:** The ability to cross the imaginary line running from a person’s nose to pelvis that divides the body into left and right sides.
- **Pencil grasp:** The efficiency of the manner in which the pencil is held, allowing age appropriate pencil movement generation.
- **Hand eye coordination:** The ability to process information received from the eyes to control, guide, and direct the hands in the accomplishment of a given task, such as handwriting or catching a ball.
- **Bilateral integration:** Using two hands together with one hand leading (e.g. opening a jar lid; with the other and helping - e.g. stabilising the jar).
- **Upper body strength:** An ability to exert force against resistance using the upper body and arms.
- **Object manipulation:** The ability to skilfully manipulate tools, including the ability to hold and move pencils and scissors with control, controlled use of everyday tools such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, cutlery.
- **Visual perception:** The brain’s ability to interpret and make sense of visual images seen by the eyes.
- **Hand dominance:** The consistent use of one (usually the same) hand for task performance, which allows refined skills to develop.
- **Hand division** (just using the thumb, index and middle finger for manipulation, leaving the fourth and little finger tucked into the palm not participating).

You can tell there are problems with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills if the child:

- Has an awkward pencil grasp.
- Has difficulty controlling a pencil for drawing.
- Shows a tendency to use their whole hand to manipulate objects rather than just a few fingers.
- Has poor endurance for pencil based activities.
- Displays messy and/or slow handwriting.
- Has difficulty staying within the lines when colouring.
- Applies inappropriate pressure to the paper for pencil based activities (either too heavy and frequently breaks the pencil, or too light and ‘spidery’).
- Has poor upper limb strength.
- Has difficulty coordinating both hands for two handed tasks.
- Has poor hand-eye coordination.
- Is verbally skilled but has difficulty showing this on paper (i.e. writing, drawing or colouring).
- Does not meet the pre-writing expectations below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pre-writing expectation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – 2 years</td>
<td>- Randomly scribbles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Spontaneously scribbles in vertical/horizontal and/or circular direction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a horizontal/vertical/circular direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 – 3 years</td>
<td>- Imitates a horizontal line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a vertical line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 4 years</td>
<td>- Copies a horizontal line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copies a vertical line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copies a circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a right/left diagonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – 5 years</td>
<td>- Copies a cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Traces a line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copies a square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copies a right/left diagonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates an X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Imitates a triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Grasps pencil in writing position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – 6 years</td>
<td>- Copies an X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Copies a triangle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Recognises between a big and small line or curve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When you see difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills, you might also see difficulties with:

- **Behaviour**: May avoid or refuse to participate in fine motor tasks.
- **Self esteem**: A person's overall sense of *self-worth* or personal value.
- **Academic performance**: The ease with which a student is able to complete academic tasks.
- **Self care**: Involves the everyday tasks undertaken to be ready to participate in life activities (including dressing, eating, cleaning teeth).
- **Avoidance**: Preference to get others to perform fine motor tasks for them under their direction, rather than actually doing themselves (e.g. “Daddy, draw me a house”, or “build me a rocket”, with refusal to do it themselves).
What can be done to improve writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

- **Hand dominance:** Determine which the dominant hand is and reinforce its frequent use in precision task performance.
- **Experience:** Encourage participation in activities that involve grasping and manipulating small objects such as drawing, puzzles, opening containers, threading or other related tasks.
- **Poking and pointing:** Practice tasks that use just one or two fingers (not all at once) e.g. poking games.
- **Praise and encouragement** when your child engages in fine motor activities, especially if they are persistent when finding an activity difficult.
- **Hand and finger strength** (e.g. scrunching, paper, using tweezers, play dough, pegs).
- **Sensory play** activities (e.g. rice play, finger painting) to assist the development of tactile awareness.
- **Hand-eye coordination:** Practice activities that involve hand-eye coordination (e.g. throwing and catching) and crossing the midline (e.g. reaching across the body to pick up items).
- **Upper limb strength:** Encourage play activities that develop upper limb strength (e.g. climbing ladders, wheelbarrow walking).

Activities that can help improve writing readiness (pre-writing) skills include:

- **Threading and lacing** with a variety of sized laces.
- **Play-doh (playdough)** activities that may involve rolling with hands or a rolling pin, hiding objects such as coins in the play dough or just creative construction.
- **Scissor projects** that may involve cutting out geometric shapes to then paste them together to make pictures such as robots, trains or houses.
- **Tongs or teabag squeezers** to pick up objects.
- **Drawing or writing** on a vertical surface.
- **Every day activities** such as opening containers and jars.
- **Pre writing shapes:** Practice drawing the 9 prewriting shapes (-, l, O, +, /, \, X, Δ, □).
- **Finger games:** Incy wincy spider.
- **Craft:** Make things using old boxes, egg cartons, wool, paper and sticky or masking tape.
- **Construction:** Building with duplo, lego, mobilo or other construction toys.
Why should you seek therapy if you notice difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills?

- To improve ability in and persistence with fine motor tasks.
- Increase school readiness.
- To help a child to complete self care tasks, such as doing up buttons and zips.
- To avoid a child becoming disengaged in an academic environment due to difficulties completing fine motor activities (e.g. writing, cutting, drawing).
- To avoid frustrations experienced by parents, teachers and children when a child is struggling to remain engaged in academic activities.
- To help maintain and develop a positive sense of well being.
- To ensure that a child doesn’t fall behind their peers in development of handwriting.

Left untreated, difficulties with writing readiness (pre-writing) skills can lead to:

- Difficulties meeting academic criteria due to poor handwriting skills and rapid fatigue.
- Difficulties mastering letter formation.
- Excessive pressure and anxiety in a school-aged child due to difficulties keeping up in class.
- Difficulties completing exams due to difficulty answering all written questions within the allocated time.
- Poor self esteem when a child compares their abilities with their peers.
- Difficulties filling in forms, such as job and rental applications.
- Difficulty developing efficient typing skills.
- Difficulty manipulating items for construction (puzzles, lego).

What type of therapy is recommended for writing readiness (pre-writing) skill difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with pre writing skills, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just pre-writing skills) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Pathology may well be recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which is a multi-disciplinary service provider.
If you are concerned about writing readiness (pre-writing) skill difficulties, the next step is:

- Call Kid Sense for an obligation-free discussion with a paediatric professional on ph 1300 66 00 67.
- Take the free on-line Self Assessment to obtain a visual representation of how your child is developing (doing this in conjunction with your teacher can be really helpful too).
- Visit the Child Development *Ages and Stages* Charts and Checklists to see what skills are expected at your child's age.
- Go to Booking an Appointment for more information.
- Review the fact sheets below for more relevant information.

Other relevant resources:

- Hand control (fact sheet)
- Crossing the midline (fact sheet)
- Handwriting expectations (fact sheet)
- Handwriting performance (fact sheet)