



How can I help my child with writing difficulties?

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A common difficulty experienced by children and young people with ADHD is poor handwriting. ADHD can co-occur with Dysgraphia which is a specific learning difficulty that impacts on writing skills. However, if your son or daughter is experiencing difficulties with handwriting, it does not automatically mean that they have Dysgraphia.

Many children with an ADHD diagnosis find the demands of writing challenging. Successful writing relies upon skills on several different levels, such as the ability to hold the content of what you are writing in your working memory, sustaining focus and remembering the range of vocabulary that you have without losing sight of the overall purpose or objective of the piece of writing. Another example would be deciding how to structure a written piece and decide upon which points go into which paragraphs and in what order. When we really think about the demands of writing, we can clearly see how a child or young person with ADHD might find the whole process very daunting and might avoid writing.

Let's take a minute to explore what Dysgraphia is. The condition can cause difficulties with forming letters, spacing words and even organising groups of words into complete sentences. This can lead to problems with taking notes in class, completing homework and succeeding in formal examinations that depend upon written responses. Other features of Dysgraphia, which can also be seen in children with ADHD, are difficulty with letter formation, spacing, writing left to right, staying inside margins, spelling, punctuation and using lower-case and capital letters interchangeably.

Writing can also be physically demanding in some cases, for example, cramping in the muscles of the hand, excessive sweating and anxiety. This is common in children and young people with ADHD and/or

Dysgraphia. Also, the child might place their arm / hand awkwardly during writing, holding their pen or pencil in an unnatural making writing even more challenging. There are many ways in which teachers can help your child in situations like this, for example, allowing the use of audio-recorders to support note taking or providing opportunities to learn touch-typing as an alternative. So, how can you help your child to improve their writing and to build their self-confidence for future writing activities?

Here are five handy tips:

1) Do some hand exercise together.

Stretch out your hands, then shake your hands out, rotate your wrists, wiggle your fingers and maybe even squeeze a stress ball. A friend of mine uses putty with her daughter. They press their fingers into the putty together which gets the blood flowing and prepares the muscles for writing.

2) Teach your child to touch-type.

If the school are not offering these opportunities, then do it yourself. Using computers are highly recommended for children and young people with handwriting difficulties because they reduce the number of variables that need to be controlled including letter formation, letter and word spacing and writing text left to right along a straight line. There is also a lot of correction built in with spell checkers which reduces any stigma that your son or daughter might experience with being constantly corrected.

3) Use cursive (joined up) writing.

Cursive writing can be easier than print writing as there are more connections between letters, so it reduces the need to be constantly thinking about spacing and requires a steady flow and movement of the hand. This is helpful for children and young people who have difficulty with fine motor skills.

4) Experiment with different paper and pens.

It can sometimes make a difference to write on paper that has thick or raised lines. Paper of different colours may also be beneficial. The way in which your son or daughter grips a pen or pencil might be helped by using a thicker pen or a pencil with a rubber grip. Experiment with a range of pen grips to find the one that works for your child and expect them to change pen grips at times.

5) If you are helping your son or daughter with a piece of written homework, discuss some ideas first without the sight of a blank page or away from the keyboard.

One of the difficulties with starting to write is often not thinking through or planning for the whole piece, therefore, help your child to organise their thoughts and knowledge into sections. If you record this first, then it will help your child with ADHD who may forget the overall purpose of the writing as they concentrate on the first section. It will also provide a system of breaks, for example, "lets just finish this paragraph, then we'll have a break and after the break, we know exactly what needs to be written next."