

Sloppy Work

Does writing neatly really matter?

Susan Spicer speaks with experts Barry MacDonald and Jenny Kermer - February 2011

Your child's report card says that if she took more care with her written homework, her marks would be better. Some kids are perfectionists and do lovely, neat work, while others hide what might be good content and right answers in a messy, slapdash presentation. Does neatness really matter?

It shouldn't be the primary focus, says Vancouver educator and speaker Barry MacDonald. "Ideally, a student is graded on ideas rather than presentation." In practice, however, that's not always the case.

"If the work isn't legible, kids may lose marks," says Jenny Kermer, an occupational therapist with the Thames Valley Children's Centre school health program in London, Ont.

In an average classroom, kids spend about 60 percent of their time working with a pen or pencil. As they enter the intermediate grades, written assignments become longer and more complex, so it's important to find ways to help kids who find handwriting difficult or uncomfortable.

Besides, says MacDonald, writing legibly is a life skill. "There will be times that they will need to be able to write things down and maybe even share it with others."

"Schools focus on the content of the written work, rather than the physical process of printing or writing," says Kermer. Cursive writing is no longer part of the curriculum, and penmanship isn't as widely taught as it once was, which means

parents may have to take a more active role in encouraging this skill.

According to MacDonald, author of **Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School**, boys tend to struggle with handwriting more than girls because girls' fine-motor skills develop earlier than boys'. This helps to explain why girls are more likely to find printing and writing easier and more enjoyable at an earlier age: It may take the boys a few years to catch up.

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Barry MacDonald

Here are some first steps in helping a struggling scribe –

Find a table and chair that fits: Adult-sized furniture is often not conducive to writing comfortably for children. A child should be sitting with his bum to the back of the chair, his hips, knees and ankles each forming a 90-degree angle, and his feet planted flat on the floor. The tabletop should be about two inches above the bent elbow.

Get a grip: Encourage kids to hold the pencil between the tip of the thumb and the first two fingers, with the fourth and fifth finger curled into the hand to provide stability. A rubber gripper placed on the pencil can encourage a proper grip. Playing with small objects, like moving coins around in the hand and working on puzzles or with building sets can really help kids who lack strength and coordination in their hands.

Improve the form: Ideally, kids should learn how to form letters from top to bottom and left to right. Quite often kids who struggle with writing form letters from the bottom up, which can affect writing speed and efficiency. In primary grades, inefficient formation sequences may not really limit speed or legibility. By age nine, however, they're required to produce a lot more work. In timed situations like a test, a slow writer won't be able to finish.

Practise perfection: Brief periods of daily practice can really improve handwriting, but don't overdo it, says Kermer. She recommends setting a timer for 10 minutes a day. "The idea is to form the letters perfectly, rather than trying to do a lot. Speed will come with practice." When the timer goes off, stop even if it's going well. That way kids come back the next day feeling positive about the practice.

Ask about typing: Both Kermer and MacDonald say using a computer keyboard to produce written work should be an option for kids who struggle with handwriting. "There are free online programs that teach touch typing," says Kermer.

Encourage writing for fun: Christmas lists or thank-you notes allow kids to write without any pressure to do it perfectly. MacDonald emphasizes, "Laughter and joy lubricate learning".

Celebrate successes: When your child does produce a tidy piece of work, be sure to post it on the fridge.

Talk to the teacher: Parents and teachers should be using the same strategies, say our experts. If, for instance, the teacher is insisting on cursive writing, it will be important to figure out how to support a child's development of this skill.

Get a professional evaluation, if necessary: If the problem is really severe, it may be appropriate to ask for an assessment. An occupational therapist may suggest individualized programming to develop strength and coordination, specialized equipment or accommodations, such as more time to write tests.

One final thought from MacDonald: "Let's keep this neatness thing in perspective. We should be mindful to not expect children to write neatly every time. If we do, we risk turning off reluctant learners when they're still developing their attitudes toward school."