

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, for example, the ability to hold the content of what you are writing in your working memory and sustain focus in order to plan a complete narrative in a piece of extended writing. Remembering the range of vocabulary that you have so that you can select the most appropriate words to use in a single sentence or paragraph without losing sight of the overall purpose or objective of the piece of writing.

Another example would be deciding how to structure the whole written piece and to decide upon which points or ideas go into which paragraphs, in what order and with what tone or emphasis. When we really think about the demands of writing we can clearly see how a child or young person with ADHD, who is inattentive, impulsive and has working memory impairments, 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 high anxiety. This is quite common in children and young people with ADHD and/or Dysgraphia. Also, the child might place their arm and hand awkwardly during writing, holding their pen or pencil in an unnatural way which makes writing even more physically challenging. There are many ways in which teachers can help your child in situations like this, for example, allowing the use of audio-recorders or partners to support note taking or providing opportunities for children and young people to learn touch-typing as an alternative to handwriting.

Therefore, if you have recognised any of the above features in the writing of your son or daughter, how can you help them 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 even writing text left to right along a straight line. There is also a lot of correction built in with spelling and grammar 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."

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