

Handwriting Instruction: How We Talk to Children Matters!

One of the first kindergarten writing priorities is to teach children to efficiently print their name – this is the foundation piece for a year of engaging and delightful “kid writing” with high Common Core Standards as our goal.

- Encourage children to fingerspell their name before writing the name ticket—especially with children who do not have strong finger writing muscles. Fingerspelling reinforces letter knowledge while building fine motor handwriting skills for a firm pencil grip. It also allows children to demonstrate a new skill that they can learn when they practice over and over until achieving their goal. Children get fast and accurate with fingerspelling, which builds their pride and confidence—especially for our harder-to-accelerate children.

How we talk to children matters! Powerful handwriting instruction involves close coaching by teachers and volunteers. They are learning “habits of mind” and attitudes about learning that may last a lifetime:

- *How did you learn how to make that L so well?*
- *Wow, you remembered that capital letter!*
- *The “r” is a “continuous motion letter.” Let’s make it again without lifting our pencil. Repeat after me, “down, up and around.” I bet you can remember how to make that letter – write your name one more time (or write the letter several times) and teach your brain to remember it!*
- *What is the focus letter that you have been working on? Yes, “y” is a “lift the pen” letter. How have you been teaching your brain to remember that?*
- *Stop and look at the Name Ticket model. Focus. Do your very best name writing!*
- *You paid attention and worked hard. That’s what good kindergarten writers do. What letter are you going to remember how to make? Let’s say the language and do the motion together.*

When the child shows you his finished Name Ticket, always start instruction with a specific positive comment about what the child can do. Then help the child remember the target letter or motion they are working on. When they show you their finished Name Ticket, give them one specific letter to improve. This is why we must be assessment-driven. The teacher, child, and parent need to know what the next Name Ticket goals are. Expect improvement every day.

Have High Expectations

If you expect students to write their first names perfectly, like your model, rather than just legibly, most students, with enough guidance and practice, will learn to write it very nicely. And for those who cannot and may never be able to write their names perfectly, your expectation will result in them writing it much better than they may have otherwise. Moreover, such an expectation at this point will result in neater handwriting throughout the year as well as an overall heightened quality of work in general. (Ranee Bergen from Teaching

Writing in Kindergarten, A Structured Approach to Daily Writing That Helps Every Child Become a Confident, Capable Writer.)

For children who need more time developmentally, or children who are harder-to-accelerate, consider letting them do rainbow writing over their name on large sheets of newsprint attached to an easel, build play dough coils to shape over a large name ticket model, or work one-on-one learning how to fluently shape letters. Invite children to use a handwriting C.L.A.W. or other pencil grip assist. Lying on the floor and using a white board may be helpful. Another strategy to teach the correct form with children who are not able to hold a pencil is ideally taught in a one-on-one setting: Cover a tray with shaving cream so the child can fingerpaint the letters using the index finger. **Work with parents and give them information on how to help their child with handwriting—and why it matters!** (See helpful links on our Nellie Edge Pinterest handwriting board.)

Incorrect muscle memories are hard to unlearn later. Encourage efficient letter formation from the first day of school, beginning with the most important thing a child will write—their name. Engage parents for nightly review in name writing until fluency is achieved (fluency = speed and accuracy). Our high expectations and authentic handwriting practice is driven by careful assessment: both student self-assessment, and ongoing teacher observation with systematic record keeping.

Why We Teach the Vertical Alphabet

The alphabet system that children use to write and read needs to be visually consistent. If you are using italic (*D'Nealian*) manuscript for handwriting, you are actually expecting young children to learn two different visual alphabet systems: one for reading and one for writing. This makes learning much harder. **Which handwriting system is best for kindergarten?** A summary of independent research from the Eric Clearinghouse concludes, "The vertical alphabet, which according to research is more developmentally appropriate, easier to read, and easier to write for young children." Consider sharing the following article with district curriculum leaders:

Research from the Eric Clearinghouse

<http://www.areasonfor.com/HomeSchool/Products/Handwriting/ERICstudy.pdf>



Katie Nelson coaches a harder-to-accelerate student.

Because "practice makes permanent," our goal for kindergarten is to use instructional techniques and systematic assessment that ensure our children are practicing efficient handwriting strokes and owning the improvement process. This supports their developing stamina as a kid writer.

"A child's name is an island of security in a sea of unfamiliar print."

—Marie Clay