



Writing By Hand or Otherwise!



Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) states: "A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classes solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum." For example, a 10-year-old student should not be removed (or denied placement) in a fifth grade classroom just because he isn't reading at grade level—the class reading material (in this case) should be modified so he can "be involved and make progress" (per IDEA) in the fifth grade curriculum. This is one in a series of articles about curriculum modifications.

Scribbling with a crayon (or mother's lipstick) is the beginning of handwriting. For many children with developmental disabilities or delays, handwriting may be a difficult, or even impossible, skill. But there are many strategies and accommodations to help!

Many kids can learn to write easier with big, fat crayons, pencils, markers, or paintbrushes—they're easier to grab, easier to use, and easier to see. Some children, however, may do fine with standard-sized writing tools if we add the spongy-like sheath around the grip area to fatten it.

Finger painting may be a helpful prewriting activity. This can be done with traditional finger paints or you can squirt a big blob of shaving cream on a tray and let a kid smooth it, draw in it, or make mounds of it!

In elementary school art class, my son, Benjamin, was provided with fat paint brushes, but he was really more comfortable finger painting. With the kind assistance of his art teacher, art projects (from painting to pottery and everything in between) were modified so Benj could create beautiful works of art like his classmates!

A table-top easel was always helpful for Benjamin; this brought the paper closer to him and helped him sit up straighter so he could use his arms and

hands better. Taping the paper down on the easel (or a desk) may also make a big difference. And to keep the easel from sliding—since Benjamin held on to it with his left hand to stabilize his body—we placed non-slip material between the table and the easel to hold the easel in place.

A variety of other writing helpers can be found in catalogs and on the Internet. One is a hard plastic pencil holder in the shape of a roly-poly bird, which rests on the desk. A pencil is inserted close to the "beak area," and the user grips the "body" of the bird to write, without having to lift the bird off the surface of the desk. And in many office supply stores, you can now find pens with a "finger ring" which makes the pen easier to hold.

Another helpful item is "raised line" paper. This is similar to handwriting paper with wide horizontal lines, but the lines on this paper are raised so the child can feel the border of the writing area.

Rubber name stamps, alphabet and number stamps, and stamps with critters and other things can also help a young child communicate written language without having to write with a pencil. With a wide variety of stamps to choose from, a child can write her name or compose a story! My son used a name stamp in kindergarten, and he has a variety of

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name stamps today (script for use on birthday cards, block style for other uses, etc.).

While it's nice to be able to write with a pen/pencil, the percentage of writing done by hand today is minuscule as compared to the writing done on computers! So while mastering handwriting has long been considered a critically important skill, in the Real World *it really isn't anymore*. When my son opens his first checking account, he'll sign his name with a rubber stamp after the cash register or the clerk fills in the other blanks—or he can just use a debit card instead of checks!

If a child *can* learn to write—legibly and quickly—that's great. But if a child's writing is illegible, if handwriting is a frustrating exercise, and/or if writing is a slow and laborious task, it's time to move on to computer use. It just seems downright silly, as well as a waste of the student's and the teacher's time, to focus on handwriting when there's a better, more effective, and more appropriate way! And the earlier a child is exposed to a computer for writing, the sooner he'll achieve success.

A wide variety of computer models, keyboards, accessories, and software—including eye-gaze software for a student who has no hand/arm movement—is available to budding *and* experienced writers. Call computer companies for a catalog, search the Internet, and/or contact an assistive technology (AT) center in your area to learn what's available. Some disability organizations (such as Easter Seals, United Cerebral Palsy, etc.) and some universities have AT departments, and many states also have some type of AT lending programs.

We can also create our own accommodations. When we first exposed Benjamin to the computer at age four, he had great difficulty seeing and finding the right keys. Rather than invest in an expensive adaptation, I bought a set of colored dots at the office supply store. First I put a yellow dot (the brightest color) on each of the letters of his name, then I put

a red dot on the remaining keys in the top row, a blue dot on the second row keys, and so forth. Since I had covered the key, I had to relabel each key, by writing on each colored dot in a big black stroke, and I also needed to trim the dots to fit the keys. Since the first thing most kids learn to write is their names, that's where we started, too. I told Benj to look for the yellow dots to write his name. He mastered that quickly. Then for other words, I'd suggest, "Look on the red row for the first letter...now look on the blue row..." Within a few weeks, he didn't need the colored dots anymore.

A child may be able to perform the *mechanics* of handwriting, but may have difficulty with composition—deciding what word to use in a sentence, how to construct sentences, and so forth. "Word predictor" software (by the Don Johnson Company and/or other firms) can be a great help to meet a student's needs.

My son, who wants to be a writer, is now using Naturally Speaking software. One-finger typing had served him well for many years, but with Naturally Speaking, all he has to do is wear a headset and dictate! The software has "learned" his voice/speech, and writing is now easier and more productive. (Interestingly, this is a product that was initially developed for individuals with disabilities, but versions have now been created for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who find dictating more productive and time-saving than typing on a computer.) Similarly, with many tablets and smart phones, the user can simply dictate her words; no typing is necessary.

Many of us are stuck in 20TH century thinking, believing penmanship is a both a mark of intelligence and a requirement for a successful education. But in the 21ST century, we know it is neither (who can read the handwriting of most physicians??). With curriculum modifications in writing—from low-tech devices to state-of-the-art computer technology—students with disabilities can write *their way* and succeed!