

## **Learning and Handwriting**

**By Lisa Harp**

Until we make the shift to expecting young children to do their work and testing entirely on a computer or hand held device, it is highly essential for them to receive handwriting instruction and practice. Children today are still expected to write with a pencil on paper, even though they have become dependent on spell check and grammar check as writing tools. We are giving these poor kids mixed messages.

Children today have poor handwriting overall. Most children print, not being forced to learn cursive, which flows with ideas. In addition, one in five of our children has dyslexia, cursed by those reversible by's and d's. Cursive eliminates this problem. But walk into any junior high or high school, and you will see most of the kids printing. Teachers just don't have enough time to teach handwriting, and it goes by the wayside.

For young children this is detrimental. These early learners are forced to write before they have the proper impulse and motor control necessary to perform the activity being asked of them. Our sandbox kindergartens are gone where crucial motor skills were emphasized. Instead, these youngsters are given a pencil and expected to write, even though they have only been alive on this earth for five years. A natural shift of brain dominance should take place at this age, hopefully to the left side so they can succeed in school. But if forced too early, the right side of the brain can become dominant. These can lead to later school frustrations and even to learning disabilities.

The right side of the brain loves pictures and colors. These kids, who should have been given a sandbox kindergarten and allowed to progress at a natural rate, spend time hooked up to a computer screen or video games. Pictures, color, graphics, and music abound, launching them further into the right hemisphere of the brain.

This is a vicious cycle that needs fixed. We need to keep teaching handwriting in school so that students can be left brain dominant and teach it at an appropriate time. Or, we need to change our educational system to a more right brain arena. At any rate, we are doing kids a huge disservice by not providing consistent handwriting instruction.

To solve the current problem, kids should never be taught to print. They should be given gross motor skills activities in kindergarten and then taught cursive in first grade. First graders are able to write in cursive. I've seen it. Then, there is

no transition that needs to take place at fourth grade. Kids resist switching to cursive because printing is already entrenched in their brains and their hands.

We are confusing our kids. In our day we only had to learn to print and then learn cursive. We made the adjustment. Today, kids have an added writing venue - computers. There is no need to add frustration to these kids' lives. They have enough on their plates just navigating a world that is fast paced and computer dominant. It's so easy to prevent learning difficulties and poor handwriting. Hit them at the right age, teach them one method, and offer instruction and practice. And then, watch them write!