

Writing With Dysgraphia

By Lisa Harp

When thinking about dysgraphia, people usually don't think of it as a learning disability. Writing is just difficult for my child. Or, my child has poor handwriting, but so do doctors. Yet, dysgraphia is real and the sooner that we consider it a learning problem and deal with it as such, the sooner we can deal with it in a positive manner. Dysgraphia by definition is a learning disability resulting from the difficulty in expressing thoughts in writing and graphing. It generally refers to extremely poor handwriting. Since the handwriting is so poor and difficult for the student to perform, is the learning disability a result of the handwriting, or are they not connected? I have found that working on the student's handwriting first and then working on the mechanics of writing is the most successful method of dealing with this disability. Most students who have learning problems or learning disabilities also have dysgraphia.

These kids usually have sequencing and perceptual problems as well as poor fine motor skills and poor eye/hand coordination. If you are in your 40's as I am you will recall that there were very few kids in our day with poor handwriting. It just wasn't allowed. The teachers literally beat it into us one way or another. When we loosened our standards on the kids as far as handwriting goes, it seemed to open a Pandora's Box. Students now have terrible handwriting, and nobody does anything about it. Should we go back to "beating" this into the kids again? No, I don't think so. But, we certainly need to spend the time on these kids to make handwriting easy and legible.

We need to lessen one more obstacle in their paths, as they are up against so much. Unfortunately, a teacher makes a judgment on every paper that crosses her desk. I know, as I have been a teacher for a long time. Don't we just love those papers from those little girls where the cursive is flowing, the writing is legible, the words are spelled correctly, and everything makes sense. It is easy to put an A grade on this paper. Throw in a paper from a little guy with learning problems and dysgraphia, and A's are hard to give out. The content may even be better than the other girl's paper, but by the time the teacher is done trying to decipher what is being said on the page, she is exhausted. Compare it to the other paper and it is easy to see why one paper gets an A and the other gets an F. Some papers may actually deserve a higher grade, but the teacher forms a subjective opinion, especially on essays. The student with dysgraphia is up against a lot. Following is a list of symptoms of dysgraphia:

- Exhibits strong verbal skills but poor writing skills
- Punctuation errors that are random or non-existent
- Spelling errors
- Reversals

- Generally illegible writing
- Inconsistencies such as mixtures of print and cursive or upper and lower case letters
- Irregular sizes, shapes, and slants of letters
- Unfinished words or letters and omitted words in writing
- Inconsistent position on the page – spaces between words and letters – lines and margins
- Cramped or unusual pencil grip
- Talking to self while writing
- Slow or labored copying or writing

So, what do you do to help a student with dysgraphia? There are many modifications that can help in a regular classroom, but we want the student to learn to function in our society, and our society won't say, "Gosh, this kid has dysgraphia. I think I'll hire him and give him a lot of money and then make a lot of modifications for him because of it." No, this isn't how it will go, and we all know it. Most job application forms are still handwritten and many places will ask for a hand written letter. Companies want to see if the potential job candidate can write. It is an important skill, and if we make modifications for the student we never correct the problem and we never teach him to succeed in society. But, to start with modifications must happen so the child can initially succeed, but our goal should always be to get the student able to function on his own.

The simplest modifications involve giving more time and shortening the assignment given. The student can tell a story in a tape recorder and then write the story at his own leisure. Show the student how to draw a picture for each thought and then write about each thought. I always hear about having a computer or word processor available for these kids, and that is good if the student knows how to type. Believe me, if they have a hard time writing, they almost always have a hard time typing. I can't begin to tell you how many IEP's have a word processor written into them and the word processor sits in the closet. Why? Because the kid doesn't know how to type, and it is more difficult to learn to type than it is to learn to write. Another modification that can help at first is to assign a "secretary" to the student. This is a classmate who can write for him on some assignments – just until his writing improves. Perhaps just for science or social studies. We don't want to give these kids crutches. We want to give them tools. There are many more modifications, but let's move on to actually dealing with dysgraphia and methods for life success.

The first thing I do is have them switch to cursive. I don't care what grade the student is in. First graders can do cursive just fine. Seventh graders can learn cursive. There is a reason for this. Cursive flows. Manuscript does not. These kids have a lot of things going on in their minds, and their hands cannot keep up with their thoughts. Ask them about it. They will say it's true. So, the first step in this journey is to have them switch to cursive. When switching to cursive, I have

the student perform strokes on lined paper. Circles, arches, loops, and curves all can be done. I will make a line of strokes and have the student copy it. This works even better if done to slow music, such as classical. Each cursive stroke needs to be taught and practiced until all are learned and the student is comfortable with them. There are many cursive writing programs available. I also use the magic eights activity using the cursive letters. In a very little amount of time these kids are learning to make cursive letters. Next, I move on to dictation. I am taking a step out of the process for them. I will give them paper with lines. I will start with basic sentences that I will read aloud orally as many times as necessary. How basic I start depends on the level of the student. A fifth grader will get a more difficult sentence than a first grader. I will call off several sentences and have the student write the sentences using a color marker, pen, or pencil. There are now erasable color pencils that work great, but many times I just let them use a marker. Color works well in keeping the right-brain dominant student focused. Many of these kids are right-brain dominant.

Then, I will have them go over their sentences and look for mistakes. I will help them fix any mistakes and we discuss them. This process may go on for months, depending on how quickly the student progresses. When the student is ready to move on I will then go to paragraphs. I usually will make up a paragraph and have the student write it after I read it aloud. I will read the paragraph as many times as necessary. The student writes the paragraph and corrects any errors as before. Next, I will give the student a picture or a tangible item, such as a teddy bear. I will have the student write a sentence about it, just describing what he sees. The reason for this is simple. These kids will try to write and their minds are all over the place. They need training on writing about one thing at a time and writing about just something they see. The student is instructed to describe the item.

Sometimes these kids are at a complete loss for words. But, we must start somewhere. If he writes, "The key is gold.", then that is enough. They were his own words. He made his own sentence and that is a start. There is nothing more frustrating than reading a piece of writing that has no focus and rambles all over the place. I will continue having the student write sentences about something that is tangible. I will continue to have the student correct his errors and we discuss them. Slowly, I will add items and finally, I will have him write sentences about things that cannot be seen but must be remembered, such as a baseball game. By now the student should have the necessary skills to write about something from memory. Then, we finally move on to teaching writing. We can use idea bubbles and outlining to plan paragraphs and stories before we write. We can learn about topic sentences and concluding sentences. But until we get to this point, we must go step by step through the above mentioned processes. It is not an over night fix. But if done correctly, these students end up with writing skills that will carry them through life.

