



I'm This Many. R U Ready?

When your little one shows interest in learning how to make letters there are some things you should know about getting started. Research by neuroscience and psychologists shows conclusively that you have an opportunity to give your child a huge head start in the development of symbolic language skills.

I will start with a list and then explain.

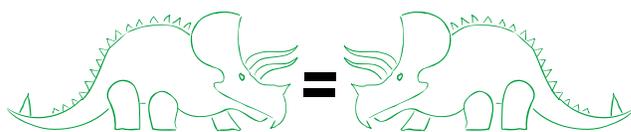
1. The only thing natural about our symbolic language is the innate interest in learning it.
2. Letters are one of the first things your child encounters where directionality makes a difference.
3. Children will touch a crayon to paper at a point that is close to the body and move away to make a stroke.
4. The reading pattern of our language must be learned and the directionality of that pattern is not consistent with early movement tendencies.
5. Letters are patterns of movement. Learning where to start and which way to go as you make the moves is more important than accurate reproduction of the shape.
6. Lowercase letters are much more important for reading than capital forms.

Only Natural

Virtually every child in cultures where a symbolic language is used, begins to show interest in learning how to make the symbols at age three or four - often younger if they are aware of the learning activities of older children. They want to play school but will usually pop in and out of the picture as their attention span dictates. Research¹ shows that brief motor learning experiences are absorbed by the brain like a damp sponge draws spilled milk. It means that seemingly incidental trials that occur erratically can be important and lasting. Great potential lies in the opportunity to provide correct information during these fleeting encounters. The real point is quite simple. Something is being absorbed during each brief activity. Without instruction, innate tendencies usually lead to undesirable learning. Early coloring activities offer important opportunity also.

Directionality & Writing Tools

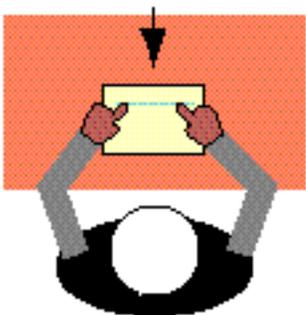
The things in your child's world are form constant. They are what they are, even when they are upside down. This is not true of our letters.



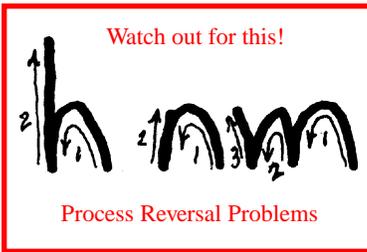
b ≠ d ≠ p

Directionality is a new concept. The use of a crayon or marker to draw a letter is a motor activity - remember the sponge is always working. When the crayon touches close and moves away, it moves from bottom to top. The reading pattern of our language is top-down. Correct movement patterns can be a reading asset².

Using Paper and Coloring



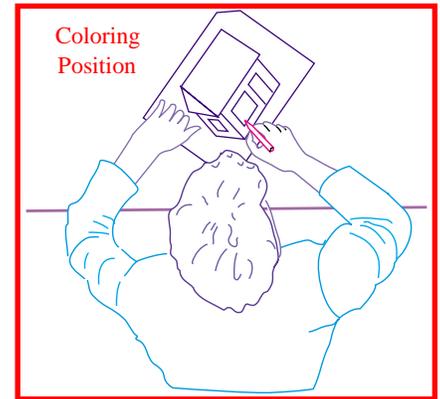
The potential problems associated with early movement are multiplied by the tendency to place a page directly in front of the body at the midpoint. This "reading position" puts the writing arm at the side of the image area and sets the stage for movement integration that is opposite to the reading pattern of our language.



Digital samples collected from more than 1000 grade one pupils, samples collected between March 1st and end of the year, showed that 72% of the children were making at least two letters completely backwards - all were using the right hand. The right hand was at the side of the page making it easier for the child to move from right to left rather than from left to right. Remember, the child's goal is the product. He or she won't care about the process used to create the shape but common sense dictates that movements like those shown to left won't help reading.

Some preschoolers have not yet shown a preference for one hand or the other. It is not uncommon to see a three year old draw scribbles with one hand on one side of a page and then switch hands to use the space on the other side.

- Teach your child how to use one hand to make strokes that start at the left and cross over body midpoint to the right side.
- Teach your preschooler how to hold the paper in “coloring position” and to use the arm for lateral coloring movements.
- Teach the capital with lowercase letters for the child's name.
- Teach a top-down, left-to-right process for building letters.



Innate developmental tendencies are just that - tendencies. They do not prevent your little one from learning something new. If you are prepared, you can teach the right things at the outset. Invest some time now to prepare yourself for teaching. Animated presentations available on the internet will help you to understand how to get your child started correctly.

The URL is: www.peterson-handwriting.com.

An Information Directory provides links to presentations on language readiness and position skill development that you can work through in about thirty minutes. The method presentation will show you how to get the most out of quick learning opportunities. Animated Letter Cards allow you and your child to write in the air along with the animation to learn correct letter-building movement sequences. These animations are also available on CD Rom. If your preschooler has not yet shown interest in making letters it won't be long until it happens. Are you ready?

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References:

1. Shadmira, R. and Holcomb, H. (1997) “Neural Correlates of Motor Memory Consolidation” Science Magazine, Vol. 277, 8 Aug. 1997.
2. Babcock, M. K., & Freyd, J. J. (1988) Perception of dynamic information in static handwritten forms. American Journal of Psychology, Spring, Vol 101, pp. 111-130.