Parent Guide

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What is this resource and how do I use it?

Does your child need support with writing? Is their writing littered with upper- and lower-case letters, spelling mistakes and illegible handwriting or do they complain of pain when writing? If your child has dysgraphia or if you are concerned about their writing progress, this guide will help you to understand what dysgraphia is, the signs of dysgraphia and how you can support your child.

What is the focus of this resource?

- Knowledge of Dysgraphia Symptoms
- Practical Support Suggestions
- Empowering Parents of Children With SEND

Further Ideas and Suggestions

We have lots of parent support guides in **this category**, including these ones on **ADHD** and **selective mutism**. Our **SEND glossary** gives information about SEND terms and acronyms commonly used and this **Parent Guide to SEND Support in School** is handy to find out about how your child might be supported.

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Supporting a Child with Dysgraphia:

A Guide for Parents

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Supporting a Child with Dysgraphia: A Guide for Parents

If you have noticed your child having persistent problems with their writing, including the mechanics of writing and organising their thoughts into writing, this guide will help you to understand the condition of dysgraphia and its symptoms. It will also give you some ideas of how you can best support your child at home.

What is dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia is a specific learning difficulty affecting writing. It affects all aspects of the writing process, including the physical aspects such as spacing, sizing and legibility. It also affects spelling and the ability to express and organise thoughts or facts in writing.

Signs

Signs of dysgraphia appear as soon as your child starts writing; however, the difficulty might go completely unnoticed until a later stage, when they have learnt a range of skills and are using them frequently. Your child's teacher might have noticed that they have some difficulties in comparison with their peers. You might also have noticed their difficulties at home when they are writing.

Signs to look out for in your child's writing include:

- mixture of upper- and lower-case letters within writing
- mixture of joined and printed words and 'spidery' looking writing which is often illegible
- irregular shapes and sizes of writing
- slow writing speed
- difficulty copying from a board
- complaints of pain when writing or tiring easily when writing
- tight or odd-looking pencil grip
- frequent spelling mistakes
- difficulty organising thoughts on paper
- speaking is confident and expressive but this does not translate to writing
- difference between spoken and written understanding of subjects
- talking to themself when writing
- reluctance or refusal to complete writing tasks
- frustration with own ability to write
- difficulties with sentence structure and rules of grammar when writing but these difficulties are not apparent when speaking

Your child might also exhibit these other difficulties:

- clumsiness/uncoordinated movements
- difficulty using scissors
- difficulty using directional language such as under, over, right and left
- coordination difficulties when throwing and catching a ball
- difficulties with their spatial awareness (knowing where their body is in relation to other objects)

What causes dysgraphia?

Dysgraphia in children is usually caused by a problem with orthographic coding. Orthographic coding is the ability to:

- store written words in the memory
- use the information required about the way your hands and fingers move to recreate these written words

Young children with dysgraphia are usually more affected by the mechanics required for writing, whereas older children become more affected by problems with grammar, comprehension and the ability to put their thoughts onto paper coherently.

Dysgraphia is common in children who have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and has some overlapping symptoms with dyslexia.

Dysgraphia can be **developmental**, where sufferers have difficulty acquiring writing skills, or **acquired**, which means it is a result of a brain injury, disease or degenerative conditions, which can affect the ability of someone who has previously acquired writing skills.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis in young children at the start of their schooling is difficult because they are just at the beginning of acquiring writing skills. Symptoms will become more pronounced as they move through school. Keep a record of the things they need support with and the signs they exhibit. Discuss your concerns with your child's teacher and the school **SENDCo**, who will be able to give you some more information and perhaps make some formal observations of your child.

Your child's school might involve an **educational psychologist** or you might need to find one privately. They will complete a range of assessments on your child, including a detailed assessment of their handwriting speed, which involves them observing how your child writes, their posture and the process they go through in order to get the words on the page. Your child's free writing will be assessed to examine the legibility of their work. An assessment of visual-motor integration skills will be undertaken, which is the communication between the eyes and the hands which is required for copying, writing or drawing what you see. Your child's cognitive ability - their mental process of acquiring knowledge through their thoughts, experiences or senses - will be assessed too.

The Next Steps

After diagnosis, the educational psychologist will provide a written report, from which an education plan can be drawn up between school staff, your child and you. This will consider how best to support your child to manage and overcome their difficulties. This support might include extra intervention, different teaching approaches, extra time for activities and the use of technology to support your child, for example, the use of a laptop for longer pieces of writing. An **occupational therapist** might be contacted to assess your child's difficulties and give support to improve your child's posture, muscle tone and strength.

Encourage Motor Skills Exercises

Exercises to develop gross motor skills (large muscle movements) and fine motor skills (movements of smaller muscles) are a great way to improve their spatial orientation and handwriting. You could try these:

- Throw and catch together - start with slower-moving items, such as thin scarves or balloons, then move on to large balls and smaller balls for precision.
- Role-play different movements - for example, jump like a frog, hop like a rabbit, slither like a snake.
- Create fun obstacle courses outside with instructions using positional language - right, left, under, over.
- Provide pull and push objects, such as prams and large-wheeled toy vehicles.
- Go swimming and practise coordinating the movements of arms and legs - it's also fun to practise this out of the water.
- Play hopscotch and practise balancing on a chalk line.
- Use a balance bike.
- Get your child to sit on a bike and push their feet on the pedals so they can feel the sensation and practise it.
- Play tennis and other bat and ball games.
- Practise unlocking padlocks.
- Colour in increasingly complex pictures.
- Thread beads onto wire or thread.
- Complete jigsaws, dice games and board games with small pieces.
- Shape clay into objects.
- Use playdough for rolling, kneading and shaping.
- Connect building bricks to make models.

What can I do to support my child?

Make Writing Fun

Your child might feel frustrated at their writing abilities, so anything you can do to bring some fun back into the process will help:

- Get them making up and writing or copying short jokes on slips of paper to hand out to friends or family.
- Set up some multi-sensory activities, such as writing in wet sand or mud, creating letter tiles on tiles of clay (using a chopstick to draw the letters on), writing messages in the dark with a glow stick or torch and painting letters.
- Play simple games to encourage them to write and develop pencil control, such as finding out how many words they can make from a longer word, mazes and tracing drawings.
- Writing for a purpose helps, so ask them to write simple notes to a relative or give them the job of writing the shopping list and ticking off items.
- Play role-play games where they need to write, for example, a doctor writing down symptoms, a waiter writing down a food order or a villain writing down their steps to rule the world!

What can I do to support my child?

Give Practical Solutions

Be proactive and talk to your child's teacher about things that they find hard and things that could help:

- Practical supports, such as pencil grips, writing slopes and guidelines for paper, could help in class as well as at home.
- Ask them to try giving your child different coloured paper, which may reduce any visual stress.
- Suggest your child learns cursive writing, which might be easier for them than printing.
- Talk about the possibility of giving your child extra time to complete writing tasks - they may qualify for extra time or for a member of staff to scribe or transcribe their answers in tests.
- Your child's teacher might also be open to the possibility of your child using a laptop for longer pieces of work - at home, you could teach them to touch type.

Every child is different and one method may not work for another, but by keeping the lines of communication open between yourself and your child's school, you'll be able to talk about what is working and what isn't.

Be Open

The chances are that, as your child gets older, they'll feel more frustration about their difficulties. This can lead to a greater reluctance and refusal to complete written tasks, which might be misunderstood as deliberate defiance and lead to your child becoming disengaged. Keep the lines of communication open with your child: talk to them about what they find difficult and really try to understand how it affects them, both practically and mentally. Don't lie to them and say you know their problem will get better, but instead, talk about the things you can do to minimise the impact on their life. Explain the importance of any advice given by the educational psychologist or occupational therapist and how this advice can improve their symptoms. Be realistic with them: they're always going to have dysgraphia and they will learn what things work for them to ease their symptoms.

Look After Yourself

Be aware that your child's dysgraphia is just one tiny part of them and keep it in perspective. It's very easy to worry needlessly about your child's future and think about how they are going to cope. Talking to people who also have a child with dysgraphia will help you to see that you are not alone. You'll be able to share advice about what has worked and support each other. Don't let your child's difficulty define everything you do with them - make time to have fun with them, be silly together and just enjoy them. Have regular breaks away from each other and make sure you get enough rest. Together, you'll be able to plan a very positive route for their future.