



# CONTROL ISSUES

In the first of a two-part look at the road to writing, **Sue Cowley** explains how to help children develop the fundamental skills they will need as they set out on this exciting journey...

**F**rom the moment a baby is born, from that very first cry, the urge to communicate is a biological imperative. As human beings, we simply must make our wishes, thoughts, feelings and needs understood by the people around us. At first this is primarily about survival – making sure we are fed and kept warm. But communicating through language is also part of what being human is all about. The ability to use symbolic forms of expression (letters, words, numbers, symbols) is what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. It enables the complex patterns of thought that have led to great literature, to vital scientific discoveries, and to amazing technological advances. At first, a baby can only communicate

through cries, sounds, and non-verbal signals. Gradually, though, a child starts to form words and then moves on to speak in sentences. Amazingly, by the time that a child is about six years old, he or she will have a vast vocabulary, a subconscious grasp of the grammatical rules of language, and will have begun to read and write properly. One of the most important aspects of your role as an early years practitioner is helping your children learn to communicate effectively. At first, this is mainly through speaking and listening, but you must also help them learn how to handle written forms of language. The process of learning to read and write begins early – in the early years you are building solid foundations for your children's future literacy. In this article you'll

find out how to help them develop the fine and gross motor skills that are one of the first key stages of the process.

### Developing gross motor skills

Children learn to control their bodies from the centre outwards, and from the top downwards. In other words, babies build up their neck muscles so they can hold up their heads, then the trunk muscles so they can sit, and finally the whole body control and balance required for walking. Arm and finger control follows the same pattern: at first a child will be able to manipulate the arm from the shoulder joint; gradually he understands how to control the hands; finally he learns





how to make the fine finger movements needed to write. To develop gross motor skills, plan a rich diet of physical activities, including:

- Balance beams
- Crawling through tunnels
- Carrying buckets of sand or water
- Swinging on monkey bars
- Digging in the sand or soil
- Yoga and dance sessions
- Tug of war (carefully supervised!).

## Bilateral integration – crossing the mid line

Most of us have a dominant side to our bodies – typically, the right if you are right-handed. You will find it easier to control your movements on your dominant side, and indeed you will subconsciously focus your

attention on this side of a room. In order to be able to write, your children need to be able to coordinate both sides of their bodies together, with one hand holding the paper, while the other manipulates the pen. This ability to coordinate the two sides of your body, while doing different things with each side, is known as ‘bilateral integration’. It allows us to perform activities such as tying knots, or kicking a football. Your children also need to learn how to ‘cross the mid line’ – to be able to control their movements across the centre point of the body. It is this that will let them write without changing the pen over to their other hand midway through a line. Try these two activities to support the development of bilateral integration:

- Play ‘Simon Says’ with a twist: Ask the children simultaneously to perform one action

with one hand (pat your head) and a different action with the other (rub your tummy).

- Draw ‘Lazy 8s’: Stick some large (A1 size) paper up on the wall and give the children some chunky felt tips or marker pens. Ask them to draw a ‘Lazy 8’ with one hand (an 8 shape that has fallen over onto its side). Now encourage them to join in with a pen in the other hand, but going in the opposite direction. This is surprisingly difficult to do.

## Building fine motor control

As well as building up their gross motor skills, your children need to develop the fine motor control required to hold and manipulate a writing tool. They need to develop strength in their wrists and hands, and also a high level of finger control. Some of the key actions required are: grip strength (make a fist to feel this action); pinch strength (hold an invisible pencil tight to feel this action); and eye to hand coordination (also known as ‘visual-motor integration’). Many of the games and activities you do in your early years setting will help your children develop these movements:

- At snack time, build hand and finger strength by cutting up foods, grating, squeezing, and using cloths to wipe up
- In the sand and water trays, you could be squeezing out sponges, pouring liquids from one jug to another, and washing up
- Drawing on vertical surfaces helps build strength in the wrists and is also very useful for left handed children
- Tracing around mazes is great for eye to hand coordination
- Squashing and squishing activities will build up lots of strength in the hands – play dough, clay, pastry, gloop, and so on
- Toys that involve pop together and pull apart movements are great for building finger strength.

## Developing dexterity

If you consider the actions you use when writing, you’ll see how important it is that you have a high level of dexterity. This skill is needed for lots of other activities too, including self-care tasks such as doing up buttons and pulling on clothes. Help your

## Dealing with dyspraxia

The term ‘dyspraxia’ describes poor motor skills. Those children who have dyspraxia will often struggle to write, because they lack the necessary strength and coordination. If you observe all or most of the following symptoms in a child, you should flag up the possibility of dyspraxia with your SENCO or local authority team, so that the appropriate strategies can be put in place. The child who has dyspraxia:

- finds it hard to stay still
- regularly bumps into things
- finds it hard to judge physical risk, for instance jumping from height without realising the danger
- flaps his or her hands when running
- is a very messy eater.







children develop their dexterity by:

- Doing up and undoing buttons and zips
- Threading beads
- Using tweezers and chopsticks
- Building towers
- Turning keys in locks
- Playing with peg boards
- Colouring in between the lines on a picture
- Icing biscuits
- Cutting or tearing paper around an outline.

### Holding a writing tool

At first, children usually grasp the pencil or pen using a fist grip, which then develops into a finger grasp. The ultimate aim is for them to learn how to use a 'dynamic tripod grasp', where the pen or pencil is held between the thumb and the index and middle fingers, and they should be able to do this from about three or four years old. The child makes a tripod shape with the thumb and fingers, with the pencil resting on the soft bit between the thumb and forefinger (see [otplan.com/articles/pencil-grasp-patterns.aspx](http://otplan.com/articles/pencil-grasp-patterns.aspx)). Help your children learn how to control their individual fingers by singing lots of rhymes where the fingers hide or disappear, such as *10 Little Fishes*. Keep an eye on your young writers, and encourage them to hold their writing tool correctly – bad habits are easy to get into, but very hard to break.

### Proper posture

Children need a substantial amount of trunk

strength in order to write, because they must support their bodies, neck and head while staying relaxed. Keep an eye out for children who flop over, or who use the table or their elbows to support their bodies, and help them develop their core body strength by using plenty of gross motor activities. The correct posture for writing is a '90-90-90 position' – i.e. a 90-degree angle at the feet/ankles, at the knees, and at the elbows. Check that the furniture in your setting allows the children to sit in the correct way.

### Supporting left-handed children

Between eight and 15 per cent of the world's population is left-handed, and it is in the early years that children work out which hand they prefer to use. Make sure you present activities at the midline of the body, so your children can decide for themselves. Where you have children who are left-handed:

- Offer them a slope to write on, i.e. an easel
- Use large scale mark making activities, so that the left hand doesn't get in the way of what they are writing
- Don't sit them on the left side of a right handed child
- Be aware that they will need to be taught different letter formation (see [anythingleft-handed.co.uk/letter\\_formation.html](http://anythingleft-handed.co.uk/letter_formation.html)), and that their writing may slope to the left rather than the right (this is fine and should not be 'corrected')

■ Ensure that you have high-quality left-handed scissors available for them to use.

### Finally...

Parents often feel that the only way to get their child to learn to write is through writing activities, such as tracing over his or her name, or practising letter formation. Whilst these are useful approaches for the more confident writer, there is much more to 'learning to write' than actually 'doing writing'. Share lots of information about the importance of fine and gross motor activities with your parents, so that they can support you in helping your children build these vital pre-writing skills.

### findoutmore

Sue Cowley is an experienced teacher, trainer and author. Her new book, *The Road to Writing*, published in August by Continuum, is a guide to developing mark making and writing skills with children aged 3-7 years. For more information, visit [suecowley.co.uk](http://suecowley.co.uk)