

LETTER AND NUMBER FORMATION

What is it?

There are numerous programs and workbooks available to assist in teaching printing/handwriting letter formation. It is important, however, that whatever program is being used, it is being used consistently by everyone involved in teaching the child (e.g. parents, teacher, support staff, therapists). It is extremely important for a child experiencing writing difficulties that the same terms and methods are used by everyone so that the child does not become confused and even more frustrated.

Writing programs group letters that are formed similarly together to make remembering their formations easier. For example, in the *Handwriting Without Tears* program, here is how letters are grouped:

Upper case letters:

- Starting with a straight line on left: L, F, E, H, D, P, B, R, N, M, K
- Starting in the upper left corner: U, V, W, X, Y, Z
- Beginning in the centre: C, O, Q, G, T, I, J, A, S

Lower case letters:

- 'Magic "c" letters', all begin by forming a 'c': c, a, d, g, q
- Line letters: l, t, j, f
- Diver letters: r, n, m, h, b, p
- Slide letters: v, w, x, y, z, k
- Others: u, e

You could also start by teaching capitals in a developmental sequence to help build confidence. H, T, I, L, F, E would be taught first (all straight lines), C, G, O, P, B, D, U, J, Q, R next, and then letters with diagonals – A, K, M, N, S, V, W, Y, X, Z last as these can be the most difficult.

How can I help the child?

Here are some strategies to help promote learning of letters and numbers.

Strategies:

Capital letters are taught first because they are easiest to form. All capitals start at the top, are the same height, and are easy to recognize and identify (compare A B D with a b d).

Lower case letters should be taught separately from capital letters because they have many different starting points (e.g. do not pair the teaching of capital A with

lowercase a). Additionally lower case letters are different sizes and are more difficult to recognize due to subtle differences (b d g p).

A child should begin by learning how to recognize the letters of his/her name. Try using magnetic letters on the refrigerator, letter blocks, letter stickers, etc.

Practice of new or difficult letters and numbers should be limited to 1 – 3 per practice session. Exceeding 3 letters and numbers could result in difficulty remembering formations and increase frustration. Often one new letter or number in a session is enough, depending on how much the individual is able to learn at that particular time.

10-15 minutes practice/day is ideal. This is much better than long sessions less frequently.

Use a Multi-Sensory Approach

Provide a multi-sensory approach to learning letters and numbers. Using multiple senses when learning helps us to remember how letters and numbers are formed. Combining several senses will provide different sensory experiences to help your child learn.

Activities:

Visual activities:

- Model the formation of a letter or number for your child.
- Use various tools e.g. paintbrush, chalk, crayons, markers, aquadoodles, magna doodles, grease pencils or transparencies
- Workbooks in which the colour appears when children paint with water or finger paint.
- Use a variety of different kinds of paper, e.g. regular, coloured, foil, brown, and construction.
- Ask your child's teacher to place a letter/number strip on your child's desk at school. Place a letter/number strip in your child's agenda for easy access at school.
- Use letter/number placemats at dinner time.
- Use magnetic letters and numbers on a fridge.
- Try letter and number formation with eyes opened and closed.

Verbal activities:

- Give verbal instructions as you model the letter and number formations. For example, the letter 'L' is "*big line down, little line across the bottom*".
- Ask the child to repeat the verbal instruction when he/she tries the letter or number.

Tactile activities:

- Practice letter and number formations in sand, paint, or gel in a Ziploc bag.
- Use a plastic page protector and wipe-off crayons, wax pencils, or dry-erase markers.
- Practice forming letters out of different materials, such as plasticine, play-doh, pipe cleaners, Wikki stix, wooden blocks, and yarn.
- Use different types of paper (i.e. sandpaper, construction paper, watercolour paper, etc.) to make the letters.

- Cornmeal, flour, rice, salt, whipping cream, sugar, shaving cream, lotion, or pudding on a baking sheet.
- Place paper on top of different textures: sandpaper, rubbing templates, leaves.
- Make letters and numbers on your child's back and have him/her name them.
- Different tools to practice with: vibrating pen, toothbrush, paintbrush, finger, sponge.
- Draw with cheese spread out on crackers.
- Use liquorice to form letters.

Motor strategies:

- Draw large letters with sidewalk chalk and walk the correct letter/number formation. Again, make sure the starting point and direction of formation is the same as when forming letters on paper.
- Have your child form the letter on a piece of paper mounted to a vertical surface (e.g. taped to the fridge or on a wall), or flat on the ground with the child on their belly.
- Use a stick in the sand to form letters/numbers.
- Dip a sponge or paint brush in water and practice forming the letter or number on a black board.
- Have the child form the letter or number in the air using their whole arm. First have him/her try with their eyes open, then try with eyes closed.

Scent Strategies:

- Scented markers.
- Add scented flavours (vanilla, cherry, mint) to yogurt or pudding and practice letter/number formations.
- Scented lotions on a baking sheet.
- Form scented play-dough into numbers or letters.