

Why your child has trouble with Handwriting and school skills?



Handwriting, Reading and School Skills

Did you know that handwriting is a very complex process that draws on many different skills? If a child is having difficulties with any of the skill areas required in handwriting, learning can become frustrating, tiring and stressful. As parents, we know the impact that these struggles can have in a classroom but also at home.

Occupational Therapists are trained to look at motor/biomechanical, cognitive, sensory and interpersonal skills. These skills can impact on a child's functioning – including handwriting and broader school skills. Assessments are often used as a way to review these skills. Occupational Therapists are interested in how these skill strengths and struggles influence children's engagement in school skills, the social environment and in their behavioural functioning. By understanding children's skills and the concerns you hold as parents/carers, we can help make sense of what motivates children to act or behave in certain ways. The following describes specific skill areas important to handwriting:

Key Points:

- **Handwriting is complex and involves a number of key skill areas**
- **The underlying causes of handwriting and school difficulties are not always obvious**
- **If you are worried, contact an OT for an assessment.**

FINE MOTOR SKILLS

Fine motor skills refer to how children use their hands to perform motor tasks, such as handwriting, threading, cutting and doing-up buttons.

GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

Gross motor skills refer to how children use their body to perform motor tasks, such as climbing, jumping, catching, and kicking.

VISUAL PERCEPTUAL SKILLS

Visual perception is the ability to interpret and understand what is seen. It is not a test of visual acuity. Visual-perceptual skills gives us clues about children's catching and throwing when playing ball games with peers, copying from the whiteboard as a student, reading skills, or

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finding and organising themselves with their belongings.

VISUAL MOTOR INTEGRATION

Visual motor integration refers to the taking in of information visually, then using this information in order to plan our movements. For example, looking at a letter, then planning where we want to move our pencil in order to write that letter. These skill components are prerequisites for learning to plan and form designs such as letters and numbers, to draw and to trace.

SENSORY PROCESSING SKILLS

Sensory processing involves *taking in* information through the senses (e.g. ears, nose, eyes), *making sense* of it, and *using* it to respond appropriately for the given situation. For instance, a child with good sensory processing skills is able to block out background stimuli such as other children talking and moving around the classroom, to listen to the teacher's instructions. Occupational Therapists may describe children's levels of *neurological* alertness to understand children's sensory processing strengths and struggles.

SENSORY MOTOR SKILLS

Specific sensory motor components (muscle tone, proprioception, motor planning, balance, laterality, centering) help to understand how children learn, manage their attention, behave, socialise

and play. For instance, to appropriately plan and coordinate movement involves *taking in* information through the senses, *making sense* of the information and *using it* to move our body at the right time, in the right direction and with the right amount of force. A child with good sensory motor integration therefore is able to:

- maintain good posture stability during gross and fine motor tasks
- complete the activity within age appropriate limits
- manage their fatigue and attention in tasks
- organise themselves in the activity age-appropriately.

What should I do if I am worried about this?

OT's assessments address these skill areas mentioned a number of areas offering some age appropriate comparison for children where appropriate. The assessments we use include standardised tests and non-standardised skilled assessment observations. When commenting on skill areas, specific examples are given to demonstrate a child's strengths and struggles.

For more information, or to discuss if your child may benefit from an assessment (and what is involved), please contact

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