

## Barnes Primary School

### **A guide to the basics of teaching handwriting to children**

*Handwriting – a useful, elegant and essential branch of education*

Teaching handwriting is a priority. Children need to learn to:

- Write cursively with efficiency and speed, without having to think hard about **how** to formulate letters and join their writing
- This enables them to concentrate on **what** to write.

#### **Essential points**

By the age of 8, most children have adopted a pencil grip, formed a style and developed habits which are hard to change. It is essential that they have been taught the correct habits by this stage. It is in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 that these should be taught: teachers in this part of the school should regularly check that children are learning the right habits from the start, such as holding a pencil correctly.

Joined handwriting should be taught as soon as they have learnt to form and orientate their letters correctly. Isolated letters should only be taught when problems arise. This does not mean that children can't practise writing one letter on its own in reception class, but if a child is writing a short word like *cat*, the letters should be joined as soon as possible. Traditionally English has been one of the only languages in the world where children are not taught a joined script from the beginning of their time at school.

The reason for teaching a joined script is quite logical: if children learn to print, they will subsequently have to relearn how to write for a second time when they are taught to join letters. This confuses them. In addition, many children who print regularly confuse capital letters and small letters in their writing: this is far less likely to happen if they write in a joined script from the start. As a general rule, children who print are also poorer spellers than those who join.

Children may say to their teacher '*I can't read joined up writing.*' Pay little attention to this. If they are taught joined writing from the start, they will learn to read a joined script. Other children who were not taught a cursive script from the start will learn to appreciate a joined script, even if it is a little confusing at the start.

All notices, displays, titles and signs in the classroom and around the school should be in joined script if they are hand written. The school has computer software that prints in a cursive style (the Nelson style). The more examples of cursive script there are around the school environment – including word joined word processing – the greater the assistance pupils receive to appreciate this writing convention.

The discrimination between **printed script** (a conventional script used by publishers for books and also for computer generated word-processed documents) and **cursive script** (a conventional hand written script) should continually be pointed out to children. This is understandably a little confusing to them: *why should I be joining my handwriting? The writing isn't joined in the*

*books I read!* There is a reason for this and children must be taught to understand this.

When they are writing comments in a children's book, teachers should always write in a cursive hand that the children can read. It is crucially important that children can read their teacher's handwriting: if it isn't legible to the child, what kind of message is being communicated?

Regular, clear, detailed feedback is a critical element in enabling children to develop the right habits. So, for example, if teachers praise children for neat printing – it encourages them to print, neatly! If a teacher doesn't comment, in words, or in writing, on the fact that a pupil is printing the child concerned will conclude that the way they are writing is correct.

The teaching of handwriting is essentially a non-creative activity which involves training, tracing, copying and practising (remind the children: *practise makes perfect!*). It is essential that children watch their teacher demonstrating how to formulate and join letters. Having done so they should try to emulate the teacher's model. As handwriting is a movement skill, demonstration by a competent teacher is essential.

Children should then be taught to compare their results very critically with what the teacher has written. Older children can also be taught to constructively criticise each other's efforts (peer assessment). Essentially rigour (and even fussiness) should be at the heart of the approach adopted by teachers to this key skill. The teacher must be 'prepared for the long haul' and relentlessly repeat expectations that need to be established at the start of each academic year. Alongside this teachers should continually find and display (on IWB slides; under a visualizer; by passing a pupil's workbook around) the very best examples produced by children.

In a handwriting session teachers cannot possibly get around thirty children and check up on their progress. Instead it is recommended that the teacher chooses a small group of children to focus on, looking at their efforts and providing feedback to them. This feedback should be pedantic, picky and even '*overly fussy*'. It should assist the children to pay attention to detail. They should be aiming to produce an exact copy of what the teacher has done on the board or under the visualiser. Picking out children's inaccuracies, whilst always remaining positive and encouraging, will arrest the development of bad habits. The advice is: be very meticulous with children and teach them to be meticulous too.

Children should be taught to write quickly, but accurately, before leaving primary school. This is a key life skill that will help them in secondary school and beyond. One way of getting them to focus upon both speed and accuracy, whilst also reflecting on how they have improved, is to have a sentence that they practise regularly, from the time they start school. This allows a child to compare her attempts with previous efforts and consider if she is

- improving in terms of quality
- speeding up

At Barnes we could have a shorter and longer version of the following sentence, the shorter form being used In Key Stage 1, with the longer version being adopted from Year 3 onwards.

**At Barnes I am learning to write neatly and quickly.**

**At Barnes Primary School I am learning to produce neat, accurate, cursive writing. I am learning to write at speed too.**

### **Fundamental issues which must be taught to children**

- An orthodox pencil grip.
- The fact that a pencil must always be sharp before you use it.
- Tiny pencils, less than 8 cm. long should be discarded.
- How to sit on a chair properly (not slouch), sitting up, with a straight back, the chair pushed in a comfortable amount, with both legs under the table. The child's thighs should be parallel and their feet flat on the floor.
- All four chair legs must be on the ground – children should not be rocking.
- The fact that the non-writing hand (left for right handers; right for left handers) should be on the table, with palm flat, in front of the child in a supportive position.
- When writing books should be fully open, not folded over. Children should be sitting in such a way that their books are not overlapping another child's book when they are writing.
- Right handers can tilt their book to the left. Left handers can tilt their book to the right. In each case the amount of tilt should be no more than 45 degrees. Quite simply, children should not be allowed to write at a 90 degree angle.
- To assist a child who has a problem with the amount of 'tilt' a right angled corner of tape can be stuck onto the desk where he sits so that he can see where to put the corner of his book.
- A clutter free table is required with adequate space for a number of children to write.
- All small letters start at the top with the exception of d and e (which conveniently happen to be next to each other in the alphabet). These two letters start from the middle.
- Capital letters can start from anywhere: the most economically efficient starting point should be found: for most people this is at the top.

### **Above all, avoid the creation of the following four ingrained habits**

- ❖ Faulty pencil grip

- ❖ Poor posture
- ❖ Poor book/paper positioning
- ❖ Incorrect letter formation (for example, starting letters at the bottom)

### **Left handers**

- There is no doubt that it is harder to learn to write left handed, as during the act of writing you are covering what you are writing. Our writing system favours the right handed child.
- Left handed children should always sit on the left hand side of the desk. This makes writing infinitely easier for them. Children must be taught this and continually reminded of it.
- Left handers tend to write lower down, so they should tilt their page to the right. To stop them tilting too far, masking tape can be used (as described above) to provide an outline for their book position. Left handers will often kneel at the desk: this is because they need to write lower down. Often a left hander may be too low down. To correct this either a cushion, a lower table or a higher chair can be used.
- Left handers tend to need a slightly longer stem to write with.

### **A few technical terms to teach children**

- ❖ The word **cursive** means joined.
- ❖ The correct name for the joining bits between letters is **ligatures**.
- ❖ The technical name for a tail is a **flourish**.
- ❖ The technical word for handwriting is **calligraphy**.
- ❖ **Serifs** should **not** be put on letters: historically they come from the tradition of carving (stone masonry) not calligraphy. The letter **I** should not have the two parallel, horizontal lines at the top. It should appear as shown in the word processed form above.
- ❖ The letters b, d, h, k, and l are called **ascenders**. The top of the letter should reach very close to the top of the line (it shouldn't touch!). The letter **t** is **not an ascender**.
- ❖ **t** is an unusual letter – a three quarters letter, rather than an ascender
- ❖ The letters g, j, p, q and y are called **descenders**. The flourish (the tail) of these letters goes below the line.

Other useful vocabulary children should be taught:

- ❖ clockwise
- ❖ anticlockwise
- ❖ vertical
- ❖ horizontal
- ❖ diagonal
- ❖ parallel

- ❖ consonant
- ❖ vowel
- ❖ joined
- ❖ sloped
- ❖ loop

### **Key points about joining letters (the Nelson handwriting scheme)**

- ❖ Letters that end at the top join horizontally: f o r t v w x
- ❖ Letters that end at the bottom join diagonally: a c d e h i k l m n u
- ❖ Letters that are traditionally not joined: b j p s q y z. These are not joined because they end in the opposite direction (to the left) to the direction of writing (to the right).
- ❖ The letters g and y can be looped, but these letters end to the left so it is therefore more consistent for them not to be joined. Children who loop these letters often then contrive other unsuitable loops, such as for the letter s.
- ❖ Capital letters should not be huge. They should be no higher than ascenders.
- ❖ Letters should not have a lead in stroke.

### **Teaching methodology & time each week**

Research shows that children make most progress when they have short, focused handwriting sessions.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, staff should focus closely upon the formation of correct habits. They should closely observe what children do with a writing implement and teach children the correct conventions to follow.

- In reception frequent opportunities are needed for child initiated writing. These should be established within a rich and stimulating play based learning environment. Alongside this there should be short, focused, Whole class handwriting sessions.
- In Year 1, three 15 minute handwriting sessions are needed each week.
- In Years 2 to 6, two 15 minute handwriting sessions are needed each week. It may also be useful to create other opportunities for the children if and when appropriate. One specific issue should be concentrated on in each session. Looking at more than one issue is potentially confusing to the children.

At the start of an academic year, in particular, or the start of a new term or half-term, it is quite acceptable for teaching staff to spend more time than this on handwriting, in order to obtain 'quick, positive gains' for the children which result in them being motivated to write due to the improvements they have made.

It is better not to practise handwriting in a separate book (a handwriting book). Handwriting practise work should be done in children's English (writing) book. Otherwise, some children will '*do their best writing*' in a special handwriting book, but then fail to translate what has been learnt when it comes to doing a piece of writing in their regular writing book.

Research suggests that lines do help children (after the age of 5/6), but they should not be too close together until children enter Key Stage 2. There should be no inflexible rules about when a child starts using lines and when (s)he reverts from lines that are broader to ones that are more narrow. It is the teacher's decision when a child is actually ready to make these important transitions. When children are ready to write on lined paper provide them with a book containing lined paper. Similarly as soon as they are ready to revert from lines that are broader (between 11cm to 14 cm) to ones that are narrower (8 cm), the change should take place.

Handwriting is a movement and memory activity, rather than an explicitly visual activity. This can be proved to children by asking them to write their name with their eyes closed – they can do this, although perhaps not quite as neatly as with their eyes open.

Children can be assisted to improve by developing their ability to discriminate between handwriting that is of a high quality and that which is of an inferior quality. One way to assist them to do this is to get them to look at a sentence written in two different ways and appraise the sentences critically. Teachers should help children to see common errors. One way of doing this is to take some photographs of 'bad habits' and paste these onto a slide. Children could be asked to identify the error. Teachers can also exaggerate the errors children produce to make these clear to them. Allowing children to see errors beside a correct version helps develop their discrimination skills.

Teach children to finish a letter before completing a word; it's more efficient. For example, take the word *tin*: it is actually quicker to finish the cross stroke first rather than add it after completing the word.

Children need to be taught to look carefully if they are to become good at handwriting. They should look at a letter shape for a long time, analyzing it so they are able to get it exactly right. **Children tend to exaggerate the non-essentials.** teachers we should be very picky in their response to what children produce.

The cross stroke of the *t* and *f* should be the same height as the other letters' bodies.

Children with very mature handwriting should be challenged: all their down strokes should be equidistant, for example. Can children do this with a word like **minimum**?

### **Writing on interactive whiteboards**

There is no doubt that this is harder for teachers than writing on a traditional, non-interactive board. Like anything else, regular practice is likely to develop fluency and a high quality of presentation by the teacher. In many ways it is

much easier for the teacher to model high quality handwriting under a visualizer.

### **Some strongly held convictions**

In general, children who feel good about their handwriting are far more motivated to write. Those who have a negative self-image of themselves as a writer and are resistant to writing usually have poor handwriting that they are unhappy with.

As a general rule, children who have attractive cursive handwriting are better at spelling than children who have untidy handwriting, or those that print.

Underachievement in writing and all other curriculum areas which involve some form of writing is often the result of poor ability in handwriting, often combined with poor layout and organisational skills (there appears to be a far higher prevalence of this amongst boys than girls).

The essential qualities of good handwriting are fluency, neatness and speed.

### **Christopher Jarman's 12 rules for handwriting**

1. Good writing is based on a

pattern of ovals and parallel lines.

*o i o i o i o i o*

2. All small letters start at the top.

*a b m c s*

3. All the downstrokes are parallel.

*m h n a d f t*

4. All similar letters are the same height.

*r o n c e u l h b k d*

5. All downstrokes are equidistant.

*minimum*

6. The space between words

is the width of the small letter o.

*will o you o be o mine*

7. Ascenders and descenders are no more

*h g l p d*

than twice the height of small letters, preferably less.

8. Capital letters are no higher

*Ch Br Dl Ph*

than the ascenders, preferably less.

9. Lines of writing are far enough apart for ascenders and descenders not to touch.

*you go joy get pit*  
*home back doll*

10. Letters which finish at the top join horizontally.

*o r v w l f*

11. Letters which finish at the bottom join diagonally.

12. Letters which finish on

*b g j p s y*

a stroke moving left, are best left unjoined.

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