

Solihull Children's Occupational Therapy Service

Pre-writing skills

Pre-writing skills are the fundamental skills children need to develop before they can write. These skills contribute to your child's ability to hold and use a pencil, and the ability to draw, write, copy, and colour. An important part of pre-writing skills are the pre-writing shapes (as shown below). These are the pencil strokes that most letters, numbers, and early drawings are comprised of. They are typically mastered in sequential order, and to an age specific level.

Developmental milestones for pre-writing skills*

 1–2 years	 2–3 years	 3 years	 3 years	 4 years
 4 years 4 months	 4 years 6 months	 4 years 7 months	 4 years 11 months	 5 years 3 months

*These milestones are intended as a guide only. The way in which a child develops their pre-writing skills is highly dependent on experience and opportunities to practise, family/cultural expectations and the child's choices and motivation. Please also consider your child's developmental levels, this can be impacted by a number of factors.



Have a think about the last time you learnt a new skill; what was it that helped you learn this? How did you feel? What kept you motivated to keep going, even when it got difficult? How many times did you practice before the new skill became automatic? If you were to do it again, is there anything you would do differently?

Why are pre-writing skills important?

Pre-writing skills are essential for a child to be able to develop the ability to hold and move a pencil fluently and effectively and therefore produce legible writing. When these skills are underdeveloped, it can lead to frustration and resistance as your child may not be able to produce legible writing or to 'keep up' in class.

Things to consider when supporting your child:

Practical tips for skill development	• Use short regular pencils, small pieces of chalk, felt markers and crayons to help the development of finger control • Encourage large movements when making marks to encourage the use of whole arm and shoulder muscles against gravity. This also helps to reinforce the 'mental picture' of the pattern. This approach can be used at the early stage of learning letter formation too • Start to make a link for children between pre-writing shapes and marks and letters i.e. A circle is the same as an 'o' • High frequency sounds are alerting and help a child to orientate to what you are doing. If your child is engaging in mark making, use directional words like down, across and round
Making practice fun and accessible	• Avoid focussing on writing letters when practicing mark making, just focus on your child having fun and learning how to create lines and shapes instead • Set up an area with an appropriately sized table and chair, and a range of fun and interesting crayons, coloured pencils, and paper which they can freely access throughout the day. This takes away the pressure of asking them to sit down to engage in the task 
Get creative	• Encourage your child to experience a wide range of different mark-makers i.e. pencils, chalk, markers, crayons, and paints (see below for more tips) • Multi-sensory play: Think about the materials you use and how they look, sound, feel, smell and taste to increase interest in the activity • Use a variety of objects to practice drawing. For example, lotions, whipped cream, chocolate spread, sand or shaving foam can be smeared onto a mirror/easel or onto a tray and your child can use their finger to draw • Draw on different textures such as sandpaper, patterned wallpaper, sand or mud to give your child different sensations • Engage in outdoor activities such as rubbing over different textures e.g. concrete, brick or bark. Use thick paintbrushes and buckets of water to paint on outdoor surfaces • Example of play activities – creating mazes: Start with getting your child to walk on large shapes/lines on the floor (use masking tape or chalk) and drive toy cars through mazes, over crossing lines and diagonals. Then encourage your child to mark make between paths. Gradually add to the maze, increasing the complexity of mark making by drawing curves, circles, and dead ends. Gradually decrease the width of the maze to encourage increased control
Increasing motivation	• Incorporate your child's own interests into writing activities. For example, if they like Bluey, consider making a road for Bluey and her family to drive along. If your child likes Spiderman, make a game of drawing webs in shaving foam. Search the internet for "Pre-Writing Activity Sheets Peppa Pig/Paw Patrol/Princesses/Superheroes etc" (or whatever their interest is) • Be your child's cheerleader: Model mark making and praise your child as they engage with you. Any attempt to copy your example should be celebrated

Setting the 'just right' challenge with your child

It is important to enable your child to gain a sense of achievement when learning a new skill. The 'just right' challenge ensures that you are encouraging your child to develop their skills and independence, whilst ensuring that the goal they are working towards is realistic. The sense of achievement that they experience acts as a great motivator to encourage your child to keep working towards mastering these skills.



Things to consider:

- What are you expecting your child to draw?
- Are they motivated/interested in what you're asking them to do?
- What tools will they use?
- How much support will you provide?

What can you do to support your child with developing pre-writing skills?

- Remember to keep it as fun as possible, if your child doesn't want to engage in the task, don't continue to push
- Some children may need direct, simple prompts when experimenting with pre-writing skills, such as **press down harder** or **down** or **across**
- Try to engage in the task alongside your child so they can see how you hold a pen/pencil/crayon and what you do with it
- Some children find it helpful to have 'hands on' help to experience the action required. For example, hold your hand over or under theirs as they draw a shape
- Give lots of praise to reward their effort, identifying clearly which action you are proud of them for



A note on hand dominance:

- i** If your child has not yet determined their dominant hand, do not force them to use one hand or the other
- i** Observe them carrying out a range of activities and make a note of which hand they tend to choose
- i** Present objects (e.g. pencils, crayons, paintbrushes) in the middle so you don't influence them to just use the hand closest to the object
- i** Provide opportunities to practice activities that require a stabilising and dominant hand. For example, unscrewing lids of containers, winding up toys, and playing musical instruments that are held and hit with a beater



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