



When Left Is Right

By Beula Postlewait, Communications Representative

Many students have bitter memories of parents or teachers who tried to change their handedness. One older adult talked about her first-grade teacher who insisted that every child write with the right hand. The teacher would tap the child's hand with a ruler if she caught the child with a pencil or scissors in the left hand. The child learned to be devious. When she saw the teacher coming, she quickly switched hands. When the teacher was not looking, she switched back to the left hand.

How can you help a student who is left-handed?

Christie Kiley, a pediatric occupational therapist, says: "I work with kids on handwriting all the time. I have found that people may become intimidated or confused about how to teach left-handed children to write. To be honest, there really is not that much difference between teaching right-handed and left-handed children to write, though there are a few important things to keep in mind. If you are teaching a left-handed child to write, do not be scared."

Go to www.MamaOT.com for information about how to help a left-handed child. Here is a summary of her thoughts:

1. **Remember that hand dominance does not fully develop until the kindergarten years, between ages five and six.** If a toddler or preschooler shows a preference for the left hand, it is possible for that child to change by the time they are in kindergarten. Let the child use either hand, and dominance will emerge.

2. **If a child has established a left-hand dominance, help him to tell others that he is left-handed.** Adults may assume the child is right-handed and try to force the child to use the right hand.
3. **Encourage the use of the “tripod grasp (pinch pencil with index finger and thumb, rest it on the middle finger) like right-handed people do.** This helps to prevent the “hook the wrist” position.
4. **Teach your lefty to hold the pencil in that tripod grasp about 1 to 1.5 inches above the tip of the pencil.** When left-handed people move their fingers a little higher on the pencil, it lets them see what they are writing. This may also help prevent smudging. As a visual reminder, put a sticker on the pencil at the height where the child should pinch the pencil.
5. **There is no need to purchase any special pencils or grippers unless an occupational therapist recommends it.** However, if possible, provide left-handed scissors because of the way the blade is situated. These scissors will allow the child to see where he or she is cutting and will cut more accurately for the child. A left-handed child can take a pair of regular scissors and flip the scissors upside-down. This is not ideal. Fingers can become crammed into the small hole, but the scissors will cut that way.
6. **Encourage the child to angle the paper with the left corner pointed up.** This position places the writing arm in a natural position to write on the lines without hooking the wrist.
7. **Teach left-handed writers to place their paper to the left of their body so they can see what they are writing.** When they finish writing across the line, the hand should be slightly left of the child’s midline. This method keeps the wrist straight, rather than hooking, and the child can see what has been written.
8. **Encourage your child to utilize the right hand as the “helper hand.”** If the child consistently stabilizes the paper with the non-dominant hand, the paper is less likely to slide around and cause frustration while writing.
9. **When teaching lefties to copy letters or words, make sure their model is either above where they are writing or directly to the right side of where they are writing, so they can see it.** Worksheets typically place the letter or word on the left side and have a blank space on the right. Usually, the lefty’s arm covers up this space. If so, the child may need more time to complete the assignment.
10. **Letter formation is the same for lefties as it is for righties.** The child should write the letter “o” in the same counterclockwise direction as righties. The only difference in formation of letters is that lefties can pull their little lines backward to cross the “f” and “t” and the capitals “A, E, F, H, J, and T.”

In the preschool years, children should be focusing on fine motor play activities rather than actual use of pencils and writing alphabets. Preschool children should focus on these activities: Pinching with the thumb and index finger, coordination of the right and left hands together (cutting), foundational fine motor strength and skills needed for later writing.

Here are some additional comments from the website and my own experience:

Most spiral bound notebooks have a binding on the left side. Look for top-bound or right-bound notebooks for lefties.

Companies made rulers and tape measures for right-handed people. Be aware that lefty students may need to hold these materials in a unique way when they use them.

The best furniture for both types of students is a table and chair. If you have right-arm style desks, provide a left-arm style desk for those who need them. A left-hand person needs a large desktop to find a comfortable position to write.

If you are teaching a child to tie shoes or tie bows or knots, invite a left-handed person to demonstrate this for the child.

Most right-handed people start walking or marching with their left foot. Lefties usually start with the right foot. Be aware of this when teaching rhythms and some games.

This information was a good reminder to me to look more carefully at the preschoolers with whom I work and the left-handed adults that I know. Also, I will be better prepared if I injure my right hand and need to attempt to write with my left hand.

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