

Messy Handwriting: What You Need to Know

By [The Understood Team](#)

At a Glance

- It's typical for young kids to have messy handwriting.
- Some people may wrongly believe that poor handwriting is due to laziness.
- There are lots of ways to help kids improve at handwriting.

Most people expect very young children to have messy handwriting. After all, learning to form letters and place them correctly on a page to make words and sentences is a process. It takes time and practice for kids to be able to do it neatly.

But what if your child continues to struggle with handwriting long after other kids have mastered it?

As kids get older, some parents and teachers might see messy writing as a sign of laziness. But messy writing is often due to trouble with motor skills. These difficulties can sometimes be so great that a child's writing is beyond messy—it's illegible. And that can have a big impact on learning.

Find out more about handwriting challenges and ways to help your child improve skills.

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Handwriting Difficulties You Might Be Seeing

Handwriting relies on a number of small skills. When kids have trouble with them, the result can be writing that's messy and hard to read. These skills are:

- Forming letters
- Placing letters and words on the page
- Making letters the right size
- Spacing letters and words
- Holding and controlling a pencil
- Holding paper with one hand while writing with the other
- Applying the right amount of pressure on the paper with a writing tool
- Maintaining the correct arm position and posture for writing

If you look closely, you might see the types of errors that can result from these difficulties. These include:

- Letters written from the bottom up, instead of the top down
- Letters written with too many strokes, or the strokes done in the wrong order
- Words and sentences floating above or below the line
- Words or sentences written on too much or too little a slant
- Letters and words spaced unevenly or running into each other
- Some letters darker and others lighter

Handwriting difficulty can appear as early as preschool, when kids may struggle to grasp a crayon properly to draw. And for some people, difficulties can persist into adulthood.

For the most part, adults can avoid writing by hand by using technology. But for kids in school, trouble with handwriting can really get in the way of learning.

Not only is what they write often hard to read, the act of writing can be very slow. Kids may get poor grades or not finish classwork or tests because of it. Plus, struggling in such a visible way in front of their classmates can take a toll on [self-esteem](#) and [motivation](#).

What Can Cause Messy Handwriting

When kids have trouble with handwriting, it doesn't mean that they're lazy or careless. They may be trying as hard as they can and just need more and better support to improve.

A good first place to look is your child's age. Not all kids develop these skills at the same rate. Some may take longer than others, and the differences can be even greater for kids who are young for their grade.

In some cases, kids have challenges that cause messy handwriting. Handwriting involves many aspects of movement. Kids have to plan the steps for writing letters in words, sentences, and paragraphs. They also need to position their wrist, arm, and body correctly. Being able to do that allows them to write without putting too much strain on their muscles.

That's why messy handwriting is often due to poor motor (movement) skills. That can include [fine motor skills](#), [gross motor skills](#), and [motor planning](#). These skills are needed to hold and control a pencil, pen, and crayon, apply the right amount of pressure, and form letters and other shapes.

You might hear motor skills difficulties referred to as developmental coordination disorder, or [DCD](#). You may also hear people use the term [dysgraphia](#) to talk about writing difficulties.

There are also challenges that don't seem related to motor skills but that can make handwriting difficult. For instance, if kids are [impulsive](#), they may rush through assignments. That can result in sloppy work and many mistakes.

No matter what's behind your child's trouble with handwriting, there are things you and the school can do to help.

What Can Help With Messy Handwriting

An important step is to take notes on what you're seeing and talk to your child's teacher or pediatrician. They can be great sources of information and advice.

Even if you're not sure what's going on, you can still work on building skills at home. Explore [a collection of strategies you can try](#). These include:

- [Free tracing and other tools to help with handwriting](#)
- [A drawing exercise](#)
- [Pencil grips](#)

You can also find help for your child at school. Talk to the teacher about strategies that help in the classroom, and how you can use them at home. Ask about technology that could help, too, like [speech-to-text](#).

Don't forget to celebrate progress as your child works on handwriting. Remind your child that everyone has difficulty with something—and that all people have strengths, too.

If you're concerned about your child's motor skills, see [next steps](#). One option is to request a [free school evaluation](#), which can help you better understand your child's challenges and strengths.

Key Takeaways

- Messy handwriting can impact learning and self-esteem.
- An evaluation at school can show why your child is struggling with writing and what type of help is best.
- Let your child know that handwriting skills can improve.

About the Author



[The Understood Team](#) is made up of passionate writers, editors, and community moderators, many of whom have children who learn and think differently.

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