

# Look Mom I'm Writing!

As an occupational therapist, I have been teaching handwriting to students with special needs in the schools for 6 years. It takes about a year for the students to learn how to write their letters even though we practice it in our sessions over and over again. I've used various strategies such as obstacle courses, shaving cream, play dough, sand, wooden sticks, wax sticks, etc to really help and incorporate different sensory systems to help facilitate learning. Majority of the students learn it eventually after a year or so. Until now, I was under the impression that children with learning disabilities simply learn at a different pace.

Then this past year, I began working at Tiny Tots Therapy's outpatient clinic. I see the children with the same special needs that I would see in the schools with similar deficits: poor handwriting, strength, difficulty paying attention, etc. Yet, the kids at the clinic are picking up the handwriting, improving their ability to pay attention, and an overall improvement in their functioning much quicker. The irony in all of this is that I see my clinic kids just 1 time a week and most of my school kids 2 times a week.

This really made me think about what I am doing differently with my treatments at the clinic versus my treatments at the school. The only difference I could possibly come up with was that I had direct contact with parents at the end of each session. The 3-5 minutes I would spend talking to the parents and sharing with them the strategies to try at home, meant that these strategies were being reinforced at home. Parent interest and interaction with children during the handwriting also appeared to be a big motivating factor for the children.

At a workshop by Zaner-Bloser on handwriting, I was informed that research shows parents spending as little as 10 minutes with their children on handwriting, significantly helps improve children's handwriting skills. And now I know first hand that this finding really is true. Each week at the clinic, parents come back with the children's OT handwriting homework assignments and the children have a sense of accomplishment on their faces. Ever since I've come to this realization, I have made it a point to send OT homework for all of my students even at school, in hopes that parents will sit down with their children and help them with their handwriting homework for more practice.

Handwriting should become an automatic reaction for children and this happens with practicing over and over again, just as you practice riding a bike. I'm hoping that parents everywhere take at least 10 minutes out of their busy schedule to help their child learn and master the basic skills of handwriting, whether their child has special needs or not. In this day and age of technology, handwriting is becoming a lost art! However, research has shown that the act of holding a writing implement and forming letters for writing by hand improves cognitive functioning, which is not comparable to placing your fingers on the keyboard and typing your thoughts. Please sit down with your children and practice a skill that will be important for them throughout their entire life!