

write on!

Your child probably knows how to say his ABCs. Now it's time for him to put them down on paper. *by HEIDI SMITH LUEDTKE, PH.D.*

The lines and curves of my 4-year-old's letters extend haphazardly into each other. Some are backward. Others lie on their side as if they've been pushed over by a schoolyard bully. He still has a few years before writing will come naturally to him, but like many kids his age, he's beginning to tackle the skills of penmanship.

Kids usually first attempt writing during the preschool years. Their vocab expands dramatically at this age, and they begin to understand that symbols, including letters and numbers, have meaning, says Susan Neuman, Ph.D., coauthor of *Nurturing Knowledge*. They see Mom and Dad scribbling away at a note or a shopping list and want to do the same, which is why you may catch your kid penning his own nonsensical memos full of zigzags, circles, and other almost-letter shapes.

But teaching your child to write isn't as easy as putting a pencil in his hand and showing him the alphabet. Before he can print his name legibly, he'll need practice in multiple areas. Luckily, it's easy to teach these lessons at home.

THE CHALLENGE muscle up

The small hand muscles needed for writing aren't well formed in 3- and 4-year-olds. But scribbling and coloring (something your child probably already enjoys doing) provide an intense workout that will help her strengthen up. Encourage her to draw as often as possible by stocking her craft bin with paper and a variety of writing tools, such as crayons, chalk, and markers. In addition, tasks like cutting with scissors and manipulating blocks, trains, Play-Doh, and other small playthings will provide great opportunities to build hand strength, says Jennifer Hallissy, a pediatric occupational therapist and author of *The Write Start*.

THE CHALLENGE get a grip

Your child's first grasp on a pencil will probably be a tightly closed fist. Encourage a good grip by offering him a small broken crayon or a golf pencil to practice letters with instead. "He will instinctively hold it with his fingertips, which will reinforce a more mature grip," explains Hallissy.

Experts recommend pinching the pencil between the thumb and index finger and resting it on the side of the middle finger, but it's okay if your child holds the pencil with all three fingers. And if he's left-handed, he'll face a special challenge, since his hand will cover his marks as he writes, says Hallissy. "Lefties should pinch their pencil slightly higher up on the shaft (about 1½ inches from the tip) and position their paper slightly to the left instead of directly in front of their body."

THE CHALLENGE proper posture

Some kids are still learning to hold down a piece of paper with one hand while writing with the other. Using an easel can eliminate this problem and also help improve overall technique. Or put a three-ring binder on your kid's

desktop and place her paper on top of that so she has a slight slope when she writes. A slanted surface requires children to extend their wrist so they properly support and move the pencil, explains Cheryl Bregman, an occupational therapist and pediatric handwriting specialist in Rockville, Maryland.

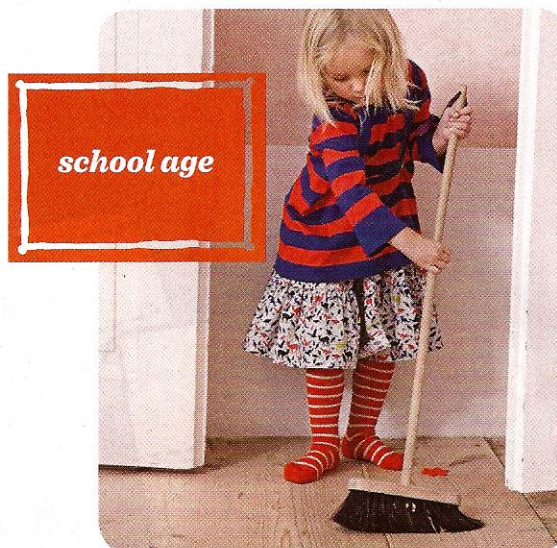
THE CHALLENGE letter knowledge

Give your beginning writer loads of alphabet inspiration so he can memorize the shapes. Stock up on letter magnets and puzzles and use shaving cream to spray letters on the wall during bathtime. As you play, highlight the small differences between easily confused characters, like *B* and *P*, and *M* and *W*. Letter recognition doesn't always translate into letter writing. "Kids see the whole form, not the specific parts, so a 4-year-old might write the letter *E* with six arms instead of three," says Jane Gibson, a pre-K teacher in North Hanover Township, New Jersey. Show the right strokes with a letter clue game. Say, "I'm thinking of a letter and I'm going to write it for you, but only one part at a time." Draw the first line of your letter, then discuss your child's best guess before adding the next line.

THE CHALLENGE name writing

Your child probably already recognizes her name, since she sees it everywhere: on her coat tag, her bedroom door, and her cubby at school. When you teach her how to write it, don't have her trace your letters because kids tend to focus on following the lines rather than learning the movements and patterns of the letters. Instead, write out her name and have her copy it underneath. Choose fun activities to give her practice, such as signing Valentine's Day cards or writing her moniker on sticky name tags.

When it comes to letter construction, there's no wrong way at this point. She'll learn the mechanics once she's in school, so don't sweat the small stuff. Instead, show how exciting writing can be so she sees it as a fun activity, not as a drag. 😊



the chore challenge

Discover the secret to getting your kid to set the table or tidy her room without being constantly on her case about it. *by* BETH HOWARD

My daughter, Zoe, was 5 when I decided to give her a couple of chores: making her bed every morning and putting some of her clean clothes in drawers on laundry day. Let's just say she blew off these tasks for months. I was beyond frustrated that my sweet kid, who eagerly pitched in at school during cleanup time, couldn't care less about lending a hand at home.

Sound familiar? While chores are typically greeted with enthusiasm in the preschool years ("Look, I'm helping Mommy!"), by the time a child is 5 or 6—and genuinely ready for more responsibility—her natural excitement wanes, says parenting expert Deborah Gilboa, M.D., the founder of AskDoctorG.com. Don't let your chore-dodger off the hook. To spur her on to action, enlist the help of these motivational tricks from the experts.

pull out the big-kid card

If you've never specifically given chores to your kid before, he's going to wonder: Why is Mom making me empty the dishwasher or set the table now? So appeal to his desire to be more grown-up. "It can be as simple as saying, 'Now that you're 5, you're stronger, taller, and more careful. I bet you could put away the

washed dinner plates,'" suggests Meg Akabas, founder of Parenting Solutions, a consulting firm.

pitch in together

Sure, you're not always going to want to do your chores at the same time as your child does hers. But saying something like, "Help me straighten up the house. I'll do my bedroom,