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How Should We Teach Our Children to Write? Cursive First, Print Later!

For the last three decades, I have been lecturing parents at homeschool conventions on how to teach the three R's: "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic." I explain in great detail how to teach children to read phonetically through intensive, systematic phonics. In fact, my reading program, Alpha-Phonics, has been used by thousands of homeschoolers to produce highly literate children. But when it comes to writing, I have to explain to a very skeptical audience why cursive writing should be taught first and print later.

I usually start my lecture by asking parents if they think that their children ought to be formally taught to write. I explain that many educators now believe that handwriting is really an obsolete art that has been replaced by the word processor, and that it is no longer necessary to teach children to write. They imply that if a child wants to learn to write, he or she can do so without the help of any school instruction.

However, I've yet to meet any parents who have been sold on such questionable futuristic thinking about a basic academic skill. They all believe that their children should be taught to write. After all, no parent knows what needs their children will have for good handwriting 20 years hence. Who knows, sending handwritten thank you notes to gift givers may come back into vogue! Also, you can't carry an expensive laptop everywhere you go.

The question then becomes: How shall we teach children to write? My answer is quite simple: Do not teach your child to print by ball-and-stick, or italic, or D'Nealian manuscript. Teach your child to write a standard cursive script. And the reason why I can say this with confidence is because that's the way I and thousands of other children were taught to write in the first grade in New York City's public schools back in the 1930s when teachers still knew how to teach the three R's.

In those days we were all taught cursive writing right off the bat in first grade. The result is that people of my generation generally have much better handwriting than those of more recent generations. Apparently, cursive first was discarded in the 1940s and '50s when the schools adopted ball-and-stick manuscript to go with the new Dick and Jane look-say reading programs. Ball-and-stick was part of the new progressive reforms in primary education.

But ball-and-stick has produced a handwriting disaster. Why? Because by the time children are introduced to cursive in the third grade, their writing habits are so fixed that some resent having to learn an entirely new way of writing. Furthermore, the teacher does not have the time to supervise the development of a good cursive script, and the students are usually unwilling to take the time and do the practice needed to develop good cursive handwriting.

The result is that many youngsters continue to print for the rest of their lives, some develop a hybrid

style consisting of a mixture of print and cursive, and some do develop a good cursive script because they'd always wanted to write cursive — like a grownup — and had been secretly practicing it for years without their teachers' or parents' knowledge.

Apparently, all of those schools that introduce cursive in the second or third grade must believe that it has some value, otherwise why would they teach it at all? The problem is that by requiring the students to learn ball-and-stick first, they create obstacles to the development of a good cursive script.

The reason schools advocate teaching ball-and-stick first, we are told, is that first graders do not have the fine motor skills or muscular dexterity in their fingers to be able to write cursive at that age. Of course, that argument is totally false. It is far more difficult to make straight lines and perfect circles in ball-and-stick than it is to write the fluid curves and loops of cursive. Prior to the 1940s, virtually all children in public and private schools were taught cursive in the first grade and most were able to develop very nice handwriting.

Back then, we were all trained in penmanship and did the various exercises — the ovals, the rainbows, the ups and downs — that helped us develop good handwriting. We were also taught how to hold the writing instrument correctly: cradled between the thumb and forefinger (also known as the index finger), with both fingers resting on the long middle finger, in a very relaxed position, enabling the writer to write for hours without tiring.

Generally, when a child is taught print first, he will hold the pen or pencil in any way he wants, usually with a tight, fist-like, grip using four fingers, with much pressure exerted on the paper held in a straight position on the desk. Their letters usually look more like chicken scratches than handwriting. When these kids are then taught cursive in the second or third grade, they do not change the way they hold the pen or pencil because their motor habits have been established and they cannot be easily changed. That is why so many children just don't bother to learn cursive because their writing habits have become fixed. Children do not easily unlearn bad habits. That's why I tell parents that there are two very important no-no's in primary education: do not teach anything that has to be unlearned later on, and do not let a child develop a bad habit. Instruct the child to do it right from the beginning.

The question most frequently asked by parents when they are told that cursive should precede learning to print is: won't learning cursive-first interfere with learning to read printed words? The answer is a categorical no. All of us who learned cursive-first had no problem learning to read printed words. In fact, it helped us. How? Well, one of the biggest problems children have when learning to read primary-school print and write in ball-and-stick is that so many letters look alike — such as b's and d's; f's and t's; g's, q's, and p's — that children become confused and make many unnecessary reading errors. In cursive, however, there is a big difference between a b and a d. In cursive writing, a b starts like an l while a d begins like writing the letter a. In other words, in cursive, children do not confuse b's and d's, because the movements of the hand make it impossible to confuse the two letters. And this knowledge in the hand is sent to the brain which conveys it to the reading process. Thus, learning to write cursive helps learning to read print.

Another aid to reading is that cursive requires children to write from left to right so that the letters will be joined in proper sequence. The blending of the sounds is made more apparent by the joining of the letters. In ball-and-stick, some children write the letters backwards, and often the spacing is so erratic that you can't tell where one word ends and another begins. Thus, cursive teaches both spatial and directional discipline.

Another important benefit of cursive is that it helps the child learn to spell correctly since the hand acquires knowledge of spelling patterns through hand movements that are used again and again in spelling. This is the same phenomenon that occurs when pianists or typists learn patterns of hand movement through continual repetition.

Another question often asked by mothers of six-year-olds is what will their child do when asked on a job application to "please print." My answer is that I don't advocate not teaching a child to print. I simply say teach cursive first, print later. Being a cursive writer helps a child become a better printer because of his or her agility with the writing instrument. And besides, children don't fill out applications for jobs at age 5 or 6. By 14 and 15 they should know how to print.

Parents often ask, "Isn't cursive harder to learn than print?" No. It's just the opposite. It is much more difficult, if not unnatural, for children to draw straight lines and perfect circles than it is to do fluid curves and loops. And that is why so much of ball-and-stick writing resembles chicken scratches. On the other hand, all of cursive writing consists of only three movements: the undercurve, the overcurve, and the up and down. That's all there is to it.

Another important point is that it takes time and supervision to help a child develop a good cursive handwriting, and one has the time for that in the first grade, not the third grade. The first-grade child may start out writing in a large scrawl, but in only a few short weeks, that scrawl will be transformed by those little fingers into a very nice manageable script. Practice makes perfect, and children should be given practice in developing good penmanship.

If you've wondered why your grandparents can write more beautifully than you do, well now you know the answer. If you teach cursive first, you can always learn to print very nicely later on. But if you teach print first, your child may never develop a good cursive style. Thus, it is essential to teach cursive first and print later.

Also, by concentrating on the development of good cursive handwriting, you eliminate the three-step nonsense of first starting with ball-and-stick, then moving to slant ball-and-stick, or some other transitional script, finally ending up with cursive. Children will make only one effort to learn a way of writing which they will use for the rest of their lives. They do not need three steps to cursive. Start with cursive, and the teaching of the second R will be greatly simplified.

By the way, if a child wants to draw the letters while learning the alphabet, that's perfectly all right. But once he or she begins to learn to read, teach cursive writing.

What about left-handed children? It may surprise you to learn that left-handed children gain great benefits from learning to write cursive first. When left-handed children are taught ball-and-stick first, they tend to use the hook position in writing since the pen or pencil is held straight up and the paper is also placed in a straight position. This means that, as the child continues printing from left to right, the child's arm will cover what has already been written. This can be avoided if the left-handed child is taught to write from the bottom up, the way a right-handed child writes. But this is difficult, if not impossible, to do when printing ball-and-stick.

However, if a left-handed child is taught to write cursive first, he must then turn the paper clockwise and must write from the bottom up, since it is awkward and difficult to use the hook position if the paper is turned clockwise. Right-handers turn the paper counter-clockwise in order to get the proper cursive slant. But left-handers are quite capable of developing as good a cursive handwriting as any right-hander by writing from the bottom up.

All of this must lead to one simple conclusion: teach cursive first and print later. There are few things that help enhance a child's academic self-esteem more than the development of good handwriting. It helps learning to read. It helps spelling. And because writing is now easy, accurate, and esthetically pleasant, it helps thinking.

As Francis Bacon once said: "Reading maketh a full man . . . and writing an exact man."