This booklet was developed as part of the project Practical Guidelines for the Development of Pre writing and Writing skills: A college based approach. This project was run by the Literacy Department, Gozo College in collaboration with the Occupational Therapy Department, Physical Section, Gozo General Hospital.

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Handwriting is one of the most complex skills that we learn and teach and requires a number of other skills (e.g., motor, sensory, cognitive, etc.). The skills that are involved in learning to write are called pre-writing skills. Pre-writing skills contribute to the child’s ability to hold a pencil and use it to draw, copy and colour. This leaflet provides a list of activities that can help in the development of these skills.

Developmental stages in acquiring pre-writing skills

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age Range (in years)</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| Stage 1    | 8–12 months          | Crinkles paper
|            |                      | Bangs crayons or writing utensils on paper                                 |
| Stage 2    | 1–2 years            | Randomly scribbles
|            |                      | Spontaneously scribbles in vertical/horizontal and/or circular direction    |
|            |                      | Imitates a horizontal/vertical/circular direction                          |
| Stage 3    | 2–3 years            | Imitates a horizontal line                                                |
|            |                      | Imitates a vertical line                                                  |
|            |                      | Imitates a circle                                                         |
| Stage 4    | 3–4 years            | Copies a horizontal line                                                  |
|            |                      | Copies a vertical line                                                    |
|            |                      | Copies a circle                                                           |
|            |                      | Imitates a cross                                                          |
|            |                      | Imitates a right/left diagonal                                             |
|            |                      | Imitates a square                                                          |
| Stage 5    | 4–5 years            | Copies a cross                                                            |
|            |                      | Copies a square                                                           |
|            |                      | Copies a right/left diagonal                                              |
|            |                      | Imitates an X                                                             |
|            |                      | Imitates a triangle                                                       |
|            |                      | Able to copy some letters and numbers                                      |
|            |                      | May be able to copy own name                                               |
| Stage 6    | 5–6 years            | Copies an X                                                               |
|            |                      | Copies a triangle                                                         |
|            |                      | Recognizes between a big and small line or curve                          |
|            |                      | Copies most lower and upper case letters                                  |

Imitation and copying activities to facilitate pre-writing skills

- Students can walk on straight, curved and diagonal lines, e.g.,
  - Walking on tape line or string line.
  - Walking on shapes in sand.
- Playing hoop games to reinforce the concept of circle.
- The children can form their bodies into a line (e.g., vertical, horizontal, diagonal).
- Star tracking. Drawing from star to star to make a shape.
- Drawing shapes in the air.
- Drawing in sand.
- Tracing around hands and feet.
- Using a paper-towel roll as a wand and drawing in the air with both hands.
- Rainbow drawing. Ask the child to trace lines using different coloured pencils.
- Draw simple pathways for your child to draw along. E.g., a straight lined road so that a car can get to a house or a dog can get to a bone. Start with straight, wide paths and progress to narrower curving paths.
- Opening/closing snaps, buttons and zippers. These help the child practice up/down movements and to learn the vertical concept.
- Decorating cakes and cookies. The child can make vertical, horizontal, diagonal or circular designs. Children can also make circles, squares, rectangles and other shapes.
- Cutting a sandwich with straight or diagonal lines.
- Drawing with cheese spread on crackers or bread.
- When using playdough, show the children how to make lines up, down and across, using a plastic pizza cutter.

The above-mentioned activities can also be used later on, or with older children to learn letters and numbers.

- The child can write on different materials. E.g., aluminium foil, construction paper of different colours, brown paper bags, butcher paper, waxed paper, standard paper, colouring books, colouring books in which colour appears when child paints with water.
- Different colours of chalk, markers, crayons, pens or pencils can be used.
- Paints can be used, e.g., finger paints or water colours.
- The child can write on different textures, e.g.:
  - Writing on sandpaper with different crayons, paintbrushes or chalk.
  - Writing on Magnadoodle.
  - Drawing around sandpaper or wooden stencils.
  - Tracing with a finger around a shape made of yarn.
  - Drawing in sand or mud.
- Finger painting using lotions, oatmeal, whipped cream or sponges.
- One can put paint/markers/crayons in the refrigerator before an activity for a change in temperature.
- Different smells can be used, e.g.:
  - Drawing with scented markers.
  - Adding a few drops of bubble bath or scented oil to finger paints.
  - Adding flavours such as vanilla or mint to finger paints.

**IMP: USE EDIBLE FINGER PAINT ONLY**
- One can add sound by attaching bells to the end of a pencil or paintbrush.

**Hand Dominance**

Hand dominance is usually established by the age of 5 years. Different tools help children to establish hand dominance, e.g., spoons, forks, toothbrushes, combs, hammers, crayons. Initially, hand switching is acceptable and normal. Present the writing tool in midline and let child choose hand. Always encourage the child to hold the paper with the other hand while writing.

**Pencil grasp**

Holding a pencil properly can be difficult for a child who does not yet have enough strength in his/her hands and fingers. To facilitate a more mature grasp one can use triangular-shaped pencils or colours. Thick diameter triangular-shaped pencil or colours can also be used. When colouring, try to give the child some broken or short crayons. This will help promote a proper grasp, so they cannot "fist" the crayons easily and encourages them to use the pads of their fingers.

Demonstrate how to properly grip the pencil between the thumb and index finger, letting the pencil rest on the middle finger.

Keep pre writing practice short 5 to 15 minutes is plenty of time for practice.
Fine Motor Skills

Fine motor activities are activities that develop the child’s control of the small muscles of the hands. They are important prerequisites to pre-writing and handwriting skills. The following activities help the child in developing their fine motor skills:

- Stacking and knocking over blocks, sponges, books or little boxes.
- Stringing beads.
- Putting pennies into a money box.
- Playing with finger puppets.
- Spinning tops.
- Using small tongs to pick up cotton balls, blocks or other small objects.
- Using a clothes peg to do finger push-ups.
- Rolling, pinching, pulling and squashing playdough, putty or plasticine. The child can use a rolling ravioli-maker to cut snakes of playdough.
- Tearing up coloured paper for pasting or collage activities.
- Decorating a picture using tissue paper. Ask the child to scrunch up small pieces of tissue paper between his/her thumb, index and middle finger. Then glue them onto the picture.
- Scissoring.

The following are some other activities that develop body stability, tactile perception, bilateral coordination and hand function. These are essential fundamental skills for the development of fine motor skills.

- Swinging between monkey bars in playgrounds.
- Wheelbarrow walking.
- Walking like an animal, e.g., crab-walking.
- Abdominal exercises such as sit-ups.
- Lying on tummy and propping up to read or colour.
- Pouring from a pitcher or watering can.
- Carrying a ball or small rock at arm’s length on a wooden spoon.
- Playing with a yo-yo.
- Messy play, e.g., using paints.
Activities for the development of pre-writing and writing skills

- Bag Hunt. This activity can be done using common objects, different shapes or letters. This can be done by placing an object in a bag and having children try to guess what it is without looking or by placing numerous items in a bag and asking children to pick out a specific object.

- Sensory Bowls. Hide small objects in bowls filled with different substances. Encourage the child to dip hand and find hidden objects.

- Pulling a rope, e.g., pulling something to self, or pulling self along a rope while on scooter board.

- Fishing games where the child needs to pull the “fish” off the "line" with one hand while holding the line with the other hand.

- Drumming with both hands. Listen and copy each other’s rhythm patterns.

- Pull-apart and push-together building materials and toys.

- Stringing beads - match the size of beads and string to child’s ability level. Start with easy activities e.g., threading large square wooden beads on a pipe cleaner and gradually move on to harder ones, e.g., threading tiny beads on a thread.

- Pour rice or sand into the child’s hand and “see how much one can hold before it spills”.

- Tongs or large tweezers.

- Play games using terms such as “up and down,” “back and forth” and “front and back”.

Writing letters

Do not be too eager to teach children how to write letters. Instead have fun drawing together, copying shapes and colouring in. Ensure that the child has acquired the basic patterns for pre-writing shapes before moving on to letter formation.

- Emphasize continually that written work should be from top to bottom and left to right.

- Go through the proper developmental sequence of pre-writing skills.

- It may be easier to start with capital letters.

- It is easier to use simple letter shapes.

- Provide models on the left and right so that left-handed children can easily see the model they are copying.

- Use step-by-step words that show students how to make each part of every letter and number. Make it easy by using only a few words, and words that children know or understand.

IMP: Use the same words at home and at school.
Please talk to an occupational therapist if your child is having difficulties related to prewriting or writing skills. One can contact the Occupational Therapy Department, Physical Section, Gozo General Hospital, telephone no: 22106282.

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