The Development of Pre-Printing Skills

Why Can't My Child Print His Name?

Many parents & educators strive for their children & students to be able to print their name upon entering Kindergarten. Is this a realistic expectation? There are many factors that contribute to a child's ability to print. However most of them revolve around the issue of developmental readiness. Developmental readiness refers to your child's degree of mastery over the skills that are requires to build a strong foundation upon which a new task is learned. For example, a child must be proficient at walking before learning to run.

The set of skills that serve as the foundation for printing & writing is called pre-printing skills. As with learning to run, your child must have mastered their pre-printing skills before learning to print. Now everyone knows of a child or two that could print their name at a very young age. But could those children print any letters that were not in their name? I would not be surprised if they could not. Teaching a child to print their name without facilitating the development of their pre-printing foundation can result in splinter skills. These include being able to print your name & no other letters, or bad habits like forming letters from the bottom up rather than top down. A child must have a strong foundation of skills to enable them to print all letters & numbers. Frequently children are faced with the challenge of learning to print their name when they do not have such a foundation. When this is the case, there is the risk of failure & frustration.

As mentioned earlier, printing is learned upon a foundation of pre-printing skills. The pre-printing foundation includes 6 building blocks. Consequently, these building blocks play a paramount role in the amount of success a child will have with pre-printing and printing. Typically it takes 4-5 years for a child to establish such a foundation & master pre-printing. There are always exceptions, and some children reach this level quicker than others while some take longer. Since we all want our children to be successful, it is best focus on developing the building blocks to facilitate your child's pre-printing skills. Once you are confident in your child's foundation of skills, you can challenge them with learning to print. Adopting this focus regarding learning to print will ensure that your child is developmentally ready when they enter Kindergarten.

The 6 Building Blocks

The six building blocks upon which pre-printing is learned are:

1. Posture & Balance
2. Shoulder Girdle Development
3. Upper Extremity Control
4. Pencil Grasp
5. Bilateral Hand Skills
6. Visual Motor Control

Posture & Balance

Prior to learning to pre-print, a child must be able to sit upright in a chair without depending on their arms for support. Obviously, if they require their arms to sit they will not be able to use a crayon effectively. In addition to requiring a sturdy base of support, the child's balance must be good enough so that he does not feel like he is going to fall out of his chair.

Shoulder Girdle Development

Shoulder girdle development refers to the strength & coordination of the muscles & bones that make up your child's shoulder. If the shoulder is weak or the child has difficulty coordinating the muscle movement, they will have great difficulty controlling their arm.

Upper Extremity Control

Upper extremity control refers to the ability to use your arm. It has two components. The first is the ability to move it with precision & the second is the ability to vary the strength or force of movement. For example, the amount of force required to hammer a nail is very different from the amount required to put in a contact lens. Factors that contribute to upper extremity control are shoulder, forearm & wrist strength.

Pencil Grasp

Pencil grasp refers to the manner in which a child holds a pencil or crayon. As a child grows & develops, they will move from using an inefficient pencil grasp to an efficient pencil grasp. Initially a child will hold a pencil or crayon with a closed fist. This is called a power grasp and the pencil is used by moving the shoulder. This type of grasp expends a lot of energy & cannot perform small precise movements. As a result, a power grasp is considered to be an inefficient grasp. By the age of 4 years, most children will progress through a number of different grasps & eventually develop an efficient grasp. The most efficient grasp is called a tripod grasp. This is how most adults hold a pen or pencil. It involves holding the pencil with 3

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fingers. The pencil is resting on the knuckle of your middle finger while being pinched between your thumb & index finger. This type of grasp allows the greatest amount of pencil movement & precision while fatiguing the hand muscles the least. As a result, it is called an efficient pencil grasp. The development of an efficient pencil grasp will improve your child's ability to learn to print.

Bilateral Hand Skills

Bilateral hand skills refer to the ability to use your hands together to accomplish a task. It is also called lead-assist, because frequently one hand will lead an activity & the other hand will assist it. Commonly it is your dominant hand that leads the activity & your non-dominant hand that assists. For example, when drawing, the pencil is held in the dominant hand & the non-dominant hand is preventing the paper from moving. Another example is when using scissors, the lead hand is operating the scissors & the assist hand is holding & turning the paper when cutting around a corner.

Visual Motor Control

Visual motor control refers to your child's ability to coordinate their eyes, arms & hands. It is very similar to eye-hand coordination & contributes to one's ability to learn new shapes, letters & numbers, print between the lines & colour within the boundaries of a picture.

Once these 6 building blocks are established, a child is ready to develop their pre-printing skills.

Pre-Printing Skills

Pre-printing skills generally refers to your child's ability to perform the pencil strokes necessary to print letters & numbers. Once the child is able to move & control the pencil, learning to print is a matter of combining these strokes.

As children develop, they typically learn the pre-printing strokes in a particular sequence. The first stage of pre-printing is scribbling. Between the ages of 1 & 2 years, a child will engage in random scribble. As they approach the age of 2, their scribble will develop a distinct direction. It may be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal. Up to this point, the child will scribble in whichever manner they feel like regardless if you try to get them to change. However, by 2 years the child will likely follow your lead. For example if scribble horizontally, your child should be able to imitate you & scribble horizontally as well. The same is true for vertical scribbling.

Before proceeding to the next stage, we must make the distinction between imitation & copying. It is very important to know the difference, as children will always imitate before copying. Imitation is the ability to reproduce a form after watching someone else draw it first. In contrast, copying is the ability to reproduce a form after being only shown a picture of the completed design. For example, if you show your child how to draw a vertical line & then ask them to draw one like you did, you are asking them to imitate. Now if you were to only show your child a picture of a vertical line and ask them to draw one like the picture, then you are asking them to copy.

Between the ages of 2 & 3 years, the child will become capable of copying horizontal & vertical lines and the exact order may vary from child to child. When the child gets closer to 3 years, they will become able to copy circles.

The ability to imitate and then copy a cross or plus sign (+) should develop between the ages of 3 & 4. This will be followed by the ability to imitate & copy diagonal lines around the age of 4. By the age of 5 children should be able to imitate & then copy a square.

Within their 5th year, your child will learn to imitate & copy a triangle. As they approach 6 years of age they will learn to copy a diamond. Typically a child is ready to learn to print when they are able to consistently copy triangles.

Because of the foundation required to learn to print and the fact that most child do not master their pre-printing skills until the age of 5, it is not recommended to expect a child to print the letters & numbers upon entering Kindergarten. A child will learn to print during their Kindergarten year and their pre-school years should be spent developing their pre-printing skills.

Please refer to the therapeutic activities, crafts & games section of our website for specific activities that you & your child can use to develop their pre-printing building blocks & pre-printing skills.

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