

## **A letter about handwriting**

[ the following is excerpted from a response to a Waldorf teacher who was reflecting on Rudolf Steiner's recommendation to encourage right handedness in all children, coupled with the concern teachers in the Waldorf movement have about using word processors at all.]

Dear Teacher,

Being lefthanded myself, the issue has always intrigued me. Neurologically, it can be interesting to consider what is involved in activating inner speech, the driving force behind writing – that interior voice that puts forth our words. We are then able to become a secretary toward that voice and 'take the memo' with the hand. That region is in the left frontal area just forward of the motor strip that carries the "homunculus" or distribution of the body according to motor nerve projections. The projections that govern the RIGHT thumb and index and middle finger lies adjacent to the inner speech area and one could suspect that activation of those digits would stimulate the inner speech to be engaged. If you look up the work of A.A. Tomatis (Education and Dyslexia) he mentions that he sees a shift from left to right hand with dyslexics when they respond to his auditory retraining program. When we tap our finger to assist us in word retrieval it is useful to tap the right fingers, but not in most cases to tap the left. However, in working with children in the classroom, since those lefties who are clearly left hand dominant can't really become proficient enough with the right hand to make it flow, the purpose is lost if we keep at it with them past a certain point. Perhaps age 9 is as good a time to let them shift to left handedness as anything, since they will have stimulated the right hand as they laid down the IDEA of phonics and established the link then between eye and ear for reading with the aid of the right hand but then processing speed needs to be considered and they need to flow better once they get the basics so they can move into abundant writing.

[note: I am not recommending that other schools begin asking all children to use the right hand until age 9 here. This just happens to be the existing practice in the Waldorf Schools (for rather complex reasons) and this teacher was searching for a clear basis for when to back off.]

I think you will find, by middle school, that it is often wise to give those kids support in discovering the art of keyboarding earlier than the others because their processing speed is still going to be delayed. The keyboarding can then automate and become a great tool for them to "take a memo" from their inner speech center more naturally. The motor task of keyboarding is much more "primitive" than that of handwriting and demands much less in the way of motor flow. Furthermore it is bilateral, and the page is on the same plane as the face. All in all, it allows the writing to drop down to less conscious realms and brings the thoughts to the fore.

To compensate for this letting go of the labor of handwriting, it could be wise to introduce calligraphy though. As you move away from the embodied practice of the pen/hand for ordinary writing, it makes sense to move more deeply toward it as well through calligraphy. There is a wonderful program for handwriting designed by a calligrapher and a learning disabilities specialist and published at Portland State University Continuing Education Press -- called the Italic handwriting series. You can call about it at 1-800-547-8887 extension 4890. You could order

an overview text called Write Now to try it out yourself or you could order Book C (the one that transitions from print to cursive) and its teacher's manual and/or the masters so you can use them over and over. I have prescribed that particular book in the series for folks with a head injury as well as for dyslexic children. There are many ordinary penmanship workbooks available, but these are not artful enough. They only teach ordinary handwriting and I am suggesting going way beyond that to writing as an art form. But, again, I would pair that up with learning word processing so the child felt both the slowing down and the speeding up of the writing process at the same time. If you introduced the calligraphy work alone without the word processor work, it might just create too much frustration and nudge them toward giving up on writing.

Sincerely,  
Dee Coulter

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