

Pre-OT/PT Referral Interventions for Classroom Difficulties

The following interventions should be attempted for several weeks (4-6) before referring a student for an occupational and/or physical therapy evaluation. Your students may have the following issues in isolation, or in combination. Handwriting difficulty may be related to any of these issues.

Posture

- Use appropriate desk height and chair. The desk height should be about 2” above the elbows (arms are by child’s side with elbows slightly bent) when child is sitting upright. If the child is slumping forward, the desk might be too low; if the child is leaning back with his/her elbows raised up, the desk might be too high.
- Make sure the child’s feet touch the floor with hips and knees bent at 90 degrees. In order to achieve this, the child may need a smaller (or larger) chair and/or the desk height may need to be adjusted accordingly.
- If the child’s feet do not touch the floor, place a block under his/her feet.
- If a child seems to have difficulty sitting upright in the chair, even though the desk/height ratio are appropriate, allow the child to rest his/her forearms on the desk during cutting, writing, drawing, coloring and other fine motor tasks.
- Providing a slanted surface may help a child sit up straight. You can use a 3” three-ring binder on the desk with the wide edge toward the back of the desk (so the binder slants downward). Tape or clip the paper to the binder to keep it steady, if necessary.
- If a child seems to be fatigued or “antsy” from sitting in a chair too long, allow alternative positions such as standing, kneeling or lying on stomach while performing fine motor activities, as appropriate. Another option is to have the child jump, run in place, or push against a wall to help him/her become more alert.
- Check the paper position. The paper should be midline, parallel to the child’s writing arm. For right-handed children, the paper should be tilted slightly so that the upper right corner is slightly higher. For left-handed children, the upper left corner is slightly higher, which helps them keep their wrist straight rather than hooking the wrist.
- The non-dominant hand should be stabilizing the paper. If the child is not stabilizing the paper, tape paper to the desk to keep the paper in place. You can also use Rubbermaid rubber-backed shelf liner under the object.

Poor pencil grasp*

- An adapted tripod grasp: make a “V” with index and middle fingers; child places pencil between these fingers rather than between thumb and index finger, and holds pencil with these two fingers and thumb.
- Short pencils, crayons and chalk encourage use of a tripod grasp.
- Various types of pencil grips to see which one the child finds most comfortable.
- Markers, pens, pencils with soft lead, and mechanical pencils with strong, sharp leads (9 mm) as these glide over the paper easier. Crayons, grease pencils, or regular lead pencils will increase friction, which leads to better control of movement than markers and pens.
- Larger sized crayons, pencils and markers, and vertical surfaces (writing on the chalkboard or paper taped to wall or board).
- Have the child hold a small object in the last two fingers of his/her writing hand (such as a cosmetic sponge, midget tootsie roll, small eraser, etc.) for short periods of time to facilitate a tripod grasp.
- Decrease the amount of writing so the child doesn’t experience hand fatigue. Allow extra time for writing assignments, and focus on legibility instead of neatness. Test orally, use multiple choice or one-word answer formats, and allow use of the computer for written assignments, as appropriate. You may also want to consider putting a word prediction program on the computer so the child would not have to type out each character of every word.
- The width of lined paper is also an important factor. Some students write better with narrow-ruled paper and some with wider-ruled paper.

Before engaging in writing tasks, take a few minutes to “warm up” the children’s hands:

- Make large circles with arms in a backward motion.
- Extend arms forward with backs of hands together, then make slow circular arm motions.
- Make a fist with both hands, tensing muscles of the whole arms and hands as hard as possible. Hold for 3 seconds and release. Do 5 times.
- Crinkle up a sheet of newspaper into a ball with one hand, then unwrinkle and straighten it out as much as possible. Repeat with other hand.
- Place palm of one hand on the desk and raise each finger off the desk.. Repeat with the other hand.
- Place a small object in the palm of one hand (paper clip, button, coin, etc.). Then using the fingers of that same hand only, move the object from the palm to the fingertips and place onto the desk. Repeat with the other hand, or do the activity with both hands if possible.

Poor cutting skills

- Following is a suggested progression for developing cutting skills: 1) have the child open and close the scissors without cutting anything; 2) then cut playdough “snakes”, straws, old playing cards, index cards, magazine insert, etc.; 3) then use heavier paper (tagboard, construction paper, laminated paper); 4) and finally use regular paper.
- When using Fiskar scissors, the correct scissors grasp is thumb in small loop, with index and middle fingers in larger loop. When using scissors with the same-sized loops, the correct scissors grasp is thumb in one loop with the middle finger in the other loop; the index finger remains on top to add stability to the cutting hand.
- Provide left-handed scissors to left-handed students.
- The child should hold the paper to be cut with his/her non-dominant hand with the thumbs of both hands up (pointing toward the ceiling).
- If the elbow of the cutting hand is sticking out to the side, it usually indicates that the non-dominant hand needs to be repositioned during the cutting activity. It might help to have the child place his/her elbows on the desk while cutting.

- If a child cuts too rapidly, try tying the inside loops of the scissors together loosely with a string (to prevent the scissors from opening up all the way), or place a rubber band around the blades of the scissors (closer to the loops, not the tips of the scissors).
- If a child has difficulty remaining on the lines while cutting, try tracing over the outline to be cut with a thick black marker, or glue the outline ahead of time so it will have time to dry.
- The teacher can cut around a shape for the child so he/she is not working with a large sheet of paper.
- Make sure the child is using the tip of the scissor blades when cutting out curves, circles and smaller areas.

Poor organizational skills

- For children who constantly lose their pencils or their pencil grip, place a strip of velcro around the pencil close to the eraser end, and the opposite type of velcro on the child's desk. Instruct the child to keep the grip on the pencil and place that pencil on the velcro strip on their desk so it is always in sight. You can also tie string around the pencil and tape the other end of the string to the desk.
- The child may benefit from a separate cart or place in the classroom to store their books and other belongings to keep his/her desk from becoming too cluttered.
- Use a binder with separate colored folders inside for each subject, take home materials, etc.
- The child may benefit from picture or word schedule that lists his/her daily routine (beginning and end of day routines, daily schedule, etc.)
- The child may benefit from instructions on an index card that break down the steps of a task.
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Visual-motor problems

- Highlight margins with markers (green for left margin to “go” back to the left margin and red for right margin to “stop” at the red line). Sometimes highlighting the writing lines helps cue the child who has difficulty remaining on a line while writing.
- For children with spatial difficulties, use lined paper rather than plain paper for writing projects to assist with organization of words on the page.
- If a child has difficulty folding paper in half, place a colored dot on each corner so the child can match the corners.
- You can use an index card under the line the child has to write on, having the child move the index card down as he/she writes.
- If a child has difficulty lining up math problems, use graph paper or turn lined paper sideways so child can write each number in a column. Graph paper can also be used to help a child with difficulty spacing between words.
- Tape a strip to the child's desk with a model of the manuscript or cursive upper/lowercase alphabet, numbers, or the child's cursive signature.
- Clear the desk of all clutter. Place a piece of brightly colored construction paper or desk blotter on the child's desk and place the worksheet or paper on top of the construction paper or blotter.
- Outline pictures with bright colors or use templates to help the child remain within the boundaries while coloring. You can place glue around the outline to be cut ahead of time so it can dry.
- Have the child write on strips rather than on a whole piece of paper.
- Keep the chalkboard clean by erasing irrelevant information and cleaning the board completely.
- Use colored chalk when writing on the chalkboard to provide visual contrast.

If a child has difficulty copying from a chalkboard, he/she may need a model written on a piece of paper that placed on his/her desk to copy onto. Keep an open desk close to the chalkboard for children who have difficulty copying from the board.

Keep worksheets clear and uncluttered, use half worksheets, prepare worksheets with only one problem on a sheet, or have worksheets with fill-in answers only (rather than expecting child to recopy math problem, for example).

- Cut out a window in a piece of cardboard and place it over a worksheet (or book child is reading from) so that only relevant information is showing through the window.
- Using a computer, demonstrating knowledge orally, using a tape recorder for note-taking, have another student share his/her notes, or decreased writing requirements may also be beneficial modifications.
- Having the child practice writing with his/her eyes closed encourages “feeling” how the letters are formed so writing becomes more automatic.

Letter reversals

- Use cognitive cues such as “c” comes before “d” (make a “c”, then draw the line and it becomes a “d”); a lowercase “b” is like a capital “B” but without the top curve.
- Keep a model of commonly reversed letters on the child’s desk. Use different colors for the letter to reinforce directionality. Mark all “b’s” and “p’s” red to indicate the loop is on the right side of the line; and “d’s” and “q’s” in green to show that the loop is on the left side of the line.

Attention

- Decrease environmental distractions by minimizing clutter in the classroom (such as cluttered walls and bulletin board).
- Keep materials out of sight by placing them in closets, cabinets, etc.
- Close the classroom windows and doors during work periods to decrease outside noises and movement.
- You can also have the child sit away from windows and doors to minimize outside noises and movement.
- Have the child sit close to the teacher so the teacher can cue the child when he/she needs to focus on a task.
- When giving verbal directions, use simple cues and less verbiage. Ask the child to repeat your instructions to ensure he/she understands the directions that were given.
- You can also stand close to child when giving instructions. To ensure the child has your attention, you can place your hands on his shoulders and give slight downward pressure through the shoulders, then give your instructions.
- Carpeting the floors can decrease noise levels.
- For children who are distracted visually, place a carrel (some are made of cardboard) around the child’s desk
- Allowing the child to wear headphones while the child is doing concentrated work may help block out extraneous noises.
- Give the child small increments of work with breaks in between to help child remain focused.
- The child may need movement breaks (you can send child to office with blank message to “deliver” to the office or to another teacher, be the teacher’s helper within the classroom and pass out papers, etc.).
- Incorporate music into activities, whenever possible.

Sensory processing difficulties

- Use a timer or a picture schedule to help with transitions. Also letting the child know ahead of time when a transition will occur or when there will be a change in routine is helpful.
- If a child becomes over-stimulated by the classroom environment, allow a break from the environment (deliver a blank note to the office or to another teacher) or provide a quiet space within the classroom where the child can “regroup.”
- For children who are sensitive to touch, allow them to stand at the beginning or end of a line, rather than standing in the middle. Allow the child to have extra space at circle time or when working in groups.
- During art activities, respect the child who is sensitive to touch.
- Forewarn the child who is sensitive to noise of any loud noises before they occur.

- Chewing gum or sucking on hard candy, as permitted in the school, may help the child remain calm and focused while performing seated work.