

Developing Effective Partnerships Between Classroom Teachers and Occupational Therapists

Illegible handwriting is one of the most common reasons students are referred to occupational therapy.¹ A few students may lag behind their peers in speed and legibility, but how do you know when it's serious? And then what do you do? Working as a team, you and an occupational therapist can help each student thrive.

How can teachers and occupational therapists collaborate to support students?

Sometimes students struggle because they have never received instruction in letter formation or have received conflicting, ad hoc instructions.² Providing developmentally appropriate classroom instruction can resolve handwriting difficulties for many students, especially if a school has consistent instruction across the grade spans.³

Occupational therapists can work with teachers to provide interventions that won't conflict with the handwriting program in use. Sometimes an occupational therapist will work one-on-one or perhaps in small groups with struggling students. Collaborating with an occupational therapist in a classroom setting can lead to successful outcomes for all students.^{4,5}

Because teachers have daily interactions with their students, they can easily identify which students are still struggling to form legible letters and words even with direct handwriting instruction. An occupational therapist can help identify and treat underlying problems, facilitate development of handwriting skills, and help devise accommodations to enable the student to successfully participate in classroom activities and the educational process.⁶

An occupational therapist may want to observe struggling students "in action." They might inquire about the writing paper students use or examine how students grip their pencil or orient their posture to write. An occupational therapist should also spend time in the classroom to understand its daily routines and physical design.

Occupational therapists are trained to examine the underlying cause of a student's handwriting difficulties in order to target effective interventions.⁷ For instance, does the student struggle with isolating the movements of each finger or with planning how to execute the next step in forming the shape of each letter? Occupational therapists intervene differently depending on the conclusion of their analysis of students in the act of writing. They are also trained to determine whether handwriting difficulties signal a more serious underlying disorder, which can help students get the range of services necessary for their school success.^{8,9}

Handwriting is a complex task for children, and teachers and school-based occupational therapists are equal partners in student success. Use the following checklist to help you determine when to consult an occupational therapist.

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When Should I Call the Occupational Therapist?

Developed by Asha Asher, MA OTR/L, FAOTA, M.Ed. (Special Education), Cincinnati, Ohio

Use the following checklist to help you determine when the occupational therapist should be consulted for assistance in remediating specific problems that interfere with a student's handwriting development.

If you've tried this...	And this happens... Then consult the OT
Provided chair/desk of the appropriate height (i.e., the student can sit with feet flat on the floor, back snug against the chair back, and the desk slightly higher than the student's elbow)	The student assumes improper posture (e.g., head on the desk, sits on feet, sits at the edge of the chair)
Provided direct instruction of letter formations followed by regular guided practice	Written output is below grade-level expectations in either quality, quantity, or both (e.g., writing is difficult to read, student produces one sentence when peers have produced five sentences)
Allowed the student to experiment with writing tools of differing widths to choose one that the student finds most comfortable to use	Student continues to have an awkward pencil grasp AND written output is below grade-level expectations
Allowed student to experiment with writing paper that has lines of differing widths so the student can choose one that works best for him/her	Quality of student writing does not match grade-level expectations
Provided student with opportunities to refine fine motor control by incorporating various activities in the daily program (i.e., cutting, coloring, using small manipulatives such as peg boards, blocks, construction sets)	Student's fine-motor control is below that of peers (e.g., does not show stable hand preference, quality of student writing does not match grade-level expectations)
Provided opportunities to refine pencil control (vertical, horizontal, circle, oblique cross)	Quality of student writing does not match grade-level expectations (student uses too much or too little pressure, letters are formed from the baseline up, or piecemeal)
Provided adequate handwriting instruction	Quality of student writing does not match grade-level expectations (e.g., reversals beyond grade 2, uneven sizing or spacing of letters, omits or repeats letters)
Provided structured classroom expectations	Student's behavior often deteriorates only when written work is required