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Magazine

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the story

Camp HandRIGHTing Ink. helps children come to grips with legible script.

By Lini S. Kadaba
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER



eacher Amy Carroll gives some encouragement to David Gustafson, 6, as he gets ready to take a few bounces on the trampoline. The trampoline is more than just fun; it's an aid to developing coordination. (Bob Williams / Inquirer Suburban Staff)

Welcome to Camp HandRIGHTing Ink., a place on the Main Line to mind one's p's and q's and other details of proper penmanship.

Yes, this is a place for children to practice putting pencil to paper - something that has become a necessity in the age of computers.

Poor penmanship costs U.S. businesses perhaps as much as \$200 million a year in lost time and revenue, according to American Demographics magazine. The American Medical Association has urged physicians to dot their i's and cross their t's, noting that the scribble of doctors has caused medication errors, even patient

deaths.

In other words, the handwriting is on the wall, and it's clearly a scrawl that needs swift attention.

"In plain English, it's a mess," said Rose Toomey, a graphologist near San Diego who analyzes handwriting. "It's illegible. [With] computers, who wants to take the time to pick up a tool and write?"

Not John Hanes, 13, who lives in Paoli.

"I don't like writing," he said bluntly of the mechanics of cursive.

His mother, Susan Hanes, wants him to improve his scratchy, hard-to-read script. She also wants her daughter Hilary, 8 1/2, to learn the correct way to form cursive letters.

Both children happily attend HandRIGHTing Ink., where the order of the day is righting writing.

"I've seen kids struggling with their grip, with their posture, with their attention, and with their writing," said Amy Carroll, an occupational therapist who cofounded the company earlier this year with Sandy Purvis, also an occupational therapist.

"We really have a very structured approach that can help people change their bad habits," said Carroll, who herself struggled as a child.

The problem, of course, starts in school, where children learn to write.

Some have always had a harder time mastering this complicated fine-motor task.

But the e-mail generation also spends far less time actually gripping a pencil, relying more than ever on computers to compose and then print out - with a tap of a button - that essay on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." And teachers, faced with an overflowing curriculum, allow that they tend to race over the mechanics of letter formations, leaving students with less than perfect ABCs.

"Computers have had a big impact," said Purvis, whose Berwyn home and tree-lined front yard serve as camp central. "A mother . . . said to me, 'Do you know my child - who was in kindergarten this past year - didn't have a structured handwriting program? All they did is work on computers.' "

The notion of penmanship camp apparently has its appeal, at least among adults. Since its flyers appeared in local supermarkets and its ads in parenting magazines, the program has received several inquiries. Fifteen children have enrolled in the \$200 summer session that runs weekly for six weeks through July 28.

"I'm thrilled, really, really thrilled," said Bonnie Manning of Chester Springs, whose son, Rickey, 11, attends the summer classes because of handwriting difficulties. "I've been looking for this for years."

And the children? For most, mom made 'em come. But Purvis and Carroll won the pouters over before the ink even dried. The children realized the value of a well-formed cursive k. Scratch that! The real motivator: There's a cool trampoline out front.

Rickey considered the trampoline a definite plus, but he also said he wanted to show off his fine hand come fall. "My teacher was throwing some fits," said the fifth grader. "Now, I'm going to show her I can do some good handwriting."

On a recent Monday, four children, ages 8 to 11, started the 21/2-hour morning session with a review of perfectly printed rules (Do not push, trip or insult, says one that Purvis wrote) and then launched into warm-up exercises for fingers.

The kids clapped to "Miss Mary Mack/All dressed in black" and learned to sign their names. Later, they would bounce on the trampoline and ride scooter boards on bellies through an obstacle course of cones.

The activities may seem like pure fun and games, adding to the camplike atmosphere, but in reality, they hone ruler-straight posture and coordination, visual acuity and attention spans - some of the very problems faced by sloppy scribes.

"The underlying conditions are the ones that are fueling the dysfunction," Purvis said. "We are providing foundation skills that let the children improve lots of areas."

The actual handwriting lessons span two 30-minute periods. The teachers provide the children with all sorts of aids, including rubber pencil grips, slant boards, special cushions to accommodate fidgeters and even Twizzlers, this last to get kids to stop chewing on their nails.

"The idea is to find more appropriate ways to meet these needs," Carroll said. "It's all fine-tuning." Each child is assessed for his or her special needs.

Rickey, for one, sat on the fidgeter's cushion and leaned into his workbook atop a slantboard.

As he gripped his pencil and wrote *i-c-e* in cursive, Purvis offered ample words of instruction and encouragement.

"That's right - i, travel, c, bump top line, travel, e, bump the top line, travel. Awesome!" she said, stamping the page with a star as Rickey smiled wide. A few weeks earlier, his print was almost impossible to read.

HandRIGHTing Ink., favors Jan Z. Olsen's Handwriting Without Tears approach to script over traditional standbys because of the method's flexibility. Palmer's method, with its loops and slants - what most boomers learned - is losing favor, it seems.

"We tolerate a lot of variation," Purvis said.

For one, none of the children had to slant their script to the right unless the slant came naturally.

"Slant versus straight is overrated," Carroll added. According to her, slanted script came into fashion because of fountain pens. "It wouldn't work if they did up and down."

Instead of model script, the goal here is legibility. "Is it functional? Is it clear? Is it fast?" Carroll said.

As the campers at HandRIGHTing Ink. worked on tall t's and round o's, she and Purvis, the women with the neat print and fine script, admired the handiwork.

HandRIGHTing Ink. can be reached at 610-408-0868.

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