

THIS IS A REPRINT FROM THE The Nation's Occupational Therapy News Magazine, Advance for Occupational Therapy Practitioners® November 27, 2006 Vol 22 No. 24

Watch & Learn (To Write)

A mother and an OT create a video that helps a boy with autism learn to write

By Janine Wiskind



In the United States today, the expectations placed on youth are far greater than ever before. Many children are expected to write their names upon entering kindergarten. Kindergarteners are now writing sentences by the end of that same year.

The pressures and demands place on these children raise many questions as to whether this is harming or helping them. Unfortunately, with the curriculum set, and the pressures on each school to have the best test scores in the state, it's unlikely that expectations will lower anytime soon.

Children are expected to learn, understand and integrate information at a much earlier age. But what if they can't? What if they are struggling and just cannot keep up with the other children in the class? These questions require answers from teachers, occupational therapists and parents.

Ryan's Struggle

Six-year-old Ryan Ellis was diagnosed with autism at three-and-a-half. At that age, he was non-verbal and did not know the difference between a pillow and a remote control. Susan Ellis, Ryan's mom, did not want to leave their home because it was too difficult to deal with his tantrums and difficult behaviors out in public.

His parents did everything they could for their little boy. Once they learned he was autistic, they placed him on a gluten-free, casein-free diet and initiated ABA therapy, biomedical intervention, occupational therapy and speech therapy. All these interventions significantly changed Ryan's behaviors and he began to be able to learn. By four-and-a-half he had learned how to count and read sight words.

He continued to work with all his therapies with a large focus on his fine-motor skills. Though he was working on fine-motor skills in school, in ABA therapy, in occupational therapy and at home with his mom, he was still refusing to learn to write, or even show interested in holding a writing utensil.

Ellis continued to be dedicated to her son, and she was determined to find an avenue that would allow her child to want to learn to write. Ryan loved television. His mom bought him many educational videos, and he was always completely engaged in whatever was on the TV. While watching his eyes fixed on the television one day, she was suddenly inspired by a revelation. Ryan needed to learn to write using television as the medium.



Continued . . . from page one

'C' Plus

Fortunately, Ellis had a good relationship with Ryan's occupational therapist, Marnie Danielson. Ellis proposed making a short video clip of teaching handwriting to see whether this would give Ryan the motivation and understanding he needed. Danielson agreed to come over and facilitate the video.

Ellis knew that Ryan loved Danielson, and that the OT had an enthusiasm and spirit that could be captured very well on camera. As they created the clip of writing the letter "c," Susan knew her son needed it to be a bit spicier, so they took a very multi-sensory approach. They found objects that began with the letter "c" – cat and candle—to add more visual stimulation. Danielson was very animated and rhythmic. They wrote the letter "c" in the air, and on a chalkboard and finally on paper.

That night, Susan surprised Ryan with his new video present. She played the tape and held her breath. When it ended, Ryan said. "Do it again."

She did. She sat next to him and asked him if he was ready and put a pen in his hand. They chanted together with the video, "Up and around, letter 'c,' up and around letter 'c.'"

He did not resist her. They wrote the letter "c" together ten or so times; each time, Ellis lightened her grip and suddenly her little boy was writing independently. As tears streamed down her face, Ryan filled pages of his notebook with the letter "c."

Ellis said, "{Danielson} gave me my new life in that twenty minutes.}"

The Whole Alphabet

Why did Ryan refuse to write for the first five years of his life when it took him less than thirty minutes to learn to write the letter "c"? It was certainly not as simple as it seems.

Children with sensory dysfunction are not able to integrate information from the outside world as easily as others. The information is just not taken in and processed in the same way as others.

Ellis believes Ryan so overwhelmed by the concept of writing that he did not understand what was being asked of him and his body was unable to process or integrate the information. She feels that when he was provided a colorful, intriguing learning tool that gave both visual and auditory cues to motor plan, it finally clicked for him. Writing finally made sense and his brain was able to process, integrate and produce the desired result. From watching the video, Ryan was now able to provide his own verbal cues in order to motor-plan writing a letter. Once he got to see that on paper, the fear began to dissipate, his self-esteem began to rise and he continued to want to learn.

Together, Danielson and Ellis set out to teach Ryan how to write the whole alphabet. Initially, the videotaping started off as a small project, but they began to realize that many other children may benefit from learning this same way.

Kindergarten and 1st grade are the only years that give children the time to learn letter formation, spacing and upper and lower cases. After that, the focus is on test scores, which involves more math, science and social studies. Handwriting is complex because it involves motor and visual components as well as attention. If a child has deficits in any of these, they may struggle to learn to write. This in turn greatly affects their motivation and self-esteem because even at the age of four and five, children are smart enough to know that we are all expected to know how to write.

A New Approach

In talking with a few occupational therapists in the Atlanta area, they felt that there is a growing trend of increased occupational therapy referrals within the school system. The majority of the referrals are for handwriting.

Once evaluated, the child's standard scores and handwriting samples frequently reveal that issues with handwriting do not mandate OT services; rather, they need more time to grasp handwriting skill and proficiency. Many therapists have witnessed that some children cannot keep up with the demands of the rest of the class and due to high class volume, the teacher does not have the time to devote to children who are behind in their handwriting skills. This system is unfair to the child, the teacher and the parent who watches their child struggle.

Today's classroom curriculum is more focused on test scores rather than quality of work produced. Ellis knew that her son was going to struggle. Her determination helped him more than she ever realized it would and from that, she and Danielson helped many other children. Many parents with children with and without disabilities are now using their video. It is entertaining, engaging and interactive, and requires parent involvement.

Ryan certainly loved watching it, and on the first day of kindergarten, he walked into class and saw an easel. He walked up to it and wrote his name. His mom watched with a smile on her face and in her heart.