



Queen of Angels

MONTESSORI

Cursive-First Penmanship at Queen of Angels Montessori

At Queen of Angels Montessori, we teach cursive penmanship beginning at age four or five. Many parents wonder why we begin with cursive rather than manuscript, and when manuscript will be introduced. Below are some answers to commonly-asked questions.

Why begin handwriting instruction in the pre-primary years?

Dr. Montessori observed that the sensitive period for acquiring handwriting skills is between age four and six. During this sensitive period the child has the desire to learn how to write. In *The Absorbent Mind*, Montessori writes,

...the child's explosion into writing is closely connected with his special sensitivity for language, and this was operative at the time when he began to speak. By age five and half or six, this sensitivity has ceased to exist; so it is clear that writing can be learned with joy and enthusiasm only before that age. Children older than this have lost the special opportunity which nature grants them of learning to write without making special and conscious efforts of application and will.

An indication of the child's natural interest in handwriting is the onset of his spontaneous attempts to write his name or random letters. When the pre-primary teacher observes this behavior, it is a signal to begin more direct instruction in handwriting.

Before these direct handwriting lessons, the Montessori classroom has offered the child a wealth of activities that indirectly prepare the hand for writing. Our students spend much time in the practical life area of the classroom, where a variety of activities encourage fine motor control of the hand and hand-eye coordination. The sensorial materials provide opportunities for controlled hand-motions such as tracing shapes and contours. Knobbed materials in both the geography and sensorial areas of the classroom train the child's hand in the all-important pincer grip. The metal insets, a more direct preparation for writing, provide an artistic way for children to practice the basic strokes and movement of writing over and over again. The sandpaper letters help the child to internalize the muscular movements involved in letter formation.

Though some children will begin as early as their second year in the preschool (age four), by age five (kindergarten) all of the children participate in formal handwriting lessons in which we teach them cursive letter and word formation. These lessons continue into the first part of the child's early elementary years.

Why teach cursive first?

- **Cursive handwriting is a more practical, relevant life skill than manuscript.**

We want our students to USE what they learn. Handwriting is a vehicle for written expression, and cursive is the most efficient form of handwriting. This is true not only for adults, but for children as young as the lower elementary years. Teaching manuscript first provides the child with a less effective skill in handwriting, one that will hamper the fluidity and efficiency of his

written expression. Why would we teach anything other than the most effective, fluid, efficient form of handwriting?

We believe that instruction should build upon itself rather than work against future teaching. We do not teach anything that is unlearned or discarded in later elementary years. We feel it is crucial that proper formation of letters is established at an early age before bad habits have a chance to develop.

- **A manuscript-first approach leads to transitional problems later on.**

In the manuscript-first approach, children are first taught manuscript writing and are expected to transition to cursive in third or fourth grade. This leads to a number of transitional problems.

In her excellent article, "Rationales for Cursive First Penmanship Instruction," (<http://home.mindspring.com/~teachingkids/id17.html>) Elizabeth FitzGerald summarizes a number of these transitional problems:

- **The transition from one writing style to another constitutes flawed teaching.** As Gladstone aptly points out, "We do not allow this artificial split to be created in any other area of education".... Experienced educators understand that instruction should build upon itself rather than working against future teaching. Blumenfeld asserts, "That is why it is so important to teach the basics in the right manner from the very beginning, and why I advise parents that there are two very important no-no's in primary education. Do not teach anything that later has to be unlearned, and do not let the child develop a bad habit. Instruct the learner to do it right from the start." (Blumenfeld, 1997).
- **The transitional process discredits the work children have done for three to four years to develop their writing.**
- **The transition process interrupts the child's ability to write at all, just at the time he is expected to put expanded thoughts into writing.** (Joss, 2001). A ten-year study on handwriting by Berninger and Graham revealed that the speed and legibility of third grade children reverted to first-grade levels. The authors credited this regression to the transitional process (Gladstone, 2000).
- **The transitional process fails because third and fourth grade teachers do not have the time to devote to handwriting instruction** that teachers in kindergarten and first grade have.

- **Other advantages to cursive-first instruction.**

- Cursive writing involves a flowing, uninterrupted movement which reinforces the left-to-right directionality of our written language.
- Cursive allows for continuous flow of thought and thinking ahead while writing.
- Cursive provides a natural division of words, with proper spacing of letters.
- Cursive helps eliminate reversals. The continuous movement helps diminish potential for error, confusion over similarly formed lower-case letters is eliminated, and children are taught the distinctive differences between letters.
- Cursive writing reinforces blending of sounds within words. The multi-sensory approaches we use, particularly the kinesthetic movements, help our students embed spelling patterns into long term memory.
- Along with several experts, we also recognize the advantages of cursive instruction for our students who demonstrate difficulties in the development of reading skills. In addition to eliminating reversals, the word is also treated as a unit and greater reinforcement is provided for spelling.
- Cursive eliminates doubt and uncertainties that many students face each time they would lift the pencil and place it back down again.

Will the child ever learn how to print?

We feel that children should be taught manuscript, but not as their primary hand. Beginning in third grade, we teach manuscript as an art form and a practical life activity. After correct formation of manuscript letters is presented, students are allowed to use print when working on maps, charts, diagrams, posters, etc. Work with calligraphy also heightens the child's interest in acquiring skill in manuscript.

As adults, we typically use manuscript when filling out job applications. As a practical life skill, manuscript has little relevance to the life of an grade-school child. It is entirely appropriate to present this skill only after the most essential skill – cursive penmanship – is very well-established for the child.

What about learning to read?

Some educators speculate that if the child is taught cursive first he will be confused when he sees printed letters in reading. However, experience does not bear this out. FitzGerald points out that the literacy rate in Europe does not suffer, though cursive is taught first there. Further, she says that, "Thinking that children cannot recognize a cursive letter...because it looks different than a...bookface letter is as ridiculous as thinking the child could not recognize the color blue outside of his initial learning context."

Maria Montessori found that cursive writing did not at all affect a child's ability to read. She states in *The Secret of Childhood* that the children learned to write all of their letters (in cursive) before learning to read, but that, once they had learned to write, "...the children began to read all the print that they found in the school...[T]hey would see a different kind of writing and learn to read it..."

- **For more information ...**

Parents seeking a more thorough rationale for cursive-first instruction are encouraged to read Elizabeth FitzGerald's article, "Rationales for Cursive First Penmanship Instruction," (<http://home.mindspring.com/~teachingkids/id17.html>)