

*Cursive First: Reasons, Research, and
Resources for Teaching Cursive First in
Your Early Childhood Classroom*

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Start at the source- Maria Montessori

- **From *The Montessori Method*:**
 - “The first steps should be the easiest, and the up and down stroke is, on the contrary, one of the most difficult of all pen movements.”
- **From *Discovery of the Child*:**
 - “. . . a straight stroke is the most difficult to make”
 - “Will not a child have to make an effort to forget printed, in order to learn cursive? And would it not be simpler to begin with the letter?”
 - “The hand of the child of six or seven has already lost its precious period of sensitivity to movement. This delicate little hand has left behind that blessed period in which its movements were coordinated.”

The Reasons: Why begin with cursive first?

It's easier for children!

- This may seem counterintuitive to those of us who learned it in third grade, but we were past the sensitive period for writing.
- All lowercase letters begin in the same place.
- Curves are easier to make than the straight lines and perfect circles of manuscript.
- Less fine motor development is required of cursive. Because the letters connect, the step of picking the pencil up and down between letters is eliminated.
- Cursive writing is faster for the same reason.

Cursive writing encourages reading skills.

- In the Montessori approach, children begin the skills of reading and writing *at the same time* when they work with the sandpaper letters. Writing then usually precedes reading as they practice formation of the letters while learning their sounds.
- Cursive words show that sounds are *connected* to make a word. This encourages blending of sounds within words, which is a foundation of reading.
- The connected letters in cursive words also help children develop left to right directionality for writing and reading.
- There is a clear beginning and end of words in cursive.
- Better spacing within and between words
- It's a quick and easy step for children to recognize manuscript letters once they've learned cursive, so they're easily able to transition into the manuscript reading materials.

Cursive writing helps with common errors in letter reversals.

- When children are learning to write b,d,p,and q in manuscript, they're essentially learning one shape that can be turned four different ways and be four different letters. This leads to a lot of confusion in reading and writing. Children who learn cursive first don't struggle with this because each letter is distinct.
- Because of this, schools such as the Shelton School (Joyce Pickering) use cursive exclusively because it helps children with learning differences.

Children learn cursive with joy at this age!

- Cursive handwriting was something our kindergartners always looked forward to with excitement, and now the younger children will be able to begin handwriting with even more joy.

Disadvantages of Manuscript First

- Causes segmentation as muscles stiffen between letters rather than flowing
- Asks children to do a more difficult task first due to the fine motor requirements. This can lead to stress and avoidance of handwriting.
- Children may be resistant to learning cursive when older.

- Learning cursive when older “causes speed and legibility to revert to first grade levels.” Montessori Learning Center
- “Muscle memory that is learned first will last a lifetime.” (Logic of English)
- Children generally revert back to manuscript or a blend of manuscript and cursive.

Why do people resist cursive first?

- Myth that it’s obsolete in our culture (often combined with a belief that all handwriting is obsolete)
- Myth that it’s more difficult-often based on our own experiences
- Lack of comfort in our own cursive skills as teachers
 - I had to relearn!
 - Use slow and careful modeling, and practice a lot.
- Mistaken belief that teachers will have to completely change their classrooms.
 - Do you need to change out all your classroom work to cursive? No! Cursive is for writing; manuscript is for reading. (Of course children who write in cursive will also be able to read it, and children who read in manuscript will also learn to write it!)
- Pressure from parents to prepare students to exit Montessori for traditional classrooms.
 - We follow Montessori philosophy, which is based on sound child development practices. We don’t change Montessori curriculum to bend to parental pressure.

- We're preparing children for life, not for public kindergarten.
- Some parents may mistakenly believe that learning cursive first will delay reading, when it actually helps build better reading skills. Cursive writing "stimulates the brain to build pathways for better reading, writing, and yes, later on, keyboarding." (Montessori Learning Center)

Resources: How to Make the Change to Cursive First

- I want to do it! Now what. . .
- Language is the most diverse area of Montessori classrooms, but most can easily follow these steps:
- Begin with cursive sandpaper letters.
- Use cursive with any initial/final/medial sound work.
- Movable Alphabet- Manuscript or cursive? Your choice! Some schools continue to use cursive until the child begins reading work. Some make the switch here to manuscript.
- Give a lesson on recognition of manuscript letters (could use MA letters, SL, or cards). This is much easier than people think! Most letters are easy to match.
- Go into manuscript for reading.
- During the transition year, first show the beautiful cursive sandpaper letters in group and tell the children

they will learn to write these. For children who have been working in manuscript already, give those quick lessons in matching cursive to manuscript, and then begin cursive writing. This will be a little more labor-intensive at the beginning of the year, but children will quickly get into the new routine.

- Do add more cursive to your classroom with name cards, calendar, snack boards etc.
- Manuscript formation can still be taught later in Primary, after the child has reached a strong level of mastery with cursive writing.

For further reading:

- *Discovery of the Child* by Maria Montessori
- “Why Teach Cursive First?” logicofenglish.com
- “Why Cursive First?” montessoriutah.com
- “Biological and Psychological Benefits of Learning Cursive First” psychologytoday.com
- “The Benefits of Teaching Cursive First” abeka.com
- “The Benefits of Cursive Writing” home-school.com
- “Brain Benefits of Learning to Write in Cursive” brainbalancecenters.com
- “The Benefits of Cursive Go Beyond Writing” nytimes.com

Closing Thoughts

“Indeed, writing is one of the easiest and most delightful of all the conquests made by the child.” *Maria Montessori*

Contact me:

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Email for parents: Primary Language Curriculum

Dear Primary Parents,

I have an exciting announcement about our Primary language curriculum. This year we are switching to the authentic Montessori approach of teaching cursive handwriting first! Here are a few of the reasons why:

Cursive writing is easier for young children. This may seem counterintuitive to all of us who learned cursive in third grade, but we're teaching it during the sensitive period for handwriting. Maria Montessori discovered more than 110 years ago that children were able to learn cursive more easily because all of the lowercase letters begin in the same place (the bottom, which is where children naturally start), and curved lines are easier for children to write than straight lines. Another reason it's easier is because cursive requires less fine motor control than manuscript since the pencil doesn't have to be lifted up and down between letters when writing words.

Cursive writing encourages reading skills. In the Montessori approach, children begin the skills of reading and writing at the same time when they work with the sandpaper letters. Writing then usually precedes reading as they practice formation of the letters while learning their sounds. As they begin writing short phonetic words in cursive, they're better able to see that words are made up of connected sounds. This encourages blending of sounds within words, which is a foundation of reading. The connected letters in cursive words also help children develop left to right directionality for writing and reading, and there is a clear beginning and end of words in cursive. It's a quick and easy step for children to recognize manuscript letters once they've learned cursive, so they're easily able to transition into the manuscript reading materials.

Cursive writing helps with common errors in letter reversals. When children are learning to write b,d,p,and q in manuscript, they're essentially learning one shape that can be turned four different ways and be four different letters/sounds. This leads to a lot of confusion in reading and writing. Children who learn cursive first don't struggle with this because each letter is distinct.

Children learn cursive with joy at this age! Cursive handwriting was something the kindergartners always looked forward to with excitement, and now the younger children will be able to begin handwriting with even more ease and joy.

Some questions you may have:

What about returning children?

For returning children who were learning manuscript, they will continue on their current reading path, and they will begin learning cursive handwriting. The teachers will give a few quick lessons to help children recognize the cursive letters (again, much easier than you might think), and then the children will begin cursive writing. I anticipate a lot of excitement!

Will they learn manuscript at all?

Yes! We've always taught both manuscript and cursive in Primary; we're just switching the order. Now when children are really strong in their cursive writing, teachers will introduce proper manuscript formation. Of course all of the children will learn manuscript letter sounds because that's what they'll still see for reading work.

Be sure to look at the beautiful cursive sandpaper letters on display in the Primary classrooms at your upcoming parent meetings, and you can look forward to seeing your little ones come home and show you their cursive in the coming months and years! Please let me know if you have any questions. I'd love to discuss this further with you!

Warm regards,

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