What to Do When Your Kid isn't Being Taught to Write AT ALL

It's here, it's there, it's everywhere in the United States (and many other countries, too)—the educational "disease" that affects handwriting. Call it "Never-Been-Taught-itis."

"Never-Been-Taught-itis" in handwriting has been going around for long enough that your children and grandchildren have probably caught it from their teachers—who may well have caught it from their own schoolteachers, who acquired it when they themselves were children.

BY KATE GLADSTONE

WHAT'S GOING ON?

The following scenes replay themselves daily, in schools and homes and neighborhoods across America:

- Children are daily asked to write, at school and elsewhere. They are issued keyboards, but often are not taught how to write the alphabet letters by hand—even though they are still required to use pen/cil and paper for classwork, quizzes, essays on standardized tests, and other writing. In too many schools, they are praised for the inevitably laborious and usually illegible (or barely decipherable) results, "so that they will feel good about being writers" (direct quote from one district's required teacher-training seminar in "building confidence for written self-expression").
- After months or years of this attitude, children—and even some teachers—may think that competent handwriting cannot matter. Worse, they may think that competent handwriting is impossible—because they have never seen handwriting done competently. One second-grade girl's father wondered why she wasn't upset that she couldn't read her own writing. She calmly explained to him: "Writing clear[ly] is a computer thing, not a people thing." It turned out that she meant that only computers could form letters well or fast, largely because the only adults she'd seen writing by hand were a couple of her schoolteachers—even then, only for a few minutes at a time, with lots of stumbles along the way. Her brother, in fourth grade, added that "even teachers can't write nice[ly] without a computer, not even when they're supposedly teaching us how. So, obviously handwriting can't be done by real people!")
- In the United States, Canada, and some other countries, most people below age 35 can no longer read the cursive script of earlier generations. Although it's fashionable to blame this new flavor of illiteracy on curricula (such as Common Core in the United States) that neglect or minimize the study of handwriting in any form, that cannot be the full explanation—because the States' millions of "cursive non-readers" include millions in their 20s and 30s, who went to school and even finished college long before Common Core was created. Cursive's non-readers also include some even older folks. I am in my mid-50s and was taught rigorously from cursive penmanship copybooks, but, at the time and for decades afterwards, I could not read and understand the script that I was being required to look at and reproduce.

  Some non-readers of cursive, young and grown, are as I was—they haven't a clue how to read cursive even when anyone is teaching them to write it—but many more of them have actually forgotten how.

- When a school board, school district, or state board of education tries to solve these known problems by putting a handwriting curriculum in place, too often the results are weak or even counterproductive. The students' handwriting actually becomes worse—even less decipherable, and/or less fluent even if decipherable.

Curriculum may be well designed or poorly designed—but, good or bad, it is being taught and evaluated by people who themselves have questionable handwriting skills. For example, a cursive handwriting curriculum may be taught by teachers who themselves cannot read cursive (and therefore cannot decipher what they are trying to teach from)—and/or the teacher may not be able to produce a clear, fluent handwriting of any kind. The father of one of my students actually observed his son's third-grade teacher pointing to a cursive alphabet chart and saying: "It's time to learn the cursive capital T. I'm not sure I can write this one, but I'll try."

Today's children and young folks, in other words, are often taught by people whose own most recent training in handwriting was in their own childhoods: usually taught by teachers whose own most recent training in handwriting had likewise been in their own long-ago childhoods, often under teachers whose own most recent training had similarly been as children. This is now true of most people making decisions on handwriting—at every level from the classroom to the district and beyond.

If people taught arithmetic as they often "teach" handwriting, most of us would finish school—even college or graduate school—unable to add, subtract, or count very reliably. Worse, most of us would assume that this was normal and fine, because we would seldom or never meet anyone our age who actually could do those things.

WHAT TO DO

Wherever "Never-Been-Taught-itis" is epidemic, the job of competent teaching falls to you (the parent, grandparent, or other person in charge). Most often, especially when children and pre-teens are at risk, the person in charge will need to be a trusted parent or grandparent, so what follows is written on that assumption.

- If your child is still in school and if *any* effort is being made in his or her classroom to teach handwriting, do not begin this project during the school year. No matter what is being neglected or mistaught, a teacher will probably resent perceived parental interference. Besides, your child will likely rebel against getting extra

schoolwork at home in addition to regular classroom assignments.

So, if at all possible, launch your family's handwriting improvement project during a long school vacation. In the United States and Canada, the last month of summer vacation usually works well. Children do not have schoolwork at that time but are beginning once again to think about school. Another good time is the winter vacation between terms.

- Make handwriting improvement a family project, rather than targeting just the children in your family while the adults seemingly don't bother about how they write. It is much easier for children to care about what their parents want when the children see that the parents want it for themselves, too.

  Call a family meeting, explain why handwriting matters (if you're reading this article, you probably are interested enough in handwriting to have some powerful explanations ready), and explain that you are not only out to improve their handwriting, but you are also committed to improving your own. If necessary, create an incentive plan. Perhaps announce that the entire family will share in a special treat every Sunday...as long as everyone in the family, including yourself, has done at least two handwriting lessons since the previous Sunday.
- You can often raise your child's motivation by providing a choice of handwriting books/resources and methods to work with—especially if your selection of materials and methods includes a range of permissible options. Different books may show allowable ways to size and space your writing, different allowable ways to for various letters, and so on.

  Even if you are in love with one particular form or style—I am a huge fan of italic—notice, and point out to your children, that different styles may each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Also, point out how often different authors' books, even within the same style, may present somewhat different acceptable ways of doing such things as joining letters. Even a particular book or series will often present more than one way of being right. My current favorite handwriting improvement resources (both for overall style and for the differing ranges of options offered within each style) are the Getty-Dubay Handwriting Success materials at handwritingsuccess.com and the Barchowsky Fluent Handwriting materials at BFHhandwriting.com—but you and your family are likely to find your own favorites.
- Work through the same book as your child for 20 minutes each day, time that can be broken up into shorter sessions. Do this every day if possible, but at least twice a week. Make sure you are always at least one page (or one lesson, chapter, or whatever) ahead of your child. If your child is very young and will be working on a book meant for elementary students, you will probably also want to put yourself through a higher-level book or resource in the same program or series. For example, if you and your child are working with Getty-Dubay Book A, for kindergarten, you will also want to work on your own with their adult-level volume titled *Write Now*.)

READING CURSIVE

No matter what style of handwriting you work with, it is essential to make sure that a child can read cursive—simply because we cannot count on going through life without ever seeing cursive.

Learning to read cursive, if one is properly taught, takes far less time than learning to write it, too—and the "superpower of cursive reading" (as one student called it) can be taught as soon as a child can reads print.

The easiest way to learn to read cursive is to see how cursive happened: how these letters gradually arose as variations on originally simpler and more recognizable forms. At left, you'll see a sketch I use to make sense of reading the cursive *G*.

A good basic resource for this kind of information is the free four-page "Recognizing Looped

Cursive" kit: originally produced by Handwriting Success, and currently downloadable from Exodus Books at exodusbooks.com/Samples/CEP/readloop_compare.pdf.

Because most cursive is very far from "textbook-perfect," expose children to a wide variety of cursive script by creating an "alphabet album." Obtain a blank notebook or photo album with at least 52 pages (one for each capital and lower-case letter), and fill each page with as many different examples as possible of that letter: from handwritten (even hand-scribbled) notes, cursive fonts, cursive logos/labels on products, from internet scans of historical documents, etc. On each page, sort them from the neatest to the messiest, from the simplest to the most elaborate. Finding and sorting perhaps a hundred different samples of cursive *G* (or *r*, or whatever) ensures that your child will not likely be stymied by the hundred-and-first.

For even more practice, take any paragraph or page of reading material and change its fonts. Keep the first sentence in a print font, but put each successive sentence into a slightly more elaborate, slightly more cursive font than the last. As seen in the example above left, this gradually acclimates the reader to more and more features of cursive, until he or she is reading cursive by the end of the paragraph or page.

The epidemic of "Never-Been-Taught-itis" is unlikely to vanish in our lifetime—but it can be cured (or, better, prevented) when we realize that it won't go away on its own.