Hands

by Beverley Blount

Tips for right-handed parents with left-handed children...and left-handed parents with right-handed children...and for all of our children and, all of our teachers!

I often find that parents may need some kind of ‘manual’ to help them cope with a child whose dominant hand is the opposite of the rest of his/her family, and especially to help protect their child in an environment of opposites.

This was made clear to me one morning on a flight from Los Angeles to Mexico City. A young mother was sitting next to me with her two young sons (probably 4 – 5 ½) sitting across the aisle from us. They were constantly popping out of their seats to show her the coloring books they were working on, coloring the pages and writing their names on the pages. The youngest one was doing a fair job for his age on his work, but the oldest was having trouble staying within the lines and reversing his letters when writing his name. I couldn’t help watching, and finally the mother turned to me and said, “I don’t know what’s wrong with my oldest. He always gets everything mixed up and his little brother doesn’t.”

That was all I needed. I advised her: “The solution is easy; he is left-handed, and you are teaching him with your right hand. His little brother is right-handed, so your instructions are correct for him. Here he comes now, use your left hand to show him how to write his name.”

She did exactly that and was amazed when he immediately did his letters correctly. She colored a bit on his booklet with her left hand and he caught on right away. She turned to me, asking: “Why didn’t anyone tell me”

We talked for an hour, me giving her tips on how to help her little one.

Then she said, “Why isn’t there something that tells parents what you are telling me?” I promised her I would write one, and here it is, a helping hand pamphlet for families with cross-handed children.

FINDING OUT Before starting, it’s necessary to get rid of the words left-handed and right-handed. The proper terms are dominant hand (DH) and sub-dominant hand (SubDH), and this usage will make understanding much easier. Of course, his or her sub-dominant hand is the one that is opposite the dominant one. The next thing is to find out which is the child’s DH if it is not yet known. Something that often works for small children is to roll a ball to them 25 times and ask them to kick it back; then, throw a ball to them 25 times and ask them to throw it back. By counting the times they kick or throw it back with each hand or foot, you may get a good idea of which is his/her DH. They may be very dexterous with both hands, but usually, they kick with their dominant foot. Now, when their DH is known for sure, some planning must be done. If their DH is the same as everyone else’s in the family, then no one needs to worry anymore; however, if their DH is different from everyone else’s then changes need to be made in some of the family techniques.

First, establish where the child with the opposite DH is in the family structure. There can be many different positions (such as the oldest sibling, middle sibling, and smallest sibling), and the parents themselves may not have the same DH. Wherever our target child is, everyone in the family, especially the parents, needs to know that they must be careful to recognize what hand they are using whenever showing something to him or her.

An important rule when dealing with a child who uses the opposite hand from her parents or siblings is that people showing the child something must use their own hands, as if they have the same DH as the child. (Don’t worry that it looks and feels a bit awkward; children feel an immense sense of relief when they realize that we have the same problem trying to use our opposite hand as they do trying to copy our hand.)

Try using your child’s DH for a day or so, or make a game with the rest of the family to do things with their SubDH. It can be fun, and will show the other children what difficulties their brother or sister faces or classroom peers experience when trying to copy someone using the reverse hand. It also will give a huge load of confidence to the ‘odd man out’ when they see their family struggling to do things in reverse.

One must also be very observant of the younger child who may adore his/her older sibling and want to copy everything he or she does. I especially remember a little right-handed girl who wanted to do everything her left-handed brother and father did. The first week of school, she dropped five small jugs of water, and I did not realize until much later that she was trying to do everything with her left hand.

Be sure that the children in the family sit where their knife-cutting hand is next to that edge of the table and sit on the side of the car where it is most comfortable to open doors and windows.

Remember that, when it comes to writing, allow plenty of space for their DH elbow and place their writing pad at a comfortable angle. Spiral workbooks can be especially difficult for left-handed children, as their hand may be resting on the spiral. Try turning the book over and start from the back if they are having this problem.

When they begin to write, sometimes it is necessary to make a small dot on the beginning of each line to help the child find exactly where he or she should start writing. Remember that our left-to-right and up to down system is not native to humanity; other cultures use op-
opposite systems such as down to up and right to left.

A bit of logical thought and observation will make life easier for the child who does not use the hand that is used by the rest of the family. It’s a question of seeing everything in reverse. The problem is much more obvious for a left-handed child in a right-handed world, but the opposite is also true: those right-handed children brought up in a left-handed family face the same problems.

It is an entirely different problem for his/her teacher who does not realize what is happening with a few children in her classroom. The teacher may be doing all her teaching by writing on the chalkboard with the opposite DH of some of her students. If you hold up your hand on a chalkboard and write the letter a with your right hand, the left-handed child will write it with exactly the same movement, and it will come out backward. Try it yourself. That will happen with all the letters (except a few, like I and l).

The child will make this mistake repeatedly until:

1. He or she is pronounced dyslexic or with learning or reading problems, and sent to therapy.

2. Somehow his/her brain sorts it out for itself, and he/she starts writing with inverse movements, and the letters come out correctly. Often children have to work with the hand curled around over the top of the letter.

3. The teacher realizes what is wrong, sits down beside the child and gives the reading and writing lessons, matching her hand to the child’s DH.

4. Children become so confused that they have problems reading and writing for the rest of their lives.

5. Or, left-handed children are taught with some of the many new writing instruments designed for left-handed children (and, if possible, by a left-handed teacher).

**EXAMPLES** My husband went to a strict European school many years ago where left-handed children were not allowed to write with their left hand. He was amazed that our Montessori daughters learned to write painlessly and with beautiful styles all of their own. He still writes with his right hand and draws with his left.

“No,” she replied, evidently surprised by the question.

Another long silence followed her answer as we all looked at each other. Again, I ventured another question, “Is somebody in your family left-handed?”

She looked at me in surprise, a strange expression on her face. “Yes,” she faltered, amazed, “All my family are left-handed.”

Her mother called me early the next morning. “What happened to Elizabeth? She came home yesterday afternoon and cried all evening. When we went to bed, she was still crying.”

A young friend of mine (now a well-known radio broadcaster) recounted some of the difficulties he has had throughout his life. He says that one of his pet peeves is that in restaurants, he must invert all the tableware, and the worst is that every time they serve him coffee, the handle of the cup is always pointed to the right.

Years ago, when I was giving the Montessori Early Childhood teacher training, one of the young trainees (22 years old) sat back on her heels after she finished presenting the red rods, her first material in her sensorial exam. Her finished efforts brought a complete silence from all of us. She had done the entire exercise the reverse of the way it had been presented to the class.

Finally I broke the silence, “Elizabeth,” I said, amazed, “Are you left-handed?”

“I think that all of us who live and work with children realize that children, who are surrounded by parents and peers who use opposite hands, face enormous difficulties in a reverse-handed world.

The daughter of my Montessori kindergarten director is left-handed. Her mother followed all the tips I am recounting here, and she is now in high school and has never shown any problem with writing, inverting letters, or reading.

A similar thing happened last week. I was making some copies behind my elementary director’s chair when I noticed the writing of one of the two therapists of our special-needs children who, was reporting to our director.

“Sara,” I told her, “you must be very careful how you hold your pen and be sure to use your right hand when working with right-handed children.”

She looked at me in surprise, “But Beverley, I am right-handed, although my daughter is left-handed!”

I turned my hand around in my mind. Sure enough, she was writ-

Today, after many, many years, that little right-handed girl who dropped so many little jugs so long ago because she was copying the movements of her left-handed family, is now a Montessori guide herself. When I told her mother (also a Montessori guide) about this article, the first thing she asked me was: “Why didn’t you tell me about her trying to use her brother’s hand? It would have helped my family so much.”

I had to admit that I did not know about the problems mentioned here, but I did know to teach with the dominant hand. This mother and Montessori guide had taken my original course 25 years ago, where using the dominant hand was stressed. She had even gone on to take the elementary Montessori course as well as many others.

She had taught all these years and had never experienced the simple techniques I am writing about in this article.