

# Put Your Left Hand In....

Summary of information by Stacey Rayment B.Ed. M. Ed.

## Key points:

- Left Right awareness can be learned at any age
- Teach left and right SEPARATELY
- Only focus on their

Knowing our left from right is a concept which can be taught and understood during the preschool years and yet it is something which people can struggle with into adulthood.

So how do we learn our left and right? The exact process is not totally understood however, it has been linked to the concept of Laterality. Laterality is the internal self-awareness of the left and right sides of the body. It is also linked to an awareness of a body midline, or an invisible line which divides our body in half. This is an important concept linked to learning left from right because it reminds us to **first teach children the concept of left and right using their own body, before moving onto objects such as shoes.**

You can determine whether your child is aware of their body midline by watching them run. Do they move the same arm and leg or do they alternate? When your child colors with crayons does the left-hand reach for crayons on the left and color on the left side of the page only passing a crayon to the right hand to draw on the right side of the page? This is a normal developmental phase which children pass through around the age of 3 when they develop hand dominance.

## Left Right Literacy

Left and right laterality is perceptual skill that is foundational to literacy and math concepts. In English we read and write from left to right. Directions for travel, process and printing are easier when these concepts are automatic. Research indicates that visual-spatial abilities contribute to a larger extent to children's verbal number skills than verbal abilities which is important for the conception of early mathematics assessments and interventions. In addition, the role of spatial skills, notably spatial orientation, were important for mathematical development. Visual spatial skills have also been shown to be related to motor coordination and handwriting skills.

## The Impact of Left-Right Confusion

Left-right confusion can affect schoolwork and daily lives in many ways. Here are some examples.

### Math

- To understand math in the most basic way, kids must think of numbers as they exist on an imaginary number line. They need to have a sense that "4" is to the "right" of "2" and "-4" is to the "left" of "2."

- Kids may struggle with math computations because they don't understand that they need to start on the right and "carry over" numbers to the left.
- Older students may struggle with graphing, since they must use direction to plot points.

### Reading and Writing

- Left-right confusion can cause mix-ups with similar letters and numbers like *b* and *d*, or *6* and *9*, long past the early learning period.
- Children might read a word starting from the right instead of the left. They might read *t-a-c* instead of *c-a-t*.
- Kids may be delayed at developing a clearly dominant hand or side of the body. When learning to write, they may switch the pencil between hands.

### Daily Living Skills

- Kids who don't have an internal sense of left and right can't use it to gauge where other things are or should go in relation to themselves. Directions like "Watch out for that bicycle to your right!" or "Put the fork to the left of the plate" can be confusing or meaningless.
- Learning how to tie shoes, which requires instructions like "right over left," can be challenging.
- Reading maps, following directions and navigating a car or bike could be tricky. The GPS may say to "Take a right at the light," but what does that mean?
- It could be tough to play games and develop skills like throwing, catching or kicking a ball and running, hopping or skipping.

## How to help

Research in the field of Special Education has shown that the age of teaching left and right is not as important as how the concept is taught and the recommendation is to **not teach the terms together**. Instead, determine your child's hand and body side dominance and use that side as a starting point. If you are unsure of your child's body dominance (they will have a dominant eye, ear and hand side) ask them to listen to hear the ocean inside a shell and watch which ear they raise it too. Ask your child to cross their legs and watch which leg they place on top. These are generally considered reliable indicators. With older children start with the side that they use to hold a pencil.

## Activities to teach dominant side first

- Tickling or Squeezing – ask your child to raise their right (or left if this is their dominant) arm and then gently tickle them underneath. Only tickle on their dominant side and they will quickly learn the name for that side.
- When holding hands gently squeeze their hand for example "I'm going to hold your right hand while we cross the road". Your child will connect the gentle squeeze with the term right.
- For right side dominant children: Add a handshake to any compliments that you are offering along with a phrase that you will repeat each time, "That was a great, let's shake the good right hand for a job well done!" While you're teaching this one, demonstrate how to make eye contact during the shake.

- For Left hand dominant children: Add a high 5 to any compliment that you are offering along with a phrase that you will repeat each time, “Lift the left for that good job!”
- **MASTERY and AUTOMATICITY** should be achieved before you integrate the non-dominant vocabulary into your practice.

## Learning Opportunities

- Dressing – children of this age love to be independent. Shoes are a great place to start with learning left from right. If your child can recognize their name write half inside the left shoe, and half inside the right. They will recognize their name correctly when they look inside their shoes because they will be able to see their name. If they can't yet read, half a smiley face works also.
- When helping your child to dress always begin with their dominant side “step in with your right foot, slide your right arm through the sleeve”.
- Dominant shoe – print a large letter R or L inside their dominant shoe only and leave the other shoe blank to reinforce the dominant side only.
- Young children cannot use the feel of their shoes as a reminder and many parents report that their children happily wear their shoes on the wrong feet.
- For older children who are still struggling to learn their left from right you can introduce the familiar trick of using their hands. Have children place their hands palm down in front of them with the thumbs touching. The left hand looks like the letter L and explain this reminds them it is a left.
- Singing songs such as the Hokey Pokey is a fun way to introduce the concept of left and right to children. The movement involved helps muscle memory develop.
- Body features. Children who are older may have a freckle, mole or scar on a side of their body. Many adults recall this is useful in reminding them of their left and right side. Children find this useful as it involves their body and a powerful reminder.
- Finally, many children are now learning left and right from listening to the GPS in their parent's cars. The familiar “turn right in 100m” followed by the reinforcement of the car turning right assists in learning this concept.

Learning left from right can be a confusing concept which requires repetition and patience. As you adopt phrases to cue the left or right repeat them over and over and over until your child automatically copies you or finishes your sentence. Always use your own body to demonstrate and stand next to them rather than opposite. Finally, remember to identify their dominant side and introduce this term first.

Source: <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/visual-processing-issues/why-kids-have-trouble-learning-left-from-right>

<https://www.kidspot.com.au/school/preschool/school-readiness/best-teaching-practices-for-left-vs-right/news-story/76041c6cf8dbeb13c540fb5c9954c2d0> <https://www.yourtherapysource.com/blog/2018/09/21/why-is-body-awareness-important-2/>