



raising your left-handed child

By Kelly Eden-Calcott*

Left-handedness isn't something that is discussed much, but if your child is one of the 10-15% born as a 'leftie', it's worth spending a bit of time considering how you can make life in a right-dominant world a little easier.

Left-handedness has been ridiculed, avoided, even hated and feared, around the world, with negative 'left' connotations seeping into languages, cultures and religions. It seems odd to us now, but it wasn't that many generations ago that New Zealand's school teachers were forcing our left-handed grandparents to complete their writing with their right hands and then punishing them for messy, inefficient work. Even stranger is the fact that in world history (and some countries still today) anything left was considered evil, untrustworthy, unclean or sneaky. The proper name for left-handedness, sinistrality, comes from the Latin word sinistra and – as you've probably worked out – is where we get our word sinister from.

So is being left-handed really that bad? Many researchers have asked the same thing and it seems that, although there can be frustrations, left-handedness can actually be an advantage.

benefits of left-handedness

Studies have shown left-handed people to be quicker at learning languages, more creative, musical, and mathematical, to have better spatial and visual memory skills, be quicker thinkers in games and sports, and more flexible at using both hands for tasks.

An unusually high number of successful people have been left-handed. The sporting world is full of them, and in the world of art, Escher, da Vinci, Michelangelo and Rembrandt were all lefties. Five of the past seven presidents of the US, including Barack Obama, are left-handed.

Lately, studies have been looking at the brain to find out why left-handedness makes such a difference. One answer is found deep in a part of the brain called the corpus callosum. Many tasks rely on this part of the brain because the corpus callosum allows messages to pass from the right to left hemispheres (sides) of the brain. In left-handed people, the corpus callosum can be 11% larger. This is perhaps because left-handers get more practice using their non-dominant side. Training up your non-dominant side (called the cross-training effect) makes your dominant side stronger.

genetic beginnings

So how do you know if you have a left-handed child? Although some children are strongly right- or left-handed from a very young age, many preschoolers don't seem to mind what hand they use. Your preschooler may be happy to draw left- or right-handed on different days, or even both at the same time. This is normal and doesn't mean they are ambidextrous (can use both hands with equal efficiency). Many children don't show a clear handedness until age 3 or 4. In saying that though, handedness isn't something they are choosing. It's completely predetermined by our genes,

and left-handedness seems to pass down the dad's side of the family. But even if mum and dad are both left-handed, they still only have a small chance of having a left-handed child (i.e. if they had ten children, only two or three would be left-handed).

left or right?

Left or right dominance is not a simple thing. You may have noticed yourself that you write with your right hand, but prefer to pour the jug with your left. In fact, we have a dominant eye, hand, foot, and even an ear that you hear better with, but we use both left and right sides and over time, we develop favourite sides for particular tasks.

So before you jump in and buy left-handed scissors for your child, watch carefully and observe which side they tend to prefer to use for different activities.

little annoying right-handed things

- Pens on chains at banks
- Multiple choice tests with boxes on the right
- Left breast pockets on shirts (easier to use when on the right)
- Knitting and crochet patterns are backwards for left-handers
- Dog training schools making you walk your dog on your right
- People telling lefties they are doing things backwards.

eye dominance test

Point at an object, then close one eye. Does the object move? If it stays still, then that is your dominant eye.

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ages & stages

Here are some ways to remove frustrations for your left-handed child.

under-5s

- Large triangular-shaped pencils help encourage good pencil grip.
- Windup toys may be back-to-front so they end up unwinding. Choose windup toys that work in both directions.
- If you are right-handed, teach skills such as shoe-tying facing your child (like in a mirror).
- Buttons and zips may feel back-to-front, so extra help may be needed here.
- When baking, place tools for mixing and pouring to their left side. (Left-handers often prefer to stir in an anti-clockwise direction.)

5- to 8-years

- Scissors cannot be made universal, despite claims otherwise. Left-handed scissors must have the left blade on top when cutting.
- Left-handed kids should sit to the left side of a shared desk or next to another left-hander at school to avoid bumping elbows.

- Some musical instruments may have challenges. Guitars can be strung left-handed. Violin bowed with the right hand may feel awkward. Piano may also feel backwards for some children. Make sure your child feels comfortable with their instrument choice.
- Writing needs to be taught differently for a left-hander to avoid incorrect posture, smudged work and pencil grip. Watch the tips video on www.lefthandersday.com on the left-handed children page. Left-handed writing skills by Mark Stewart is a helpful book (your library may have a copy).

9- to 12-years

- Computer keyboards and the computer mouse can both be switched to left-handed ones to avoid strain.
- Vegetable peelers, serrated knives and some other kitchen tools are right-hand biased. There are plenty of sites online where you can buy left-handed versions. Don't let left-handedness be an excuse for the kids not helping in the kitchen, wink wink.
- Woodwork equipment and other tools are also set up for right-handed use, so check any safety issues before your child uses them.
- By this age, a hooked or incorrect writing style may have been developed. To correct it can be tricky, but it is possible and worth the effort to reduce hand and arm strain, as workloads increase at high school.