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Pay for lessons in touch-typing. It will give a huge boost to the confidence of children with poor handwriting or special needs, says Eleanor Mills

'Nice story. But it will be a good day for Eleanor's readers when she learns to type," my English teacher wrote when I was 10. Handwriting has never been my strong suit — my brain would always race faster than I could get my thoughts down, making work look scrappy. When I was 16, my parents sent me to learn touch-typing. I hated it — but the course worked. Not only did I earn my living in student holidays working as a temp but being able to type as fast as I can think has been a mighty boon as a journalist.

These days, with so much of modern life revolving around keyboards, touch-typing is an even more important skill for our children to master. But they don't learn it in school. Even if the school claims to offer it, pupils tend to learn from free internet-based programmes that aren't good at increasing their accuracy. As a touch-typing evangelist, I've been intending for years to teach my two girls — aged 9 and 11 — to get tapping, but, as these things do, it kept slipping. Last holidays, however, we took the plunge.

In a room as narrow as a railway carriage, lined with desks and keyboards, the girls were taught the basics: "Hit E and go down to D," intoned Amanda McLeod, a handwriting expert and authority on special educational needs who runs the McLeod Centre for Learning in London. Her approach is multi-sensory and she is full of mnemonics such as "U, I, O pounds" (look at a keyboard and it will make sense) to help children get to grip with letter positions.



The writer's daughters, Alice, 11, and Laura, 9, on a touch-typing course at the McLeod Centre for Learning in London

It's a qwerty job, but worth doing

These lessons are not for the faint-hearted; McLeod is strict — any misspelt word must be repeated three times and consistent mistakes, such as confusing V and C, are repeated until it is right. The sessions last an hour and cost £40 each but she helps the children concentrate by switching them frequently between tasks: one minute they are killing monsters when they hit certain letters, the next making music with other combinations or typing common words such as "with" or "and", interspersed with copying.

She interacts with them constantly and encouragingly but is a stickler for accuracy and *not looking down*. Posture is also crucial (no leaning back, hunching or sticking elbows out) as is the height of the hands — there should be a smooth downward trajectory from elbow, to wrist to hand.

Experts say that it is better for children to learn in small groups. "Touch-

typing lessons teach correct finger positioning, the correct keys, promote correct key pressure and the right rhythm, which increases speed," says McLeod. "For all those variables to be monitored, the groups need to be small and intensive." When is the best age to learn? McLeod says she has taught children as young as four, but eight or nine is optimum. "It is important to catch them before bad habits set in — that is particularly important for children who use keyboards often," she says.

Increasingly, touch-typing is seen as a key tool for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia, poor handwriting and those with visual perception problems. Indeed, children certified dyslexic by an educational psychologist can now use a keyboard in exams, providing their speed is above 30 words a minute with 90% accuracy.

For this reason, McLeod is sent many children who need to learn in

time for the 11-plus and common entrance. But touch-typing is not a magical cure. Those with dyspraxia, dyslexia and hypermobility, or problems with working memory and speed of processing, will not pick up touch-typing as quickly.

McLeod's multi-sensory approach helps, but learning to touch-type is a serious commitment — an intensive week of lessons and then 15 minutes' practice a day for 60 days with perhaps some refresher lessons, too.

Children with special needs should persevere. Once they can type, the confidence they gain can boost massively their academic performance, not to mention the legibility of their efforts.

It strikes me as crazy that all children aren't taught to touch-type as a matter of course — but until that time McLeod, or someone who follows a similar regime, is probably the best option.

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