

My child writes numbers backwards

Is it normal for a child to write numbers backwards? Depends on their age.

“I am the father of a 7-year-old son who has had difficulty writing numbers since preschool. He recognizes numbers in books or games, but he often writes numbers like 3 or 7 backwards. I noticed that my son is left handed and I am wondering if this has anything to do with it. I am also wondering if he is perhaps inattentive or less diligent because he is a boy. Is this normal? How can I help him?”

The number system only has ten symbols (0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9). Therefore, we might think that it is very easy to remember and write them down. However, recognizing and writing numbers are two very different activities. Although they both require the child to be able to look at all the elements, writing numbers also requires significant manual abilities to control the writing motion. Children therefore need time and practice to be able to write numbers automatically.

Why does my child write numbers backwards?

Writing numbers backwards is not related to the child's sex, the hand they use to write or an attention issue. It doesn't matter if you are a boy or a girl, left handed or right handed, backwards numbers have been observed in all groups. Children write numbers backwards even when they are paying attention. In fact, writing numbers backwards is a regular phenomenon observed in children until the age of 5-6 years old, which is explained by the fact that children apply a writing rule depending on the number's orientation. Certain numbers face left (like 1, 2, 3, 7, 9), while other numbers face right (like 4, 5, 6).

The numbers 0 and 8 cannot be written backwards. If a child usually or always draws right to left, they could end up writing numbers backwards when they should be written from left to right, and inversely.

My child is 3-4 years old. They are in preschool.

The child is in the process of discovering numbers. They are learning how to recognize numbers. Writing numbers is still difficult. If the child is interested in writing numbers, it is normal if they are illegible or written backwards. If the child writes numbers backwards, there is nothing to worry about. They just need to be shown the natural example again in a fun and entertaining way.

My child is 5-6 years old. They are in kindergarten.

The child is learning numbers. They are learning how to write numbers, but control is still difficult. At this age, it is common to see numbers written backwards in children without any particular difficulties. This will not lead to difficulties later on. Around 20% of productions from children aged 5-6 years old are written backwards from right to left. More than 88% of children aged 5-6 years old write a number backwards at least one time out of 16. The number 3 is most commonly written backwards (up to 60%). Then comes the numbers 9, 7, 1, 2, 5, 6, 4 (with nearly 10% for 4). If the child writes numbers backwards, you should discuss this with their teacher: they will know if the proportion of numbers written backwards is normal. At this age, there is no need to overly worry. You should naturally show the correct example in a friendly and fun discussion. Practice writing numbers is important: this can be done by writing on a piece of paper, chalkboard, large board as well as in the air. Close your eyes, hold your child's hand and make them write a number in the air. Then try and guess which number it is. The inverse is also interesting in order to provide a model.

My child is 6-7 years old. They are in first grade.

The child is progressively internalizing how to write numbers. Backward writing occurs during first grade, but it practically disappears by the end of the year. We estimate that less than 5% of writing is done backwards. It is normal that, sometimes, a child may hesitate on how to write numbers and still write backwards sometimes. If they do not have any other difficulties in math or in terms of their motor skills, there is no need to worry. You should remain attentive regarding their evolution over the course of the first couple of months of 2nd grade.

My child is over 8 years old. They are in 2nd grade or higher.

After 8 years old, the child has internalized how to write numbers. Writing backwards has practically disappeared overall. If there is still hesitation, the child might need specialized help for writing numbers. If writing difficulties are accompanied by difficulties in math, general motor or graphic difficulties, and/or difficulties in terms of writing letters (writing letters backwards), the child could need a speech therapy evaluation.

In summary, it is important to remember:

Boys and girls both write numbers backwards.

Lefties and righties both write numbers backwards.

Writing backwards is not related to attention issues.

Writing backwards is related to age: at 5-6 years old (kindergarten), it is frequent and normal to write numbers backwards. However, as of 1st grade, writing backwards progressively disappears. In 2nd grade, it is very rare to write numbers backwards.

The number 3 is the digit that is most frequently written backwards in children ages 5-6 years old.