

# Supporting Young Writers *by Jennifer Gonzalez*



*Providing early writing experiences for children allows them to experience the joy associated with writing while mastering key aspects of literacy.*

--J.A. Schickendanz, Professor of Education, Boston University

*We know that learning to read and write is essential for a child's success in school and in later life. The challenge for families and teachers is to understand the development of these skills in order to assist children in their learning.*

## What does research tell us?

The picture that emerges from literacy research in these first years of children's reading and writing is one that emphasizes wide exposure to print and to developing concepts about it and its forms and functions. Children need regular and active interactions with print. Classrooms and homes filled with print, literacy-rich play, storybook reading, and writing allow children to experience the joy and power associated with reading and writing while mastering basic concepts about print.

Experiences throughout early childhood affect the development of literacy. Reading, writing, and oral language are connected and develop together as young children interact with their environment. When we refer to the environment, we include adults, other children, materials, and the various forms of print that children encounter such as labels, signs, and books (Mayer, 2007).

Writing is defined as "a system for conveying or recording messages through constellations of visual symbols" (Adams, 1996, p.13). Young children explore writing through drawing and scribbling. Through this exploration, they begin to understand that writing is a valuable tool for communication.

## From Scribbles to Letters

Writing skills progress on a developmental continuum. Children move from representing things with actual objects (making a train out of blocks), to using more abstract representations for their ideas such as drawing, pretend writing and, eventually, conventional writing. In order to support this process, it is necessary for adults to understand the patterns of emergent writing. It is important to note that not all children will use all of these forms of writing, nor go through the stages in order. Depending on their task (i.e., writing their name or

writing a caption to a picture), they may switch back and forth from one form of writing to another (Ranweiler, 2004).

The earliest writing of very young children includes **drawings and scribbles** that carry meaning only for them (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). For example, when referring to the scribble below, a child might explain, "This is about my cat."



Drawings and scribbles

Between the ages of three and five, children start to understand that print can be used to convey meaning to others. At this stage we see the use of **scribble-writing**,



Scribble-writing

which often has features similar to those of conventional writing, such as moving from left to right across the page,

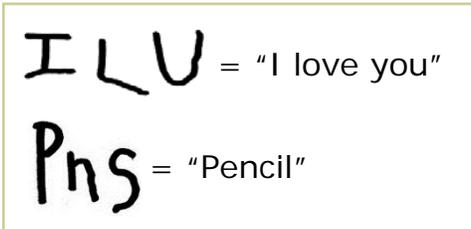


Letterlike forms

and the use of **letter-like forms**, or "mock letters" (Ranweiler, 2004).

While children are unable to formally print at this stage, they believe their marks have meaning (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz, 2008; Whitehurst & Lonigan).

Eventually, children begin to produce actual letters. Typically, the first letters a child writes are the letters in his or her first name (Ranweiler, 2004). This makes sense as these are the letters a child sees most often and the letters that have the most meaning for them. As they learn to write additional letters, we see children start to use invented spelling. This can include using only one letter to represent a word or using one letter for every sound they hear in the word. In using invented spelling, children are demonstrating their increased awareness of phonemes (the small units of sound that combine to form syllables and words). With time and support, children will ultimately employ conventional spelling.



## What can families do?

Adults can facilitate emergent writing by providing children with multiple opportunities to practice their developing skills. Some of the successful strategies used by teachers to support children's emergent writing include providing opportunities for children to use a variety of writing tools, having children practice writing their own name, and providing children with templates to help them form letters (Hawken et al., 2005). Many of the strategies that we use here at school can be adapted by parents for use at home.

## Provide materials for fine motor development.

Young children need experiences that allow for the development of fine motor skills. Activities such as stringing beads, completing puzzles, manipulating play dough, cutting with scissors, sorting buttons, and building with Legos support the small-muscle skill development needed for later writing.



To prevent children from developing an inappropriate pencil grasp, they should have strength and dexterity in their hands and fingers before beginning to use conventional writing instruments such as standard-size pencils and pens (CDE, 2010). For older toddlers and young preschoolers who are still developing the necessary strength and dexterity, offer triangular and/or thick crayons, large markers, and sidewalk chalk.

## Create opportunities to write at home.

To encourage writing at home, consider what might engage a child's existing interests. Children need authentic experiences with language and literacy materials in order to construct an understanding of the purpose and multiple uses of writing. When we ask children to learn to write primarily through the use of materials like letter tracing dittos, for example, we ask them to learn in a rote manner. Taken out of the context of play and daily life, these "learning" exercises are not authentic—and not much fun. Instead, invite children to label their drawings, paintings, and constructions with titles or captions. As children engage in pretend play, encourage them to write out restaurant orders, recipes, shopping lists, or a treasure map. "This cake is delicious! Here's a recipe card. Could you write down what you put in it so I can make it sometime?"



Supply your home with age-appropriate letter making tools (stencils, stamps, sandpaper letters), stickers, and a variety of paper and writing instruments. Be creative with storage. Try using a small suitcase or an old canvas bag to store your materials; it's compact and mobile, allowing children to use its contents anywhere in your home that they might be playing.

Offer children multiple media with which to explore letters.

- Cover a surface with shaving cream and invite children to write letters in the shaving cream with their fingers.
- On a hot day, get large paint brushes and bucket of water and encourage children to write letters on the cement.
- Write letters in the air. Using big arm strokes, demonstrate how to make several letters in the air, such as M or O. Ask children to try writing letters in the air, too. See if you can guess one another's letters.

## Be a model.

Demonstrate the effective uses of writing. Look for opportunities to draw attention to your own acts of writing such as labeling your child's coat or leaving a note for another family member. "I am going to write Mommy a note to let her know that we went to the park."



**Become a public writer.** Make lists for the grocery store, take down children's dictation, and write simple letters to relatives or friends.

**Model letter strokes.** As you write, be sure to give children the opportunity to observe letter strokes and shapes. **"P. I make one line going down, and then add a curve at the top...Yes, that part does look like a backwards 'c'."**

## Provide developmentally appropriate support and coaching.

- It is common for children to ask adults to decipher their illegible "writing." Respond to this request by saying with enthusiasm, **"You look very proud of your work! Tell me about what you wrote?"**
- Do not correct invented spelling. Rather, view the children's writing as a developmentally appropriate work in progress. Encouraging children to "write" in the way that they want to write increases their motivation and allows them to focus on the messages they want to convey.
- Offer information. When a child asks you how to write a letter or a word, consider their background knowledge and where they are currently (Ranweiler, 2004).

For a child just beginning to show interest in writing you might say:

- **"Why don't you write that in your own way of writing."**
- **"Let me see how you would write it first."**
- **"Do you remember what a T looks like?"**
- **"How do you think 'dad' is spelled?"**

For children who understand that scribble-writing and invented spelling are not the conventional ways an adult writes, you might say:

- **"Here, I'll write it on this piece of paper (sound out the word aloud as you write) and then you can copy it."**

- **"Let's look at the alphabet poster to see how to make that letter."**
- **"Well, cute is spelled like this: the /k/-/k/-/k/-/k/ sound is the letter c.../u/-/u/-/u/--right, the letter u, just like it sounds.../t/-/t/-/t/--yep, that's a t... and then there's a letter at the end of this word that doesn't make any sound at all; an e!"**



**At its most basic level, supporting children's emergent writing at home can be done as easily as capitalizing on everyday events like writing out a shopping list or writing a check. Children naturally mimic the adults in their environment; they will want to learn to write when they view writing as a meaningful way to communicate.**

**The take-home message is to intentionally use everyday opportunities with children to support their developing skills. Remember to make the learning process enjoyable. Happy writing!**

