

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Making their mark – children's early writing

Penny Tassoni

Being able to write is one of the many things that most of us take for granted. Even if we're not keen writers, we may still write out a shopping list or jot down the odd note. For children, writing is a skill that they have to learn and, like so much during their childhood, it develops gradually.

Starting to write

Children begin their journey towards writing by making marks, not by producing letters and words. Once they can sit with a meal in front of them, babies love to play with spilt food and drinks, touching them with little palms and fingers to create patterns before the spill can be mopped up. They're not just making a mess, they're making marks.

Even so, the first clear sign that children are interested in markmaking comes when they use thick crayons to make big circular and straight lines. This type of mark-making is often dismissed as scribble, but it is actually an important step in learning to write, because children are trying out new things to see what happens.

Deeper meanings

The marks children make slowly begin to have more meaning for them, and you will be able to see this by listening to what they say when they play with pens, crayons and paper.

At first, mark-making is a blend of writing and drawing, as children are keen to use their new skills. But most begin to understand the difference between drawing and writing sometime after their third birthday. They may act out 'writing' situations, especially if they have seen other people do them. This means that many children left with a pen and the shopping list may want to add items to that list rather than come up with their own. This can be

a nuisance, especially if the children's marks cover the original list, but it shows how much they value adult writing. It's so important, they want to do it the same way.

From first words to confident writing

At around four years old, children begin to write their first words – and their own name is usually the first of all. This is partly because it has huge meaning for them and also because adults tend to point out and write children's names. At first, we may simply notice that their markmaking contains a few more letters. Then, bit by bit, they learn to write their name. This is not to say that the name will be written in perfect handwriting or that all the letters will be in the right order. Even so, this is a spectacular breakthrough in the writing journey. From now on, children can 'sign' their drawings and add their name onto the bottom of cards.

The next stage of writing depends on children's knowledge of reading. As children learn about reading, letter shapes and words begin to have more meaning for them. This allows them to remember what is, after all, just a collection of shapes. Reading also allows children to work out how to write the sounds of the words that they can hear in their head. This is when adults need patience. Learning to read takes time and, while some children crack the code earlier than others, most do not really get into the swing of reading until they are six years old.

When children are learning to read, they often start to write quite simple and repetitive sentences such as 'I like to...' because they are confident about how to put these down. Try not to keep 'correcting' children about what they write at this time, as this can stop them from having a go at writing new words.

By about the age of seven or eight, children's writing moves to a different stage, in which they know what they want to write and are able to write it quite well.

Helping children's writing

There are many ways of helping children to write. First of all, it is helpful if parents and carers understand that learning to write takes a few years. Patience and support are needed over time. Children who are corrected too often or asked to write things out 'properly' can lose interest in doing it at all. On the other hand, children who enjoy the process of mark-making and writing notes, and who know that anything they produce is praised will write more often and so get better at it.

On a practical level, it is useful to provide endless supplies of paper, crayons, felt tips and – if you can bear it – paint! Do not worry about buying paper, as very young children will be happy with rolls of old wallpaper and scrap. The key is to relax and even start mark-making on your own piece of paper when children get going.

You might also like to try markmaking outdoors by getting out some chalks. Patios, walls, paths in the park and even pavements are fantastic for helping children to learn to control their movements and the chalk won't leave any permanent damage. For happy early mark-making:

- be ready to join in the drawing and painting
- look out for washable paints and felt tips
- show children how you write
- write notes and letters to your child
- avoid 'teaching' and 'correcting' children.

Handwriting is not the same as writing. It is important to understand the difference between handwriting and writing. Handwriting is about putting words down on paper, while writing is the 'thinking' of the actual words.

For young children, learning to control a pencil, pen or even paintbrush is hard. To do it, they first need to develop their hand-eye coordination, and build up the muscles and control in the hands. And children need more than just the control of their hands – they also need to be able to coordinate their arms and shoulders. Controlling these larger movements is what comes first when children are very young.

So, while young children may enjoy mark-making, we must be careful not to force them into writing small as they will find it easier if they have had the chance to work on controlling their whole arm movements. This will also help them to develop a better handwriting style later on. These larger movements are usually made by children quite naturally as they play outdoors, by throwing balls or using their arms to help them climb up a slide. When they run, jump, climb, twist and twirl, young children are actually building the muscles they need for good handwriting later on.

Helping children's handwriting

Children develop the hand skills needed to hold and control a pencil as they make everyday movements around the house rather than with paper and a pen. Folding clothes, wiping up spills and learning to dry up cups all strengthen their hands and build hand-eye coordination as well as making children feel part of the family. Look out for other everyday opportunities such as putting on coats, pouring out drinks and cooking, as these also help children's hands to develop.

As well as everyday skills, children may also enjoy playing games that need hand skills, such as 'Kerplunk' or 'Pick up sticks', and using jigsaws, building bricks or threading chunky beads onto laces. To help children develop the skills that will help their handwriting later on:

- encourage them to help around the home with odd jobs
- take time to show them how to manage buttons and zips, and to put on clothes
- play throwing and catching games together
- play games that encourage hand movements.

Some common worries

Because writing is such an important skill, it is normal that parents have the odd worry about it. Here are some of the worries they often have:

- Pencil grip: Children who are developing strange pencil grips do so because they are desperately looking for a way to control their movements. The grip used by young children will usually improve as their hand movements become more controlled, so long as they are not put under pressure to gain control by doing a lot of tracing or being expected to produce small writing. It is quite hard to change pencil grip in older children and, so long as the grip works for the child, it is often best to leave it.
- Back to front letters: Children have to rely on their memory to write letters until they become good readers. This means that nearly all children will reverse their letters early on, or miss letters out of words.
- Left-handed children: Children are born being either right-handed or left-handed and this normally shows by about three years. Left-handed children find it easier if they are writing on a slope and benefit from having opportunities to do large scale mark-making. If a child has not developed a hand preference by three years, look out for regular activities around the home where one hand is used to stabilise the child and the other is doing something active, such as drying a plate or chopping a peeled banana.
- Spelling usually becomes more accurate as children learn to read. It is worth taking a relaxed approach because, if children become anxious about how to write down a word, they may develop a habit of only writing what they

know they can spell. This leads to children writing less and, in the end, they become less imaginative writers. Even so, once children begin to read it is worth pointing out words that 'play tricks' on us in the way they are spelt – words like 'phantom', 'knight' or 'would'. Doing this can help children remember the words later on.

- Children who are not interested: Mark-making must be fun for children. Try putting out 'real' pens and paper or taking out a bucket of water and a paintbrush for children to enjoy playing with them. Try hard not to pass comments about how young children's writing looks, as this can put some children off. And remember that children need to see the adults around them writing.

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Useful resources

Helen Bromley (2006) *Making my own mark: play and writing*, London: Early Education.

DCSF (2008) *Mark Making Matters: young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development*, London: DCSF Available to download only: <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/>.

Diane Rich (2002) *More than words: children developing communication, language and literacy*, London: Early Education.

Useful contacts

The Literacy Trust www.literacy.org.uk.

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

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