

Emergent Writing



Article by Heather S. Benson

Preschool and kindergarten children develop reading and writing skills simultaneously. One area of development supports the other. It is as important for teachers to provide a variety of authentic writing experiences as it is to provide opportunities to explore and learn about reading. Incorporating writing into your daily schedule is essential to

supporting children's emergent literacy development.

Overview

Children go through developmental stages in learning to write. Children are best supported when you determine their current emergent writing skills and provide appropriate opportunities to expand them. Preschoolers and kindergarteners often have great variation in their writing experiences prior to coming to school. Some may be quite comfortable using markers and crayons and others may have had very few opportunities to use writing utensils. Think about each child as an individual and offer writing activities that match current skill levels and encourage new ones.

Learning to write asks children to use multiple physical and mental processes in one effort. Writing combines many skills and relies on development in areas not specific to writing. It requires fine motor skills –or the ability to use muscles in the fingers and hands; attention to focus for periods of time; memory to generate ideas and retrieve letters and appropriate words; and language to be able to express themselves.

Early childhood educators should also help children learn the functions of writing. It is important for children to understand that writing is a way of sharing one's ideas and knowledge; it is a method of personal communication and conveys a message that can be read at a later time.

Developing Emergent Writing Skills

Teaching Strategies

Inventive spelling is a stage in writing development. "Exposing children to standard spellings found in storybooks and classroom signs, labels, and charts is one way to help young children move in the direction of standard spellings. Helping them with spellings when they request them is another. Short explanations of why we chose one alphabet letter rather than another to code a phoneme also provide useful instruction." (Schickedanz 1999)

Usually the first word a child learns to write is his or her name. Help children learn the letters in his or her name and frequently have the children label their work and identify their belongings –with part or all of their names.

Children love to communicate with their family and friends. Have them make cards for different occasions, write or dictate notes and letters, and draw pictures to show what is important to them.

Environment

Set up your environment to provide meaningful writing opportunities in all classroom areas and outdoors. Establish an area near the door, where children can sign-in and out each day. Have writing materials be part of the "props" in the dramatic play area. This can include pads for making shopping lists, writing medical prescriptions, or parking and speeding tickets. Ask children to dictate or write stories to go with their artwork. Provide an observation journal for each student in the science area and math journals in the math area. Provide alphabet letters—for example, charts, magnets, books—as reference tools and display them where children can easily see or reach them.

Encourage writing outside the classroom. Bring colored chalk and other writing materials outside. Allow children bring journals on nature walks and field trips. Have them sign-out their own books at the library.

Variety of Materials

Children are not motivated by the same things. Make sure that you provide your students access to a variety of writing materials. Respond to what interests your students. This is especially important for children who are second language learners or have developmental delays.

Some students are quite excited about crayons and markers. However some may more willingly challenge themselves with the chance to use paint to experiment with letters or make letters using their fingers in sand or shaving cream. Depending on the fine motor development of each child, most preschool and kindergarten children should be using thicker writing utensils. Some children might benefit from weighted pencils or pencil grasps.

Provide different kinds of paper such as construction paper, lined paper, envelopes, stationary, index cards, textured paper, paper with raised lines, and colored paper. Also expose children to stencils, stamps, scissors, hole punches and anything else that might be motivating. Ask your colleagues what they are using and share ideas.

What Are the Benefits?

In a joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), learning to read and write is said to be "critical to a child's success in school and later in life" and that "although reading and writing abilities continue to develop throughout the lifespan, the early childhood years – from birth through age eight – are the most important period for literacy development."

Documenting Development

Start collecting work samples for each of the children at the beginning of the school or program year. Mark each sample with the date and a brief note about the context in which the child did the work. Include a variety of examples. These records can help you communicate with parents how their child is making progress in understanding stories, spelling, and concepts of print. Periodically compare children's progress and to developmentally appropriate standards and milestones.

Summary

Maximize the enthusiasm preschoolers and kindergarteners have for writing. Support their literacy development by providing writing opportunities every day.

References

- Copple, C., Neuman, S., Bredekamp, S. *Learning to Read and Write*. Washington, DC: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2000)
- Schickedanz, J. *Much More Than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing*. Washington, D.C.: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1999)
- Reading Is Fundamental, Inc. *Gateways to Early Literacy*. Washington, D.C.: Reading Is Fundamental, Inc. (2004)
- RIF Educators, "Writing Matters: Children as Authors," http://www.rif.org/educators/rifexchange/programdescriptions/503_index.msp (2004).
- NAEYC Beyond the Journal, "The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction," <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/journal/2003/Essentials.pdf> (March 2003)

About the Author

Heather Benson was a classroom teacher in a variety of educational settings in the United States and Japan. She received her B.S. in Elementary Education from Boston University. She received her M.A. in Early Childhood Special Education focusing on literacy. She currently produces educational materials and supports training initiatives as Senior Training Specialist at [Reading Is Fundamental, Inc.](http://www.rif.org) (<http://www.rif.org>)

Published: July 2004
