

Child Care plus

+ Just Write!

The most important years for learning to listen, speak, read, and write are from birth to age eight. This highlights the key role parents and early childhood professionals play in supporting literacy learning during children's early years. Programs have responded by providing learning opportunities across the environment and in the planned curriculum. You have probably seen well-developed library or book areas in early childhood programs and daily activity plans that offer multiple opportunities for story-telling, listening, and reading books. More recently, *writing centers* have become a familiar sight in early childhood environments.



The addition of writing as a visible component of the early childhood curriculum is a good fit. Young children know a lot about writing because they are interested and active observers of the writing process. Through exposure to print in their environment and watching adults as they write—a waiter taking an order, a parent's grocery list—even very young children can often distinguish pictures from print and are eager to try writing. By preschool, many children are enthusiastic writers and busy consumers of writing materials, such as envelopes and ink pens. Well-stocked writing centers offer many materials that are rotated periodically, including a range of writing tools (crayons, markers, colored ink pens, pencils, chalk, erasers, gel pens), writing surfaces (paper of various sizes and colors, including black for the chalk, adding machine tape, salt boxes, index cards, envelopes), writing samples (an alphabet hanging within children's reach, photocopied pages of children's written names—with photographs as needed, picture dictionaries, word/picture cards, alphabet books), and writing props (mailbox, typewriter or computer, letter stamps, ink pads, pencil sharpener, message board).

Providing engaging materials in the writing center is important in supporting children's development of—and interest in—writing skills. Of equal importance is clearly defining your beliefs about how to best support children's emerging writing development. You must achieve a balance between

two common extremes—providing *too little writing support and instruction* due to concern that instruction might undermine children's natural enthusiasm or *overemphasizing formal writing instruction* using methods meant for older children, such as whole group teaching (everyone learns to write the same letters or words at the same time) and repetitive worksheets. Without instruction, children miss powerful learning opportunities; with too much "formal instruction," children may feel pressured and learn to dislike writing.

As you explore writing as a component of your early childhood curriculum, work to ensure that your approach fits developmentally appropriate philosophy. This may be challenging because chances are that you are most familiar with school-based methods for teaching writing skills. However, with some creativity and attention to the three "R"s of early writing, your curriculum can be *just right*.

1. Make sure writing activities have **REAL** purpose. Build writing experiences into and around meaningful activities where writing makes sense and has use.
2. Provide a **RESPONSIVE** writing curriculum by individualizing your expectations and teaching methods according to children's interests, strengths, and needs. Remember to include families in this process.
3. Build in writing experiences throughout the daily **ROUTINE**, in learning centers, snack time experiences, field trips, and even on the playground.

The insert in this newsletter provides a detailed description of how to implement the three "R"s of writing in your program. Using the three "R"s can help you establish a writing approach that is *just write!* + SHW

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The Three "R"s of Writing

The three "R"s can guide you as you create an early childhood environment that encourages and supports children's writing efforts.

REAL

First and foremost, make writing in the program *real*. Help children experience and explore meaningful reasons for writing. While it is important for young children to be immersed in a print-rich environment, do not just print the word "clock" and put it up by the clock. Where else do you see clocks labeled?

Word and picture labels become *real* when they are important to children and spring from real situations: "We named our hamster Harry," "I could not find the glue," or "When a visitor came, she could not find the bathroom." Labels are appropriate when they have meaning or when they tell something meaningful, such as the name of a class pet (label him HARRY, not HAMSTER), where to put the glue when you are finished, or a sign to help visitors find the bathroom.



Another way to make writing *real* is to help children use writing to make something happen. For example, when children write and drop letters in the writing center mail box, make sure they have the tools for addressing their mail so it can be delivered! Perhaps make a list of children's and teacher's names, along with their photocopied pictures for aspiring letter writers to copy or cut and paste onto the envelopes. When writing has a purpose, you are

more likely to enhance children's enthusiasm for and interest in writing.

RESPONSIVE

The writing curriculum must be individualized to meet the interests, strengths, and needs of the children in your group and their families. Familiarize yourself with the developmental continuum for learning to write so you understand how writing develops. Use this information to *individualize*, not to predict where you think children should be. Make observation a regular part of your day so you know where children in your group are on the writing continuum. Seek natural teaching opportunities throughout the day to meet and build upon each child's development. For example, if a child requests a certain snack food, think about the child's individual development and respond accordingly. Perhaps you will get an index card and tell the child you are writing down the idea so you will remember (helping a child connect spoken words with print), or you might hand the pencil and index card to the child and ask him/her to write the request (supporting a child who is interested in doing "their own writing"), or you might explicitly model writing for the child by sounding out each letter as you write (building on a child's beginning understanding of sound/letter correspondence). In each of these important individualized teaching moments, make sure you follow through by posting the note on the class message board and by getting the snack!





Brief, whole-group writing activities can be responsive to individual interests and needs. For example, take children's dictation to create a Lost and Found poster to find the owner of a mysterious item discovered on the playground. This little activity may captivate each child's interest at a different level, with a bit of prompting from you. A mysterious voice and a sense of wonder can engage some children in the "mystery" of it all, while a challenge will lead others to find a letter from their name in the words on the poster, and still others may join in with you to sound out words.

Work with parents to discover their literacy goals for their child. Literacy is valued by our society, and parents may worry about their child's learning in this area. You can listen and be responsive to their concerns, describe writing opportunities in your program, integrate parents' suggestions into your curriculum, and offer ideas for writing experiences at home.

ROUTINE

Meaningful writing experiences should be a regular component of your curriculum. Look carefully at 1) your planned activities as well as 2) your learning environment to be sure that you are providing multiple opportunities for children to explore key writing skills and to gain confidence and enthusiasm for the writing process.

Make a checklist of key writing skills and embed experiences systematically in your lesson plans. Offer simple to more complex writing opportunities throughout the year. Make sure these activities include adult modeling of key writing skills, opportunities for children to initiate writing, and one-on-one direct teaching, based on each child's interest and developmental level.

Take a close look at your environment. Does

each play area offer writing materials and writing models? The block area becomes a natural environment for writing when you add traffic posters on the wall, and index cards and markers for children to make their own traffic signs. The housekeeping area is an ideal place for offering "home-based" writing experiences when you provide a wall calendar with large spaces for writing appointments, labeled food items and a tablet for grocery lists, a phone book, and a checkbook filled with blank checks (you can create forms that look like checks and staple them together for the checkbook). Environments outside your program can also support writing—add chalk on the playground and take small notebooks on field trips so children can draw or write about their experiences. Take plenty of photographs too so children can dictate captions and create documentation panels of their learning. + SHW

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Child Care plus+ Insert



+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

To help children develop writing skills and the self-confidence to use them, you have to be systematic about offering opportunities for them to be writers and to observe adults writing in everyday activities.

Modeling writing in a natural way is important. Children need to see adults use written words meaningfully. They need to watch you write and be exposed to the concepts of a) letter formation; b) writing from left to right and from top to bottom; and c) letters having sounds and words having meaning.

Children's efforts to write are equally important. You can encourage children to write by 1) creating an environment that fosters communication, 2) providing many chances for children to create their *own writing*, and 3) frequently exposing children to writing that others create or *shared writing*.

ENVIRONMENT THAT FOSTERS COMMUNICATION

What children need to know: Everybody has important ideas. We share ideas by saying words, pointing to things, using a sign, or making facial expressions. We also write our ideas. We write so we can remember and share our ideas with other people.

What you can do: * make eye contact when you talk to children; * get down at the child's level; * listen attentively; * help each child feel cared about and safe in your program; * engage in genuine conversations; * help children identify and interpret their own and others' nonverbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, sign language, etc.).

What the child develops: * a sense of significance within a community; * a stronger understanding of communication; * acceptance of diversity; * the idea that writing is another way of communicating.

THE WRITING CHILDREN CREATE

What children need to know: Everybody starts writing by using lines, shapes, or pictures. You might call this *your own writing* when you talk about it with young children. *Your own writing* is the kind of writing people do first, and it is very important. *Your own writing* looks a little different from anyone else's writing. It is writing that *you* can read to others because it is *your own*.

What you can do: * develop a children's writing center; * start a children's message board or mailbox; * add

writing tools and props to each play area in your program; * ask children to read their own writing to you; * display samples of children's own writing to help them see and accept different styles; * honor children's writing by responding appropriately, for example, writing back when they write you a note or making sure their "SAVE" sign for a puzzle is respected.

What the child develops: * the sense of self as a writer; * an understanding of the meaning and purpose of writing; * a realistic view of their own writing; * self-acceptance; * celebration of diversity; * ownership of the writing and communication process.

THE WRITING OTHERS CREATE

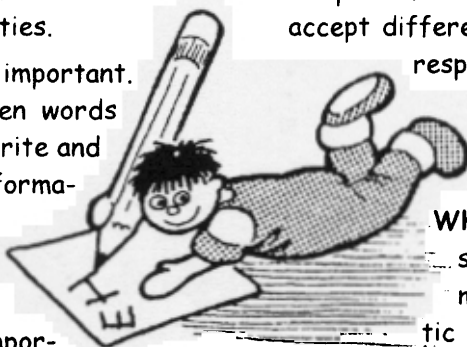
What children need to know: We call the writing we see in books, on cereal boxes, and on signs *shared writing*. *Shared writing* uses letters and words or it can be a picture, such as a crosswalk sign. *Shared writing* is the kind of writing that has rules and looks the same so other people can read the message, too. People in different countries have their own rules about *shared writing*. There are many different kinds of shared writing.

What you can do: * model writing to groups or to individual children; * use writing in meaningful ways, such as writing a group thank you note or adding to the grocery list; * incorporate books or posters written in Braille and other languages; * talk about authors of children's favorite books.

What the child develops: * an understanding of formal writing as a means of sharing information; * heightened awareness of print in their environment; * awareness of conventions of written communication; * awareness of different fonts, cursive/print, and symbols in everyday writing; * awareness of diversity.

Eventually children become interested in—and ready to learn—letters and words. Each child will let you know when he or she is ready for the next steps. Their readiness leads to prime teaching because their interest is high and your instruction is most meaningful to them.

Each child's writing style is unique, and each child's writing development occurs at an individual pace. With a bit of effort, you can individualize for each child and provide opportunities for writing that meets every child's developmental sequence. + SHW



+ QUESTION

QUESTION: *I hear children say "I can't write" or they ask me to write for them. When they do write, they ask me to read it and are disappointed when I can't. How can I help children develop a positive attitude about writing?*

ANSWER: As you point out, children's *disposition to write* is as important as the skills to write. You can help children develop a positive attitude about writing by taking a closer look at the overall learning dispositions that are promoted in your program's play environment, day-to-day activities and routines, and your individual interactions with children. Ask yourself: "How well do I encourage children to *take initiative, express curiosity, engage in trial and error, problem-solve, accept diversity, and practice self-evaluation?* To promote these dispositions: ● provide a range of play materials so each child has opportunities to be an engaged and active explorer; ● help each child experience a balance of success and challenge; ● do not overuse crafts and whole-group activities that require children to learn or do the same thing at the same time; ● avoid the message that products should "be the same" and set children up to compare their work with others (a common practice that reduces children's comfort with exploration and minimizes their sense of competence and self-acceptance); ● resist the urge to "over-help" children in the completion of projects and activities; ● allow children to take the lead in learning rather than seeing you as the "expert."

Second, focus on how you respond to children as writers. Young children's writing moves from random to more controlled scribbles with the gradual use of letter shapes and letters over time. You can help children value each of these stages by giving emergent writing a name like *your own writing*. (Avoid the term "kid writing." This label does not reflect children's desire to do real, grown-up tasks.)

You need to model writing as well, to help children learn the rules of *shared writing*. As you write, point out con-

ventions such as left to right movement on the page, spaces between words, and letter names and forms. (*Your own writing and shared writing* have been explained previously in this newsletter.)

Finally, actively encourage children's writing. Learn the mark a child uses to represent his or her name and let the child write it when you need to record children's names. Listen to children's stories with interest and suggest: *You have a lot to say about this painting. I am wondering if you will decide to get some paper and write it down. Seek a balance of modeling shared writing and opportunities for children to do their own writing. Using these strategies honors children's individual progress in the writing process and allows them to own it!* + SHW

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

We suggest two resources from NAEYC for developing a literacy rich environment. *Much More than the ABC's: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing* by J. Schickendanz (1999) is \$12.00, and *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* by S.B. Neuman, C. Copple, and S. Bredekamp (2000) is \$15.00. To order, contact NAEYC at www.naeyc.org or at 1-800-242-2460, ext. 2001.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 8.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission, please include reference.

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