

Encouraging preschoolers' early writing efforts

Take another look at that scribble

by Leslie Falconer

If there's one object common to preschools and child care centers the world over, it's pieces of paper covered with looping scribbles made by small hands learning to hold a pencil or crayon. The next time you're cleaning up at the end of a busy day, though, consider taking a closer look at those scribbles. They're actually samples of early writing, and an invitation for you to channel those small hands into recording their new ideas and creative thoughts.

Early literacy development: Reading and writing go together

Much has been made by early childhood educators about the importance of activities that foster early reading — and deservedly so — but studies show that reading and writing are skills that children develop simultaneously. Early reading is supported and improved by early writing. Young children need reading to help them learn about writing, and they need writing to learn about reading (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003).

Leslie Falconer is a trained educator and mother of three girls. In 2007, she became CEO of Mother Goose Time, an international publishing company for preschool curriculum. Falconer has co-produced over 15 children music CDs and is author of the children's book *The Great Mountain Hike*. She consults globally on early childhood education and curriculum development.

Reading and writing development

"One area of development supports the other," says Heather Benson of Reading Is Fundamental. "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" (Benson, 2004, p. 8).

Writing is an extraordinarily complex process for young children. It requires children to formulate personal opinions or ideas and then translate them into written symbols that represent words they use in oral language. Because this process is very demanding on both an emotional and intellectual level, it is important for educators to celebrate the child each time she experiments with writing. Cultivating a child's willingness to express herself through scribbles or inventive spelling will yield benefits in her long-term social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Journaling

Preschool journaling offers an open-ended and rich experience that integrates prewriting skills into the development of both print-related and linguistic

competencies. Research by the Center for Early Literacy Learning in 2006 demonstrates the importance of providing diverse experiences to children in six primary domains of early literacy. These domains include:

- alphabetic and print awareness
- written language
- reading comprehension
- phonological awareness
- oral language
- listening comprehension.

As children learn to write about their own experiences, they must independently apply skills learned in reading, speaking, and listening within a very personal context. As a result, the link between the six domains of early literacy as outlined by the Center for Early Literacy (Masiello & Trivette, 2006) are uniquely strengthened.

Historically, young children were taught the alphabet solely through rote memory. A child's personal experience or context was seldom integrated. A teacher stood in front of the classroom and together they recited the letters. For writing, children practiced writing key sentences over and over. Children memorized spelling lists and practiced reading. Monaghan (2005) recounts in her book that toward the end of the 17th century,

educators slowly evolved in their views on children and how they learn. The idea emerged to make books that featured themes of interest to children and writing styles that entertained. This was the beginning of a new era in early literacy. Today, researchers conclude that literacy results from three primary influences:

- a child's interests
- instructional practices both structured and informal
- literacy-rich experiences (Masiello & Trivette, 2006).

From infancy, parents and child care providers snuggle up with their children and read stories. Throughout the day, parents and educators engage children through oral language and talk about the many things the child sees, touches, and experiences. Reading and talking with children has a significant impact on children's literacy development. When, then, should we also sit together and write?

Early writing

Early writing — scribbles, drawing, a child's first attempts at letters or his name — develops more than just fine motor skills. It is a way for children to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others. Learning about writing — as with reading — begins in infancy. Before children can sound out letters, or even hold a crayon, they can observe an adult making marks on a notepad or a letter to Grandma. Children watch their teachers write key words on a large piece of paper as they brainstorm ideas around a theme. When the adult rereads the idea list, children make the connection that words can be expressed in symbols to be reread later. For preschool-aged children, dictating words and ideas to an adult teacher — an activity called *story dictation* — who can then read them back to the children in their own words, can be a very empowering experience. Inviting children to make creative choices in their

storytelling enhances that accomplishment. "Once children get into the routine of daily writing, they develop ownership over their work," writes Bobbi Fisher (in Diffily, Donaldson & Sassman, 2001). "They gain control over their writing when they can choose their own topic, paper, and format; whether to work alone or with a friend; and how to share their work" (p. 17).

In practice, educators are experimenting today with unique models to inspire children through the use of developmentally appropriate writing techniques. Try some of the following simple activities designed by Andrea Hornby, director of curriculum for Mother Goose Time Preschool Curriculum Company, to enrich your classroom's early literacy curriculum.

► Classroom books

In this social activity, each child receives a blank piece of paper. The teacher talks with children about their interests until they arrive at a topic they would like to 'write' about. Then children are asked to draw pictures and/or dictate their ideas about that topic to an adult. The teacher collects the completed page from each child and staples them all together, creating a single class book. This book is added to the classroom library and is reread frequently to build children's self-esteem (pride in their creations) and literacy skills. Throughout both the writing and reading process, educators can reinforce the link between translating oral to written language, highlight print awareness, and ask questions to verify children's comprehension of the communicated concept.

► Make-a-story cards

Cut out pictures of animals, plants, people, and places. Glue these images onto index cards. Encourage children to choose a few cards and put them in a line (like a train.) Then ask them to 'read'

their picture story. Model how they can read and write left to right. Write key words or the first letter of the image pictured on each card to reinforce alphabetic and print awareness.

► Mystery messages

Writing, just like reading, can happen everywhere. While playing outside, experiment with the children by making shapes and letters in the dirt with their feet, write standing up with long sticks, or using dried corn cobs to make letters. Ask children to help you find other objects that could be used as writing tools. Write in nature together, read the messages and scribbles together, and then clean them away. Discuss how some written messages are for keeping a long time; others are only to save for a short time.

► Playing post office

This child-initiated activity reinforces written language as a means for communication. Let the child start the written conversation by role-playing post office. Set up a mail center at a table or on a blanket with paper, pencils, crayons, glue, and diverse found objects. Invite children to freely make and deliver mail to you and their classmates. Whenever you receive a letter, read and discuss it with the child. Create a letter of your own and send it back to the child. For example, a child may give you a piece of paper with a scribble in the corner and a glued on leaf, explaining that they loved playing outside in the leaves today. Make a similar picture with a glued on leaf and write a simple message such as "I like leaves too!" Send it to the child and read it together. This simple activity affirms for the child that you liked their idea and how they expressed it to you in the letter. By adding words, you model how a message can be represented both in pictures and in letter symbols.

For children, such as non-native English speakers, who do not feel comfortable talking in front of others, this quiet form of communication is a safe vehicle to comfortably initiate a conversation that may evolve into a more in-depth oral language exchange later. Success in one domain of early literacy will translate to future success in other domains.

► Cross-curricular journaling

After routine activities such as playing blocks, planting seeds, and going on an acorn hunt, try setting up a journaling center with common objects from these activities as well as paper, crayons, and glue. Invite children to independently write about their day. Allow them to scribble letter-like symbols and to glue on or make texture rubbings from materials used that day. Publish children's work by hanging it on the wall, or invite them to read their journal entries to you, their parents, and the other children.

Summary

Writing and reading skills increase over time. Writing celebrates the open-ended opportunity wherein children can express their feelings, ideas, and fantasies. After you read rhymes, sing songs, and model fingerplays for children, carefully observe them in their free play. You just may catch them experimenting with their own rhyming combinations, song variations, and/or using their fingers to create stories unique to their own imaginations. Support them in recording this creative process on paper. There is no need to wait for children to grow older. Today, they are authors, composers, poets, and philosophers with life-changing words and sounds embedded in their playful scribbles.

References

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- Masiello, T. L., & Trivette, C. M. (2006). *Bridging the research to practice gap*. Storrs, CT: Center for Early Literacy Learning.
- Monaghan, E. J. (2005). *Learning to read and write in Colonial America*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Roskos, K. A., Christie, J. F., & Rigels, D. J. (2003). *The essentials of early literacy, instruction*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

For more information and research on early literacy, visit the following web sites:

- Center for Literacy and Disability Studies:
www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/
- National Center for Family Literacy:
www.famlit.org
- National Literacy Trust:
www.literacytrust.org.uk
- National Institute for Literacy:
www.nifl.gov

And the following useful publication:

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1998, May). Joint position statement on learning to read and write. Washington, DC: Authors.