When you think about writing, you may think it happens when your child starts school. However, the process can start much earlier, if children are offered Early Writing Experiences. Your preschooler’s writing will go through many stages before kindergarten. If your child has time to explore these stages, he or she will have a strong foundation to build upon in school. Early Writing Experiences:

- Build fine motor skills needed to eventually write letters and words.
- Teach your child that we use writing to communicate.
- Show children that writing and drawing are different.
- Show your child that writing is useful in everyday life.
- Make children see themselves as writers.
- Writing should be fun and meaningful for children.

You may have some questions about Early Writing Experiences, such as what preschool writing looks like, what helps preschoolers become writers, and how to provide Early Writing Experiences at home. The purpose of this brochure is to answer these and other questions, so that you will understand how to help your child progress through each stage of early writing.

If children are provided with marking tools, a suitable surface on which to apply them, and a safe place to play, they begin to make marks at quite an early age” (Gardner, 1980; Baghban, 1984; Schickendanz, 1990).

“Encouraging young children to ‘write’ in the way that they want to write increases their motivation and allows them to focus on the message they want to convey” (Burns & Casbergue, 1992).

“Writing is an important part of a child’s literacy development. Pretend writing should be as meaningful to young children as pretend reading, so that there is no fear of writing later on. Writing should be a natural, enjoyable, successful part of play” (Levine, 2007).
Drawing as writing – The child draws pictures to represent writing. [Age 2-3]

Scribble writing – The child writes using long wavy lines (marks have distinct meaning). [Age 2-3]

Letter-like units – The child uses a series of separate marks with letterlike characteristics. [Age 3-4]

Nonphonetic letter strings – The child writes strings of real letters in random groups or repeated clusters. [Age 4-5]

Nonphonetic letter strings (letters reversed) – The child writes strings of real letters in random groups or repeated clusters. [Age 4-5]

Invented spelling – The child creates his or her own spelling, using letter-sound relationships; may use one letter for each word or a letter for every sound in each word. [Age 5-6]

Conventional spelling – The child spells most words correctly. [Age 6-7]

Copying environmental print – The child copies print found in the environment, such as words on signs or food labels. [Age 4-5]
What Helps Preschoolers Become Writers?

Most of us remember copying letters, repeatedly, to “practice” writing. Preschoolers need active experiences to prepare their mind and body to be able to write. The following activities help children have meaningful experiences:

- Activities to build fine motor skills – Before preschoolers can form letters, the small muscles in their hands must be strong enough to properly hold a pencil.
  - Preschoolers need hands-on experiences with materials that stretch their muscles.
  - Working with clay and drawing with color pencils require the hands and fingers to work harder than working with play dough and drawing with markers.
  - Stringing beads to make a necklace and working with lacing cards build fine motor skills.
- Pretend play – As adults, we know that writing means using symbols to represent spoken words. Preschoolers must first learn what a symbol is; they learn during pretend play.
  - When your child hands you a toy banana and says “Phone call for you,” he or she has learned that objects can stand for or symbolize something else. Here, the banana stands for a phone.
  - Preschoolers need numerous play experiences to understand symbols, before they can learn that written letters and words symbolize speech.
- Modeling writing – Young children are likely to repeat the behavior of important adults in their lives.
  - If your child sees you writing a grocery list, he or she may imitate you by writing a list, too.
- Chance to use writing in a variety of ways – Preschoolers must learn that writing is useful to them.
  - They must have opportunities to write for many purposes, such as making to-do lists, signing their name on artwork or the sign-in sheet at preschool, and using creative writing to go along with a drawing.
- Appropriate writing materials available – If preschoolers are to view themselves as writers, they must have access to writing materials throughout the day.
  - Some vital materials include different types of lined and unlined paper, child-safe scissors, stringing beads, clay/playdough, sand and/or fun foam to trace the shapes of letters, pens, pencils, crayons, and markers.

What Can I Do At Home?

- Grocery lists – When you write a grocery list, let your child write one, too. Then, let your child mark items off the list, once they are in the shopping cart. This also gives your child something to do while you shop.
- Letters and cards for family and friends – When you send letters or cards for special occasions or holidays, let your child write a message and sign his or her name, too. This activity also strengthens the bond your child has with family and friends.
- Journal writing – Journals can be made by simply folding some paper and letting your child decorate a cover. Encourage your child to write in his or her journal each night about what happened that day. You could start a journal, too.
- Hands-on activities – If you are baking bread, let your child help stir the batter and knead the dough. This will strengthen hand and finger muscles. You can also provide play dough or clay and form letters together.
- Book-making – Use folded paper to write and illustrate stories together. You could write about a new pet, your favorite foods, or a trip you took together. You could also write a new ending to a favorite book.
Frequently Asked Questions

- What if my child asks me to read his or her writing? – Instead of saying “I can’t read this” or “I don’t know”, say, “Tell me about what you are writing” or “Can you read it to me?” Jot down what your child says next to the writing. This way, you will know what to say if your child asks you to read it again.

- What if I am unable to write? – Cut out pictures from old magazines and make a book together; your child can write labels for the pictures. Provide Early Writing Experiences, by giving your child the materials and letting him or her explore writing. Make sure your child knows that there are many kinds of writing: drawing pictures or symbols, scribbling a signature, etc.

- Why are Early Writing Experiences more meaningful than just copying letters? – When preschoolers actively use writing, it has meaning in their lives. They should make choices about their writing. Your child needs hands-on activities to build fine motor skills before being ready to write letters.

- What if my preschooler writes backwards or misspells words? – Most preschoolers are still exploring letters, sounds, and how to form words; they have not reached the conventional spelling stage. Part of exploration involves writing letters backwards and using “invented” spelling – this is how children learn the shapes of letters and what sounds they make. Once your child is close to the conventional spelling stage, he or she will start to realize that there is a correct way to spell most words, and you may hear him or her asking, “Did I spell this right?” or “How do you spell _____?” When your child asks, provide assistance.

Useful Books and Websites to Remember:

The Art of Teaching Writing, Lucy Calkins (Heinemann)
Get Ready to Read (GRTR), getreadytoread.org
International Reading Association (IRA), reading.org
Much More than the ABC’s: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing, Judith Schickendanz
(National Association for the Education of Young Children)
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), naeyc.org
National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), familit.org
Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), pbs.org/parents
READ TO ME: Raising Kids who Love to Read, Bernice E. Cullinan (Cartwheel)
Reading is Fundamental (RIF), rif.org
Reading Rockets, readingrockets.org
Writing in Preschool: Learning to Orchestrate Meaning and Marks, Judith Schickendanz & Renee Casbergue (International Reading Association)
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