

Tips for Parents: Learning to Write

There are many things you can do to support your child's first efforts at writing:

- **Make writing materials available to your child.** This means not only pens, markers, crayons, and plenty of paper (unlined), but also an organized space and free time.
- **Let your child see you writing.** When you make out the grocery list or write a letter to a relative, explain to your child what you are doing. Invite your child to add his or her own message to what you have written.
- **Create opportunities for writing.** Ask your child to write something for you. Have your child read you the message he or she has written.
- **Pay attention to what your child writes.** Make sure your child knows that others are interested in what he or she has written. Also, let children know that the meaning of what they've written is what's most important to you.
- **Keep what your child writes.** Create a folder or scrapbook to record your child's first efforts at writing. Display your child's work around your home. Put pictures and writings up on the refrigerator or in the bathrooms where they will be seen by the entire family.
- **Read to your children as much as possible.** Spend at least fifteen minutes each day and make sure these reading experiences are always enjoyable for your child. Make sure examples of print are always available.

And there are several things you should NOT do:

- **Don't panic.** The first efforts at writing will be much like the first efforts at speech, and you will see a lot of marks you don't understand. This is natural and good for your child's development as a future writer. Ask your child to read the writing to you.
- **Never correct your child's work.** It's better for your child to learn the correct letter forms and spelling conventions through discovery, trial, and error. Don't worry that your child is learning the wrong information. These early mistakes will make your child a better writer in the long run.
- **Don't try to teach your child how to write.** Keep writing a time for your child to have fun, be creative, and explore. If your child asks for assistance, it's fine to help. But if you try to accelerate your child's learning by teaching, this may make your child feel pressured, and he or she may avoid writing.
- **Don't help too much.** If children ask you how to spell a word, it's all right to tell them the spelling, but be sure to encourage them to try to spell the word on their own. The freedom to spell creatively gives children more confidence to write their own stories.
- **Try not to discourage children who write on surfaces other than paper.** Instead, direct them to more appropriate writing surfaces without stifling their interest in writing. Keep plenty of unlined paper on hand.

Children learn to write in similar ways. Here are some of the things you can expect from your child:

- **Pictures.** The pictures children draw are more than representations of what they see. Pictures are your child’s way of telling a story or telling about something that has happened—the beginning of your child’s writing development. Eventually your child may add letters to the pictures, and although these letters have no literal meaning, they are an important step in the writing process.
- **Scribbling.** You may see your child writing long, snaky lines across a page. If you ask your child what the lines are, your child will probably say, “Writing.” Again, even though there is no literal meaning in these scribbles, they represent an important step forward in your child’s discovery of writing.
- **Letters this way and that.** The fact that English is read from left to right is just a convention, and children learn to follow this convention in time. As part of the discovery process, your child is likely to rotate letters, split words onto two lines, and amazingly, write an entire sentence backward.
- **Invented spelling.** Children spell words according to a complex set of connections they make between the sound of the word and the sound of letters. You may see the word “went” spelled “YENT” because of the sound of the *name* of the letter “Y.” Think of the sound of the name of the letter “H,” and to think what HASE might spell.

For more information:

Anbar, Ada. “The Secret of Natural Readers: How Preschool Children Learn to Read.” Praeger Publishers, 2004.

Honig, Bill. “Teaching Our Children to Read: The Components of an Effective, Comprehensive Reading Program.” Corwin Press, 2001.

Taylor, Denny. “Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write.” Heinemann, 1998.

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