



Emergent Writing: Background Information

Reading, writing, and listening are streams that flow into the same pool: they are constantly refreshing each other.¹

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Key Messages

I. Reading and writing develop together.

Research indicates that for most children, reading and writing develop simultaneously. However, for some children, the desire to write precedes a desire to read. Moreover, most young children find it easier to form the letters of the alphabet than to read them. While writing depends on eye-hand coordination and visual perception, reading requires the more complex skill of finding meaning in words.



Understanding that reading and writing develop together enables you to offer children a relevant context for learning to write. One process informs the other. Good readers grow up to be good writers, and good writers grow up to be good readers.

II. Children go through distinct developmental stages in learning to write.

Long before children come to school, they have seen writing displayed and used in their environment. When children are provided with opportunities to write in the context of everyday activities, they learn many important literacy skills such as concepts of print, functions of print, and phonological awareness.

- ⇒ **Stage One: Scribbling.** Young children love to use markers, crayons, and other writing tools to explore and discover. These early attempts at writing mark the first developmental stage.
- ⇒ **Stage Two: Scribble Writing and Letter-Like Forms.** In the second stage of development, scribbles gradually transform into little marks.
- ⇒ **Stage Three: Using Letters That Represent Sounds in Words.** By the end of the preschool years and early in kindergarten, children's writing generally shows increased organization. Children begin to grasp the concept that a word is made up of a series of sounds; for example, a child may write a note to Mom that reads "I LV U."



For providers, knowing the stages in learning to write is important not so they can instruct children in the “how-to's” of writing but so they can support children in their journey to becoming writers.

Most children with developmental delays will go through all the stages of learning to write, but at different speeds. It is important to support and encourage children's progress no matter its rate.

*(See the **Stages in Learning to Write** [handout](#) for more information.)*

III. Providers can assist children in mastering the prerequisite skills for learning to write.

While children go through the developmental steps of learning to write at their own pace and on their own schedule, you can take an active role in helping children develop the underlying physical and mental skills that will support their progress through these stages.

Learning to write requires combining multiple physical and mental processes in one concerted effort. Writing combines many skills and relies on development in many areas not specific to writing. A young child's success in learning to write is affected by four key functions:

- ⇒ **Fine motor skills**—or the ability to use muscles in the fingers and hands—are needed to grip a writing tool comfortably and form letters easily and legibly. Providers may need to provide direct instruction on grasping writing tools and helping children apply a writing tool to paper.
- ⇒ **Attention** plays an important role in all stages of writing. Writing demands considerable mental energy and focus over long periods of time. Since attention is itself developmental, providers may need to offer children exercises in focusing and sustaining their attention.
- ⇒ **Memory** has a significant impact on writing. The rate at which children generate ideas must coincide with their retrieval of necessary letters, sounds, and vocabulary.
- ⇒ **Language** is an essential ingredient of writing. The ability to recognize letter sounds, comprehend words and their meanings, and understand word order and grammar all contribute to a child's ability to write clearly. Conversation and vocabulary development are just as important to learning to write as they are to learning to read.



*(See the **Activities That Build Writing Skills** [handout](#) for more information.)*



It is important to remember that children with developmental delays in one functional area might not have developmental delays in all functional areas. For example, a child might have motor delays but be advanced in language development. Children should be encouraged to improve their abilities in all functional areas, no matter whether they are advanced or delayed in relation to appropriate developmental milestones.

Providers can also help children in learning to understand the basics of print. In addition to pointing out letters of the alphabet in books and in the environment and drawing children's attention to paragraph breaks, punctuation, upper- and lower-case letters, and spaces between words, providers can assist children in learning about the directionality of writing. Children must understand three basic rules:

1. Print goes from left to right.
2. Print goes from top to bottom.
3. At the end of a line, print starts over again, moving from left to right.

Giving children lots of opportunities to fill up blank spaces on unlined paper is probably the most effective strategy for preparing children to write.



IV. What's in a name? Everything when it comes to writing.

Nothing interests preschoolers as much as themselves. Usually the first word a child writes is the child's first name. At first, children may draw pictures to symbolize themselves. Over time, they gradually learn to write their first and last names.

Tapping into children's natural fascination with their names is a sure way for providers to facilitate children's interest in writing. When children are aware of the letters in their names, they begin to use these letters in their writing. Children can “sign in” in the mornings, using even just a scribble or an initial letter. Likewise, they can be encouraged to sign their artistic masterpieces, make nameplates for their books, or identify a cubby or basket that is used for take-home materials.



V. Writing serves a variety of functions.

One of the most important concepts that children acquire is the knowledge that writing serves many purposes. During the toddler years, children become aware that words tell us something. As they experiment with their own writing, providers should encourage children to use writing for different purposes—to tell the story of an accompanying picture, to write a letter to their parents, or to craft an invitation to a party. In this way, children learn not only that writing words conveys meaning, but also that the style of writing conveys a message. For example, a list includes less writing than a story or even a letter does.

Children also learn that writing is a way of sharing one's self, ideas, and knowledge. Its most powerful function is that of personal communication. Children enjoy writing (at whatever level) to communicate what is meaningful to them. They often describe their family, tell about interesting events they have experienced, or express emotions. They also begin to understand that writing conveys a message that can be read at a later time.

In addition to offering opportunities for writing, providers need to alert children to functional print inside and outside the family child care home. This helps them understand print's labeling and directive purposes. Examples of print inside the provider's home include children's names by their cubbies or baskets, labels, signs designating where supplies are kept, directive signs asking for quiet when reading, and job charts. Providers help children become aware of the functions of writing by involving them in the labeling process.



Outdoors, help children notice signs and environmental print in their surroundings. Environmental print includes logos and signs that children come to recognize as having particular meaning (e.g., the McDonald's arch). On field trips and outdoor walks, children can watch out for stop signs and other distinctive markers along their path.



VI. Invented spelling can be a useful tool.

As young children learn to write, they go through several stages of spelling development. At first the child uses symbols from the alphabet but shows no knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. Children may also lack knowledge of the entire alphabet, the distinction between upper- and lower-case letters, and the left-to-right direction of English. Children then begin to understand letter-sound correspondences—that sounds are assigned to letters. Finally, children use a letter or group of letters to represent every speech sound that they hear in a word. Although some of their choices do not conform to conventional English spelling, they are systematic and usually easily understood.

Research shows that using temporary invented spelling contributes to children's success as readers and writers. It draws their attention to the sounds of letters and parts of words. It also helps them progress as writers because they are not limited to expressing themselves in words they already know how to spell. For example, a child might write “bees” as “BZ.”

VII. Providers can employ specific strategies to encourage children's writing.

Children need the tools to write. According to Judith Schickedanz, “The most important thing we can do to support children's beginning efforts at writing is to provide materials.”² Children need access to a variety of writing tools and papers, so they can explore the world of print.

Give children an opportunity to use writing for a purpose, to create a greeting card or write a message to a friend. Set aside an area for writing that includes a small table and chairs and an accessible place for storing writing materials.

*(See the **Tips to Encourage Children's Writing** [handout](#) for more information.)*

¹ Braunger, J. and Lewis, J.P., *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*, International Reading Association. 1997.

² Schickedanz, J. *Much More Than the ABC's*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. 1999.

