



Professional Learning Module
Emergent Writing for Early Learners

How Early Writing Develops

Typically, prekindergarten children move from drawing and scribbling in order to convey messages, to using letter-like forms and letter strings as they learn more about the alphabet, and eventually to invented spellings when they can make some connections between letters and sounds. After prekindergarten, children ultimately achieve mastery of conventional spelling where they are able to remember and apply the correct spelling for most words.

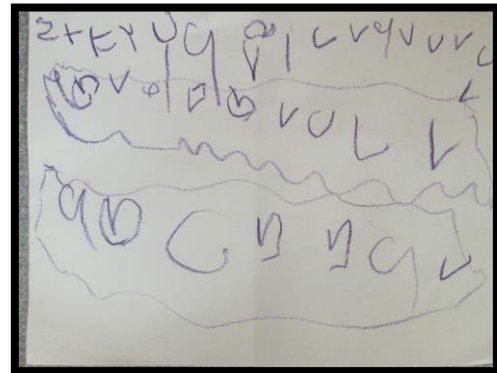
Random Scribbles/Drawings and Controlled Scribbles

Writing development begins when a young child, experimenting with writing tools, makes random marks on paper. With practice, the marks become more deliberate and controlled until one day the child notices that something in the marking looks familiar, and the idea that things can be represented by marks on paper is understood.



Random Scribble/Drawing

- Child “discovers” a familiar object in the random marks
- Child tries to recreate the object with deliberate strokes
- Child begins to name objects on the page



Controlled Scribbles

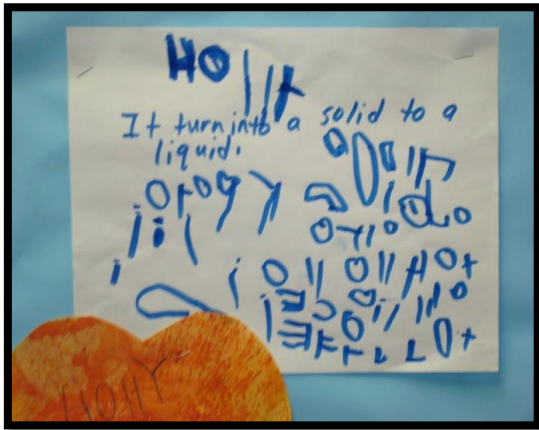
- Marking is more deliberate
- Figures are open and closed and patterns appear
- Child begins to understand that print conveys meaning
- Child discerns difference between drawing and writing
- Child can tell about what is drawn or “written”

Teachers support this stage of development by writing stories with children and repeating and writing words that children say. Creating management charts and doing a morning message will help children understand that writing has meaning (conceptual knowledge). Alphabet instruction along with labeling the classroom and having name cards help children understand the mechanics of letter and word writing (procedural knowledge).

How Early Writing Develops

Mock Letters and Letter Strings

About the same time that children notice that their marks have meaning, they are learning that print in the environment conveys meaning. As print awareness and letter/sound knowledge grows with more exposure, the marks on paper take on new shapes and meaning. The child's marks become more intentional and are used to represent ideas and will take on a more letter-like form that gradually become letters.



Mock Letters

- Child begins to pay more attention to details
- Writing is easily discernible from drawing
- Figures have letter characteristics with lines and curves
- Figures appear in patterns
- Writing tends to be linear
- Manual and cursive forms appear



Letter Strings

- Letters appear in repeating patterns
- First letters mastered are usually from child's name
- No concept of word indicated by lack of spacing
- Letters may not represent sounds
- Child enjoys copying words from other texts

To support this stage of writing development:

- Teachers can make class books that come from topics during class units, for example, making a Three Billy Goats Gruff book after each child drew and "wrote" about their favorite part.
- Continue to model the writing process with charts, for example, making a list of items needed for an upcoming party and then crafting a thank-you note to the parents for providing the items. Then encourage children to write about the party.
- When setting up learning centers include writing materials and pretend reasons for writing, for example, a restaurant with a pad for taking orders, signs for food choices, labels for the area. Be sure to include a well-stocked writing center with many tools and materials for writing. Name cards, stencils, ABC cards, etc. support children in becoming writers.
- Journals are important for children to use to write down their own thoughts. Teachers can also provide a prompts or titles to encourage with their writing, for example, "My Family."

How Early Writing Develops

Invented (phonetic) Spelling

Later, as alphabet knowledge instruction continues, the child makes connections between the sounds of language and letters, and begins using letters that correspond to the sounds in words. The young writer learns to spell familiar words, and before long is writing using more and more conventional spelling. Do not be surprised when you see children occasionally writing backwards, they are still learning about directionality and placement in writing. Writing letters backwards is not an indication of a reading problem. It can be developmentally appropriate.



Invented Spelling

- Letters represent sounds
- Initial sounds appear first, then final sounds, and medial sounds appear last
- Becoming aware of concept of word
- Becoming aware of print conventions
- Correct letter formation still developing—letters may be reversed or have extra lines. Diagonal lines are challenging
- Child may or may not be able to read/remember what is written

Teachers continue to support children's writing by integrating chart writing, book making and journaling with all aspects of learning in the classroom.

Remember, emergent writing is directly connected with language and reading. If you notice that some children's writing is not progressing on a reasonable timeline, you may want to make some adjustments. Working with a few children or one-on-one will support them as you provide them with purposeful instruction in both reading and writing.

Be aware of how children are holding their writing tools – they may need additional fine motor activities such as play dough, stringing beads, painting on large paper, or coloring. Fine motor materials are not only in the writing center but in construction, dramatic play, art area and especially in the math and science areas.

Teachers will always want to help families understand the what, why and how you are providing instruction in emergent writing. They may not know that the scribbling stage is as important as being able to "properly" write their names. Display a variety of writing experiences around the room will help them see the importance of writing and how it develops.

Cabell, S., Tortorelli, L., & Gerde, H. (2013). HOW DO I WRITE ...?: Scaffolding Preschoolers' Early Writing Skills. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(8), 650-659. Retrieved March 31, 2020