

## Encouraging Young Writers

**Source:** RIF Parent Guide Brochure

Long before they go to school, before they even know the alphabet, children begin to write. In fact, for most children, literacy begins at home . . . with a crayon.

The scribbles of very young children have meaning to them, and scribbling actually helps them to develop the language skills that lead to reading. Young children who are encouraged to draw and scribble stories will learn to write more easily, effectively, and confidently once they head off to school.

### How can you encourage your children to write?

From infancy on, *reading books aloud to your children is the single most important way you can help them get ready to both read and write.* Hearing you read aloud gives them their first meaningful experiences with printed words, and makes them aware of how stories work. After they learn to read, writing continues to be a natural spin-off activity that contributes to their language and reading development.

In this article we offer many other ideas for encouraging preschoolers to experiment with writing, for motivating school-age children to write more, and for involving the whole family in writing at home.

### Supplies and Space

Children don't need special tools or fancy equipment to write! Fresh supplies and an inviting workplace can provide inspiration. Here are some suggestions:

- **Writing tables.** All children write best when they have a comfortable place to work. Young children can sit on a child-size chair at a play table cleared of toys. Older children can work at the desk or table where you do your own writing, or on desks of their own.
- **Writing paper.** The smallest writers need the largest paper for their drawings and scribbles. (Check with your local newspaper for their roll ends of newsprint.) Introduce lined paper only when a beginning writer has mastered the alphabet and forms letters that are the same size. Stock a variety of paper sizes for different writing projects.
- **Writing tools.** Fat watercolor markers and crayons are best for toddlers' drawings and scribbles. Preschoolers enjoy using thin markers, regular crayons, and chalk. Beginning writers need pencils with erasers. When they have mastered handwriting, older children like to use pens for their polished copies.
- **Reference books.** As your children become more experienced writers, help them to step back and look critically at their writings. They'll need a dictionary to check spellings, and a thesaurus will encourage them to make better word choices. A young poet might also enjoy using a rhyming dictionary.
- **Wastepaper basket.** All writers have false starts. It's perfectly okay to crumple up the page, toss it in the garbage, and try again.
- **Keyboards.** Although not necessary for writing, a personal computer can enhance your children's writing experiences. Perfect letters appear at the press of a key—no small miracle for a young child struggling to control a pencil. These big toys are lots of fun for learning to recognize letters. For older children, the word processing capabilities of a computer make rewriting a natural part of the writing process. There is excellent educational software which encourages illustrations, and others promote effective reading through the writing process.
- **Making books.** Collect a variety of tools and materials for your children's homemade books. Include ordinary stationery items, such as scissors, glue, tape, a stapler, and a hole punch. Save cardboard remnants, wrapping paper, and wallpaper for covers. Rub-on letters, available in stationery stores, give titles more pizzazz. Children can staple pages and hide the stapled edge with a strip of colorful cloth tape, or punch holes and bind the pages with yarn or ribbons. A basket or box, decorated with your child's name, can store supplies.
- **Show it off!** Young writers are proud of their work. Give each child a large envelope or box to save writing. Keep magnets on the refrigerator to mount their favorite work, and display homemade books on the family bookshelf.

### Everday Writing

Like reading, writing can become a natural part of your family's everyday activities. Your regular household activities are great for putting children's writing skills to good use.

- Before you go shopping, ask a child to write out your list, or have your children add their personal items to the list you've already made.
- Explain how you'd like your children to take messages when you can't get to the telephone. Keep a pad or memo board and something to write with near the phone. Family members can also leave each other notes at this message center.
- Do you write regularly to a grandparent, other family members, or friends? Perhaps your child can add a picture or note.
- Ask your children to write in their own appointments and dates on a family calendar. Very young children can draw picture reminders.

### Writing Before Reading

Rejoice in your children's early attempts at writing. Keep in mind that spelling, correct letter formation, neatness, and how your children hold their markers or pencils don't matter now! Those skills will come naturally, in time. Respond now to the ideas they are trying to express, and accept whatever they write with praise.

Here are some playful activities that will nourish your preschoolers natural fascination with writing:

**Everywhere you look.** Help your children become aware of the writing that surrounds them. Read aloud stop signs, favorite restaurant signs, the *S* on Superman's cape, and other interesting print you encounter in the course of your daily activities.

**Props for pretend play.** Given a marker and a pad, little doctors can scribble their prescriptions and waiters can take orders. Opportunities for playtime writing are endless: restaurant menus, store signs and price tags, tickets for a show or a train ride, etc. Some children may ask for help in writing real words; others are satisfied with their own marks or drawings.

**Post office.** Equip a play post office with paper, envelopes, and cards. Save stickers and stamps from junk mail for pretend postage stamps. (One parent's trash is another child's treasure!) Reply promptly to mail that's delivered to you.

**Taking dictation.** Be your children's secretary and take down word for word the stories they tell. These stories can be read back again and again. When you inquire about a drawing, write down your child's response as a title or caption.

**Yummy alphabet.** Cook up fun ways to help young children learn the letters of the alphabet. For example, help them shape letters out of pretzel dough or cookie dough. Show them how to write in a tray of pudding or squirt whipped cream letters.

**Homemade books.** First books are often stories told in pictures on folded pages, perhaps with a few words or captions. You might introduce beginning writers to comic strip format, so they can add words in voice balloons and thought clouds to their picture stories. Young children also like to make their own A-B-C books by drawing or pasting pictures on pages labeled for each letter of the alphabet.

### Encouraging Older Writers

Beginning writers become more fluent and mature writers only with practice. You don't want to force them to put their pens to paper, but you can certainly help them find extra opportunities and the inspiration to write at home.

**Journal writing.** A gift of a journal or diary is a way to get young people into the habit of writing daily. A journal begins the writing process, and may be the source of ideas for a new poem or story. Journals also provide a private outlet for emotions.

**Books about writing.** Ask a librarian to help you find storybooks in which writing is important to the plot or character development, as in *Dear Mr. Henshaw* by Beverly Cleary, *Harriet the Spy* by Louise Fitzhugh, or *Mostly Michael* by Robert Kimmel Smith.

**Letter writing.** Encourage your children to correspond regularly with long distance friends and family, or become pen pals. Supply them with stationery (or the materials to make their own), envelopes, postage stamps, an address book, and a box for saving letters. For variety, suggest that they design their own postcards.

**Gifts of writing.** Greeting cards with personal messages and poems are more meaningful when they're homemade, rather than store-bought. An older child may enjoy the challenge of writing a ballad or song lyrics in honor of a special someone or occasion. Homemade books and calendars also make nice gifts of writing.

**Publishing.** All writers young and old dream of having their work published. School newspapers and literary magazines are a good first start. Serious writers may want to submit stories and poems to a national publication devoted to children's writing (*see Resource*). Many other magazines for young people run writing contests or have special departments featuring their readers' letters and contributions.

### **Family Writing**

Although writing is usually an individual effort, some writing projects can invite family collaboration. Here are a few ideas that encourage family involvement:

**Holiday letters.** Around the winter holidays, some families send all their distant friends and family copies of one long letter recounting events of the past year. Your children can contribute to this kind of holiday greeting.

**Family newsletters.** Some extended families keep in touch through a family newsletter. Perhaps your family can volunteer to become reporters and gather news and photos by phone or mail from your relatives. Your staff writes up news stories, assembles the newsletters, and makes photocopies to send out to other family subscribers.

**Scrapbooks and photo albums.** Keep souvenirs of your family activities in an album. Ask your children to help you write in dates and captions.

**Travel journal.** When you take trips for a day or longer, keep a journal of where you go and what you see. Have your children contribute written descriptions and drawings to the journal.

**Writing to each other.** Encourage personal correspondence within your family. For example:

- Write to your children at camp, or when you travel without them.
- Leave notes with jokes or reminders in their lunch boxes.
- Have the tooth fairy leave a receipt.
- Write each child a birthday letter or poem.
- Create a certificate of achievement for swimming across the lake, or being very cooperative during a trying week.

More than anything else, be an enthusiastic audience for the writers growing up in your family. Encourage them to share their writing with you, while respecting their need to keep some writing private. Comment on their writing in ways that are thoughtful but uncritical. Make your children feel confident that, as writers, they always have your interest, admiration, and support.

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