

Early Writing



Learning to write is a complex process that involves [learning many skills](#). First, children need to learn to speak, build their vocabulary and develop the fine motor coordination they will need to manipulate a writing instrument. As they grow, they need to learn about the alphabet and to make connections between spoken and written words.

Motivation and purpose in early writing

To write meaningfully, children must have the motivation and inspiration to write in the first place. They need to understand that writing has meaning and that the words they write can be read back again.

This understanding will come from seeing adults and others around them using writing for a purpose and modelling the use of written language in a range of contexts, such as shopping lists, invitations, postcards, text messages, emails, greetings cards, storytelling and so on.

Adults should find opportunities to model and encourage writing in everyday and playful contexts and model writing for specific audiences, for example such as writing a letter to a family member or friend who lives far away. This is especially important as children enter the final year of the Foundation Stage where writing can become more formulaic and less spontaneous.

To prompt children's motivation to write, adults should start with the child's interests and find relevant opportunities in children's self-initiated play to model and encourage writing for a purpose, such as creating a sign for a den to tell baddies to 'keep out' or writing invitations to a tea party.

Texts as multimodal constructs

Early writing will often combine pictures, words, and symbols all in one text. Children may talk to themselves or others as they draw and write and will use symbolic representations alongside or in place of alphabetic code. They will enjoy adding symbols and words to their creations, for example adding signs and labels to their construction models, small world and role play representations or making a mini story book.

As well as more traditional writing using paper, children will increasingly use digital representations for their early writing. So it is important to recognise and value all the forms that writing may take for young children at home, in the community and in Early Years settings.

Children also express themselves through art, music and movement and may combine these forms of expression with symbols and letters to create meaning.

The meaning of texts created by young children will often involve a skilled adult piecing together various modes of expression alongside visual or oral explanations from the child (see Flewitt, 2008).

Exploratory and intentional mark making

There is a difference between exploratory and intentional mark making although there will be times where they overlap.

At first, very young children's mark making experiences will have more of a sensory aspect to them as they learn to handle mark making materials and notice the marks and traces their actions leave behind. For example, a child making marks in cornflour gloop may notice that marks are left behind when they move their fingers through the mixture and may repeat this action or vary their movements in response to the experience.

As children's mark making becomes more deliberate, they will start to attribute their own meaning to their marks by talking to themselves or others as they make marks or share their creations and tell others about their mark making to which they attribute specific meaning. For example, [a child making marks with chalk may talk as they write about their play or about events.](#)

Physical skills of writing

The physical skills of writing are dependent on the development of a range of gross and fine motor skills (see EYFS area of Physical Development). It is important for children to develop the necessary physical skills and coordination before attempting to teach them [how to form letters.](#)

Muscle development for writing is a comprehensive process that begins with movements of the whole arm and progresses toward very detailed fine motor control at the fingertips (Adolph, 2008, p.100)

There are many [different specific motor skills](#) which are necessary for a child to write successfully:

- Developing gross motor skills
- [Bilateral integration](#) (using both sides of the body in a coordinated way)
- [Fine motor control](#)
- Developing dexterity
- Holding and manipulating a writing tool
- Writing posture

Activities to develop these skills will be a crucial part of the journey to becoming a writer.

For further information, see: <http://assure.education/blog/i-like-to-move-it>

Symbolic marks

Young children will often make and give meaning to marks which do not match the alphabetic code for English. Yet these symbols and their meaning will be important to their author so they must be acknowledged and valued.

Children may mimic the act of writing by making marks that look like scribbles, dots or patterns rather than alphabetic letters. Or they may write [a random combination of](#)

[letters](#). A child may talk as they make these marks or will tell others the meaning of their early writing, so it is important to ask children about their writing and respect its meaning for the child. Early writing often occurs spontaneously in play contexts, such as children writing a shopping list during role play or creating a sign or label for a play area.

Children may enjoy copying the symbols they see in the environment and attach their own meaning to these. To support young children's early writing, practitioners might set up a '[Message Centre](#)' where children are encouraged to leave messages for others using their own symbols and codes.

Creating meaning

Children will often reproduce graphic representations which carry meaning for them, sometimes these will be symbolic such as hearts and kisses in a greetings card, or represent familiar logos and brand names.

Other times children might represent parts of words or whole words that they see regularly such as their own name, the names of friends and family, or labels. When children recreate words and symbols in this way they are recognising the meaning attached to that particular graphic. They may be able to do this before they fully understand the correspondence to phonics and the process of encoding for writing, or they may only recognise the initial sound.

Children will enjoy exploring these familiar words and symbols in a range of contexts, for example when role playing schools, children might copy their friends' names from the peg labels to [create a register](#) and tick them off.

Authorship- power of narrative

Children are natural story tellers. They will often create narratives in their play and when relaying events and their experiences to their peers and adults or retelling familiar stories and tales.

Adults can record children's oral stories by [scribing them](#) in a class story book, and these stories can [later be acted out](#). As children become more confident with the physical and phonic skills of writing they may choose to collaborate with the adult when scribing their stories or go on to scribe their own stories.

It is important that these kinds of stories are celebrated and treasured and can be referred to and enjoyed time and again.

Using phonic knowledge to write

Using phonics is a key strategy for early writing which is part of a range of skills and dispositions that young children need to become writers. Using phonics refers to the skill of using letter/sound knowledge in order to write.

For young children to be able to apply their phonic knowledge in writing it is important that they have experienced lots of opportunities to explore the sounds that make up words in playful contexts. Moving to formal grapheme-phoneme correspondences too early can be counterproductive.

When teaching children phonics, it is important to include multi-sensory and active approaches to encoding words, for example writing on a large scale, using vertical surfaces and outdoor spaces, magnetic letters and other physical representations of graphemes.

When children are first writing words phonetically, they will often mishear and misrepresent some sounds. This is particularly true for polysyllabic words or those with more complex spelling patterns. The most important way practitioners can support early writing is by praising children to raise their confidence and motivation. Young children's attempts at early phonic writing should always be recognised and celebrated, accuracy will develop as children become more confident and fluent with their writing.

As children move through the various of stages of phonics they use increasingly complex graphemes and combinations of phonemes to make words. It is important however that the skills associated with early phonics such as those explored in [Phase 1 of Letters and Sounds](#) (e.g. rhyme, rhythm, alliteration) continue to be provided as part of the Literacy curriculum.

References

Adolph, K.E. 2008. "Motor/Physical Development: Locomotion." In *Encyclopaedia of Infant and Early Childhood Development*, 359–73. San Diego, CA: Academic Press

[Flewitt, Rosie](#) (2008). Multimodal literacies. In: Marsh, Jackie and Hallet, Elaine eds. *Desirable Literacies: Approaches to Language and Literacy in the Early Years*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 122–366.

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Online resource links

1. <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Making%20their%20mark%20-%20children's%20early%20writing.pdf>
2. <https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Gateway-to-Writing-Developing-handwriting.pdf>
3. <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/learning-and-development/view/the-road-to-writing-physical-skills>
4. <https://family.co/blog/the-child/early-years-writing-eyfs/>
5. <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/how-do-i-write-scaffolding-preschoolers-early-writing-skills>
6. <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/children-may-not-be-physically-ready-to-start-school-study>
7. <https://www.ot-mom-learning-activities.com/bilateral-coordination.html#:~:text=Bilateral%20coordination%20is%20the%20ability,use%20both%20hands%20together%20well.>
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