

How Can I Help My Child With Writing?

When we write, we have to attend to a great many things at the same time. First we need to consider who the writing is for and what sort of form it will take, for instance, a letter to a friend, a shopping list for myself or an invoice for a customer.

After deciding what we are going to write, we need to think what we want to say. Then we choose the words that best suit our purpose and make decisions about spelling, punctuation, and how to get our message across. Unless we are writing for ourselves, we try to write legibly.

As we write, we are constantly reading and re-reading what we have written, making alterations and corrections as we go. At the end we look through our writing again to make sure we haven't missed a spelling error and to check that the writing reads well.

Children find writing a great challenge. They need a lot of encouragement and praise as they move through their school years. When they show you their work, pay careful attention to what they are writing, because that is the most important thing. Writing is like a jigsaw. It is made up of lots of little bits, but it is the big picture that counts.

Try to focus on all the good things children do, rather than on their mistakes. Sometimes children will seem to go backwards. This usually means they are coming to grips with something new, and can't deal with everything else as well. Be patient and they will soon get it all together again. The key is to make sure they remain confident and enjoy writing – the rest will follow as they gradually mature!

The Developmental Continuum for writing shows you the phases through which a child goes through as they learn how to write:

Phase 1: Role Play Writing

Phase 2: Experimental Writing

Phase 3: Early Writing

Phase 4: Conventional Writing

Phase 5: Proficient Writing

Phase 2: Experimental Writing

This article covers Phase 2 in detail. In this phase, children know that speech can be written down and that print remains constant. They understand that writing goes from left to right and they experiment with writing letters and words.

The writer :

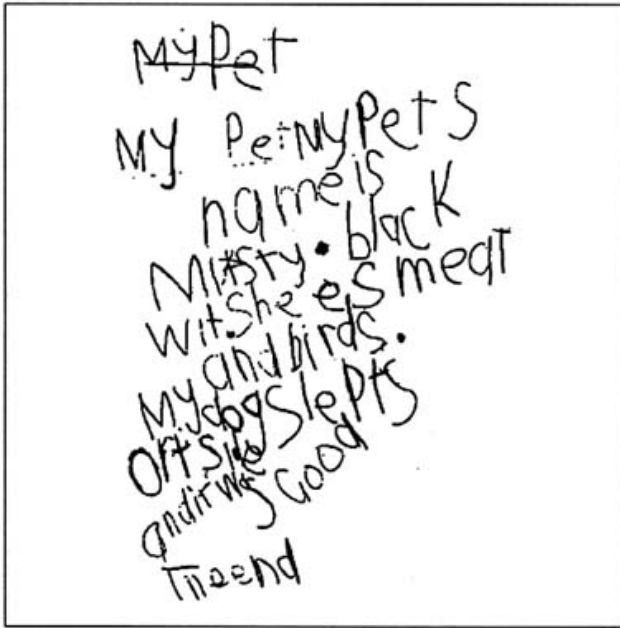
- tries to read back own writing
- knows that the written message stays the same, but does not always 'read' it the same way
- voices thoughts while writing
- mixes up capitals and small letters
- can tell the difference between numbers and letters
- 'writes' from left to right and top to bottom on a page
- starts to leave spaces between 'words'
- shows that one letter or letter cluster represents one word
- repeats familiar words when writing, e.g. *I like cats. I like dogs*, but will probably not write these words in conventional ways
- starts to notice features like full stops and commas and 'sprinkle' them through their writing
- dictates slowly when adult is writing for them
- writes different forms that are familiar, e.g. letters, lists, telephone messages, stories, greeting cards

How do you help your child at Phase 2?

- Read to your child and encourage her or him to join in.
- Talk about books before you read them and encourage your child to guess what might happen in the story. Sometimes point to particular words or leave words for your child to predict.
- Build up a collection of favourite books and read them often.
- Take your child to the library to select own books. Don't worry if she or he chooses books which seem too hard – read to or with him/ her.
- Write messages to your child and encourage her or him to write replies.
Talk about letters, words, spaces, as you write, e.g. 'Mm..Does that word look right? I'll write it again to see... I'll leave a space here before I write the next word.'
- Use a family message board and encourage children to write their own messages.
- Sometimes try written conversations with your child. The idea is to provide a good model without criticising a child's attempts and to encourage him or her to continue writing, e.g.

Parent writes: What did you do today?
Child replies: I played in the adventure playground
Parent writes: What did you play in the adventure playground?
Child replies: I played with monkeys
Parent writes: What did the monkeys play?

- Support your child's spelling attempts and praise his or her willingness to have-a-go.
- Provide a special place for your child to write. Equipment such as a small table or desk and a notice board for displaying writing materials such as scrap paper (lined, coloured or plain), used greeting cards, pencils, pens, envelopes and little note-books would provide an excellent environment for children to experiment with writing.
- Encourage your child to make greeting cards for special occasions.
- Talk about the purposes for which you use writing and the advantages of using writing, e.g. telephone messages, recipes or shopping lists to aid memory.
- Use scrap books or books made from spare paper to make personalised books with your child. Glue a photograph or picture chosen by your child into the book and ask your child to tell something about the picture. Let her or him see you write the words and sentences and use for reading. Add more pages and encourage your child to read 'his or her' book.
- Make an alphabet book with your child. As she or he expresses an interest in particular words help her or him to enter words on the appropriate page and keep for use as a personal word bank.
- Draw your child's attention to a variety of print forms such as telephone books, T.V. guides, magazines, street directories and bank stationery.
- Play games making words from plastic or magnetic letters. Discuss similarities and differences in the way words sound or look. Answer your child's questions about print.
- Play games using letter names and sounds, e.g. 'I spy with my little eye'.



*My pet
My pet's name is
Misty. black white.
She eats meat and birds
My dog sleeps outside and
it was good. The end.*

Olivia read this to the teacher and looked puzzled when she came to the word 'black'. She said 'I wrote "she is" in my head. I didn't really leave it out.' Olivia knows a lot about writing.

She is displaying all the important behaviours from the Experimental Phase and some behaviours from Early Writing.

Experimental writers have a lot to think about. Praise their efforts.



This article is an excerpt from the book
First Steps: Parents as Partners
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This article offers descriptions of the sorts of things that children are likely to do at a

certain stage as they learn how to write. The book describes children's literacy behaviours, covering the developmental phases of Oral Language, Reading, Writing and Spelling. It also offers practical suggestions for helping children at each phase of their development.