

Every Child is a Writer: Understanding the Importance of Writing in Early Childhood

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“Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school, they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child’s marks say, ‘I am.’”

– Donald Graves

Children as young as two years of age make marks on paper to express their feelings and communicate with others.¹ Although toddlers and preschoolers may not write conventionally, they demonstrate their writing abilities in a variety of ways such as scribbling, drawing, and making letter-like forms. The ways in which adults respond to children’s first writing attempts can nurture or extinguish children’s natural desire to write; therefore, it is critical for parents, teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders to understand the important stages of writing development and to encourage positive attitudes toward writing.

Compositional writing refers to the act of using print to express meaning or to compose a story or nonfiction piece of writing. Handwriting refers to a less complex strand of development, which involves developing fine motor skills necessary to create print forms such as alphabet letters. Composing and handwriting develop alongside one another in order for young children to bridge their oral and written worlds.²

Over the past twenty years, writing instruction has received increased emphasis in the United States. In 2002, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges was established in an effort to focus national attention on the importance of writing for all students in the 21st century. This commission argued that writing was not a skill for the few, but an essential skill for all students planning to enter the workforce. The first report issued by this commission, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*,³ recommended doubling writing time in classrooms and providing resources for teachers to make increased instructional time possible.

This brief addresses the importance of fostering early writing skills in early childhood; research-based barriers and opportunities for writing in early childhood environments; and the policy considerations related to early writing development. The primary audience is early childhood teachers and administrators; recommendations are also made for families and community stakeholders.

Key Concepts of Early Literacy

Alphabet knowledge: letter identification and letter-sound knowledge

Concepts of print: ability to recognize how print works especially with regards to books (includes directionality, book characteristics, purposes of genres, etc.)

Decoding: ability to pronounce written words by applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships and letter patterns

Fine motor skills: coordination of small muscle movements in the fingers, hands, and forearms

Letter recognition skills: ability to visually recognize and name individual letters in the alphabet

Phonological awareness: the ability to recognize that words are made up of sounds

Print awareness: functions, forms, and conventions of written language

Reading comprehension: ability to use background knowledge to process and construct meaning from text

BENEFITS OF EARLY WRITING INSTRUCTION

Research on early writing instruction suggests that experimenting with composing helps children develop phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness, which are skills associated with future reading and writing proficiency.⁴

Early childhood research also supports the development of foundational early writing skills as a means of promoting higher-level composition skills such as organizing, planning, and revising⁵, as well as future legibility and speed in handwriting.⁶

The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report⁷ concluded that name-writing skills yielded significant correlations with later reading abilities including decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling. Likewise, the National Research Council (NRC) reported key early writing skills (e.g., writing uppercase and lowercase letters independently, writing unconventionally to express meaning, and writing letters and some words when dictated) as necessary targets of interventions to prevent future reading problems.⁸

HOW IS EARLY WRITING DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTED BY THEORY AND RESEARCH?

Since the late 1970s, emergent literacy (a term coined by distinguished literacy researcher Marie Clay) has been the dominant theoretical perspective on early reading and writing. Emergent literacy theory supports the development of writing in a social context where children can learn about the meaning and process of writing by observing and interacting with teachers and other children. Emergent literacy encourages teachers to make writing materials readily available and give children time to write freely. This theory also posits that reading and writing are reciprocal and interrelated processes. Writers have to know what readers do and readers have to know what writers do. The two processes contribute to each other during early literacy learning and are equally important for future academic success.⁹

Research on early childhood preschool writing suggests adult modeling and guidance are also critical for teaching students how and when to apply writing skills.¹⁰ Therefore, embedding instruction within learning centers and authentic literacy activities in preschool and kindergarten can provide a balanced approach to literacy instruction.¹¹

In the primary grades, research has described a strong link between process-oriented teaching practices (e.g., choice of topic, extended opportunities to write, and showcasing student work) and students' positive attitudes toward writing.¹² In 2012, What Works Clearinghouse released an educator's practice guide entitled "Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers."¹³ In this guide, it is recommended that teachers:

1. provide daily time for students to write,
2. teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes,
3. teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing and word processing, and
4. create an engaged community of writers.

WHAT ARE THE PHASES AND DIMENSIONS OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT?

As infants near their first birthday, they may begin imitating adults and experimenting with writing tools. From there, early writing development follows a similar trajectory into the early grades, outlined in Figure 1:

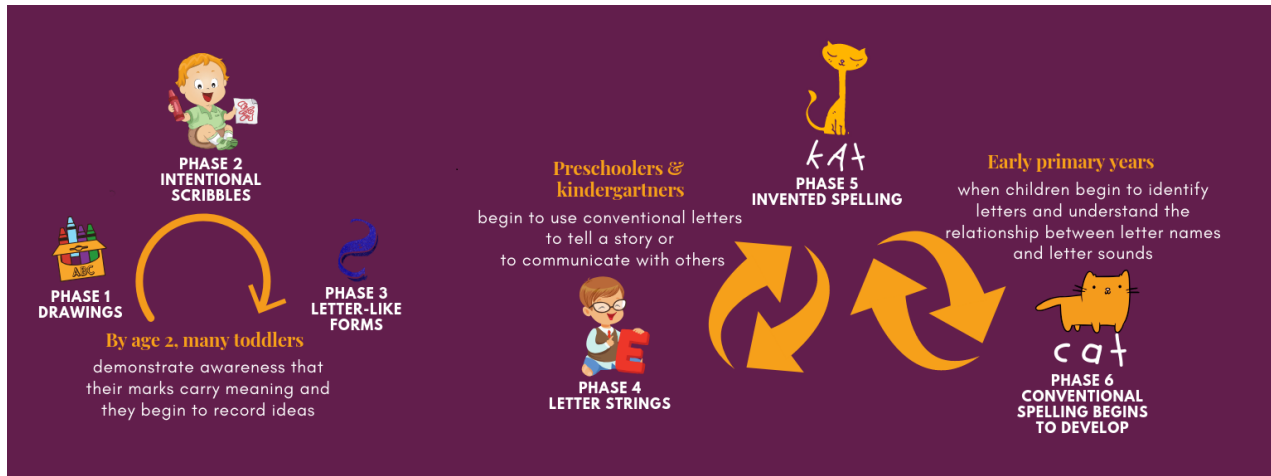


Figure 1: Phase of early writing development¹⁴

All children move through these phases in order, the phases do overlap, and children may use a combination of techniques described in the different phases concurrently.

The dimensions of early childhood writing include both lower level transcription skills (handwriting and spelling) and higher level executive skills (generating ideas, organizing, and revising during composing).¹⁵ When school-age children perform lower level skills automatically, they have more working memory available for higher level skills and they are able to translate language in their minds into written text more easily.¹⁶

Lower Level Transcription Skills

Handwriting: Limited research exists on the development of handwriting and handwriting practices in preschool. In a recent review of experimental studies investigating preschool writing instruction, Hall and colleagues (2015) found only three studies that focused on handwriting.¹⁷ Other researchers¹⁸ have found that preschool children participating in a particular program, *Handwriting Without Tears*,¹⁹ scored significantly higher on instruments measuring prewriting skills, kindergarten readiness, and fine motor skills than children that did not participate in the handwriting program. One study has found that children engaged in a handwriting intervention program outperformed children engaged in a similar type intervention in terms of letter recognition skills.²⁰ However, conclusions from these studies warrant caution due to the small number of participants included in these samples.

A similar systematic review on handwriting concluded that handwriting development and practices have been generally neglected in the early childhood literature due to an emphasis on the emergent literacy perspective and the increasing use of technology in our society.²¹ However, the current literature does point to fine motor skills as a key variable in handwriting readiness.

Fine motor skills involve small muscles in the body that enable such functions as lacing, stacking, and writing. Young children need to develop adequate strength and dexterity in their hands through daily fine motor experiences (e.g., putting clothes on a doll, rolling play dough into a ball) before moving on to the more complex task of handwriting.²² Before children learn to control their fingers in order to hold, grip, and maneuver a pencil, they must gain control of their arms, hands, and wrists.²³ When children are ready to begin handwriting instruction (typically during the kindergarten year),²⁴ the following skills should be introduced first: pencil grasp and letter formation.²⁵ These skills should be modeled during authentic literacy activities such as a morning message and children should be given frequent daily opportunities to practice writing letters independently (such as during interactive writing or in the dramatic play center). Lined paper is constraining to early writers and should only be introduced when a child has mastered the alphabet and is able to form letters that are the same size as the lines on the page (typically toward the middle of the kindergarten year).²⁶

Spelling: In addition to handwriting, children must learn how to spell in order to communicate clearly with their audience and compose with ease in the primary grades.²⁷ Before children begin to identify letters and understand the relationship between letter names and letter sounds, they may use scribbles or letter strings to communicate their ideas. As children develop stronger alphabet knowledge skills in preschool and kindergarten, they are able to use invented spelling to write letters and form words representative of sounds and may begin to use conventional spelling for high-frequency words (such as “cat,” “see,” and “the”). Invented spelling should be encouraged as young children experiment with composing written texts. If teachers focus on conventional spelling too early, it can constrain children’s ability to write freely and independently.

Higher Level Executive Skills

Composing: Like handwriting and spelling, composing is a developmental process. As members of a literate society, children demonstrate the ability to use early forms of writing (drawing, scribbling, letter strings) to compose written texts as early as 2 years of age.²⁸ Young children may imitate the adults in their lives by creating shopping lists, calendars, and menus. They may also experiment with writing letters and stories. As they use writing to explore new ideas and communicate with others, their understanding of the writing process becomes more sophisticated.

Composition is often taught through the process writing approach beginning in kindergarten. The process writing approach is supported by years of research and focuses on giving children opportunities to see themselves as authors.²⁹ It is one of the most popular methods of writing instruction due to support from the National Writing Project and the incorporation of the format into many widely used curricula and philosophies.³⁰ The process approach, often referred to as Writer’s Workshop, is a framework which includes a short mini-lesson, individual writing time and teacher conferences, and a time for children to share their writing. Children engage in cycles of prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing for real purposes. A meta-analysis of the process writing approach, looking at 29 other studies, found that in general education classrooms, students engaged in process writing instruction have greater increases in their writing quality than students engaged in other approaches.³¹

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In 2009, an effort led by 48 states guided the development of common learning standards in the U.S. known as The Common Core State Standards. This educational movement demanded an increase in the frequency and rigor of writing in various genres for students across the nation.³² Even in states that eventually distanced themselves from the Common Core standards, this revised national conversation reshaped standards for what students should learn each year reshaped standards.

Cursive handwriting was not specifically addressed in these standards, and so debates around a focus on this skill shifted to state and local educational agencies.³³ In many ways, cursive instruction became a flash point in a broader debate about the purpose of education and how to adapt instruction to the current times. The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) notes that this debate generally focused on perceptions of “common sense” needs rather than a basis in research. Advocates of cursive instruction point to the speed of the method compared to print in everyday life as well as the benefit of being able to read historical primary source documents; detractors contend that the time needed for cursive instruction could be used for other subjects, particularly as the growth of digital technology has replaced the role of many handwritten documents.³⁴ NASBE recommends that as states design their handwriting standards, they “should clearly explain to educators and parents the educational, research-based benefits of learning manuscript and cursive handwriting...because so much of the public debate is based on anecdotes and personal experiences.”³⁵

A database from the Education Commission of the States demonstrates that between 2006 and 2016, 21 bills related to writing and spelling were introduced in state legislatures. While not all of these bills were eventually passed, tracking their introductions is a valuable indicator of the priorities state legislators are placing on this issue. The year 2009 was the most popular for legislation related to writing, with five bills introduced across three different states. After tapering off between 2010 -2013, interest has returned in more recent years with four bills introduced in 2015 as well as in 2016, across eight different states.³⁶ The bills ranged in goals,

though cursive writing instruction and the determination of appropriate writing assessments were recurring topics.

Despite the intensified focus on the need for writing instruction, very few universities provide specific coursework aimed at preparing future teachers to teach writing.³⁷ Literacy courses at the college level often focus primarily on reading instruction with little attention or time devoted to conceptual and pedagogical tools related to writing. Only 12 percent of elementary school teachers surveyed in 2008 reported they had received adequate writing instruction in their preparatory work.³⁸

BARRIERS TO CREATING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD WRITING ENVIRONMENT

Some common barriers to creating a welcoming writing environment are adult misconceptions about the phases of writing development, access to strategies and materials, and limited understanding of how early literacy skills build the foundation for future reading and writing.

Adult Misconceptions: “But she can’t write yet!” is a phrase spoken by many adults when referring to young writers. In order for adults to move past this barrier, they must first understand the phases of writing development and the amazing capabilities that children demonstrate in writing from a very young age. When adults understand the developmental trajectory of writing, they are able to acknowledge milestones and celebrate children’s use of writing at their current level.

Access to Strategies and Materials: As mentioned earlier, teacher education programs focus primarily on reading instruction, so many teachers enter the classroom with limited knowledge of writing instructional strategies. In addition, our society encourages families to read to their children, but families are not equally encouraged to provide writing materials to their children.

Understanding the Importance of Early Literacy Skills: There are important early literacy skills such as alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, oral language, and phonological awareness, which provide a foundation for future reading and writing. It is important for adults to understand and focus on these necessary building blocks in the early years so that children will have the skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

HOW DO WE FOSTER WRITING READINESS?

As this brief has highlighted, children learn to write not simply through social interactions with peers and adults throughout formal writing instructions in classrooms, but through an iterative process along their early childhood years. By understanding children’s capabilities and how those are linked to early writing, teachers, parents, and community program providers can all overcome these barriers to early writing and encourage development through similar, hands-on opportunities.

Infants



Oral language skills have been identified as foundational skills on which other emergent and conventional literacy abilities are built.³⁹ Limited vocabulary affects writing productivity by preventing efficient word retrieval and weak syntactic skills affect students' ability to construct complex, rather than simple sentences.⁴⁰ In order to build oral language skills and prepare

infants to be future writers, it is important to:

- Talk to infants
- Read to infants
- Point out written words in the environment
- Provide a print-rich environment (labeled materials, books, wall displays)

In addition to oral language development, young children need to develop proximal stability (core strength and mobility) in order to develop distal mobility (extremity functions such as fine motor skills) necessary for future writing. Proximal stability activities can include:

- Tummy time
- Swinging
- Jumping
- Removing books from shelves and putting them back
- Being carried in a football hold

Distal mobility and fine motor skills can be increased by providing:

- Banging activities – two toys, hammer toys, musical instruments
- Bubble play – popping, catching, poking
- Stacking activities – rings, blocks, cups
- Placing objects in slots – coffee can with slot cut in lid

Toddlers



Toddlers continue to build their oral language skills through meaningful conversations with adults and peers as well as routine shared reading experiences. In order to continue strengthening motor skills necessary for writing, adults can provide:

- Puzzles
- Stringing activities – beads (with adult supervision)
- Paper activities – torn paper art, collage, paper chains
- Dressing activities – zipper and snap toys, putting on their own jackets
- Strengthening activities – spray bottle, hole punches, mixing cooking ingredients
- Picture hanging with clothespins
- Finger puppets
- Sensory activities– play dough, sand, finger paint

As toddlers' motor skills advance, they can begin exploring with writing instruments such as thick crayons, sidewalk chalk, and markers. Hand dominance should not be forced because it will occur naturally over time as the child engages in fine motor activities. When introducing toddlers to writing:

- Have children write with their fingers before using writing instruments
- Provide a vertical surface like an easel or chalk board to promote a stable posture for writing and increased wrist extension stability
- Alternate positions during writing activities to enhance core strength
- Encourage a comfortable grip when using writing instruments
- Introduce toddlers to their written first name

Preschoolers



Early writing development is a dynamic process involving multiple foundational skills. In order to foster preschoolers' writing, adults can provide activities focused on strengthening children's alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, print awareness, and oral language skills as part of a balanced early literacy curriculum. In addition, adults can help preschoolers learn about the writing process by:

- Modeling writing
- Writing with children
- Giving children time to write independently – journals, bookmaking
- Providing ample opportunities to write throughout the day – group writing, writing center
- Providing writing materials in various centers and places in the home - dramatic play, blocks, science
- Nudging children toward writing props to help them experiment with different functions of writing
- Providing authentic opportunities to write - books, charts, and lists
- Reading aloud wordless storybooks and encouraging children to tell their stories through drawings

Encouraging all forms of emergent writing – drawings, scribbles, letter-like forms, and invented spelling

- Encouraging children to talk about their writing with peers and adults
- Responding to the meaning of children's writing instead of the form
- Asking children to read their writing aloud instead of guessing what they have written or drawn

Although formal handwriting instruction should not begin until kindergarten, foundational handwriting skills can be embedded in authentic activities in the preschool classroom and at home. For example, adults can model and think aloud about stroke formation while they write with children. In addition, adults can:

- Use activities in which children can practice forming letters, erase quickly, and then practice forming again such as writing in cornmeal or finger paint, or on a large dry erase board
- Provide large blank paper to give children plenty of room to practice forming letters
- Provide broken crayons and triangular pencils and crayons to encourage the tripod grasp (writing instrument is held between the thumb and the index finger, and rests on the side of the middle finger)
- Provide help with letter formation when children make requests – “My M is upside down. How do I fix it?”

Kindergartners



By kindergarten, most children have developed the necessary fine motor skills to scribble and form some letters independently. Although kindergarten is an appropriate time to introduce guided instruction in lower level skills (handwriting, spelling), it is important to keep the primary focus of writing instruction on content and meaning (composition). Adults can help kindergarten-age children understand the process and functions of writing by:

- Writing together
- Using the process writing approach – Writer’s Workshop
- Modeling the steps of the writing process – prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing
- Inviting children to write independently for extended periods of time
- Conferencing with children about their writing
- Allowing children to share their writing with others – authors’ teas, pair shares
- Displaying functional examples of children’s writing around the room - cubby labels, classroom rules
- Setting up classroom or family mailboxes to encourage functional writing between peers and family members
- Providing examples of conventional writing around the classroom or home
- Using writing terminology – author, editor, publisher
- Encouraging children to use invented spelling and stretch words as they write to hear the sounds

In addition to process-oriented writing activities, kindergartners can engage in distributed, frequent handwriting practice for short periods of time (5-10 minutes per day) to build handwriting proficiency.⁴¹ Research does not support using repetitive worksheets or lined paper to introduce kindergartners to handwriting. Instead, Steve Graham, a leading handwriting expert suggests adults provide stroke-by-stroke demonstrations with verbal descriptions of their actions, give time for children to complete each stroke and to evaluate the quality of their efforts (e.g., circling the best formed letter out of three attempts), and then review and practice in subsequent sessions. In addition, adults can:

- Focus on pencil grip and position
- Introduce letters systematically – all straight-lined letters at the same time
- Describe similarities with other letters when introducing a new letter
- Teach efficient patterns for forming letters – always start at the top and go down
- Ask children to reproduce letters from memory
- Use spatial and temporal vocabulary – top, up and bottom, down

CONCLUSION

The recommendations embedded within this paper are based on seminal studies of early writing development and current research in preschool and primary school writing, many of which apply to the other daily environments in which children live. It is important to remember that children are naturally motivated to write at a young age. In order to continue to nurture this desire for written expression, it is crucial that early childhood educators focus their writing instruction primarily on content, process, and meaning (composition) and that families and community stakeholders understand and celebrate the phases of early writing development. In addition, it is critical to acknowledge that handwriting instruction is only a small strand of writing development and that proximal stability (core and trunk strength) and distal mobility (coordinated movement of body parts farther from the core) are prerequisite foundations for formal handwriting instruction in the primary grades. Policymakers who are interested in fostering writing skills must focus on more than just the existence of handwriting instruction and ensure that teachers have access to preparatory and in-service trainings to learn the full range of writing skills children should develop. Finally, modeling writing for authentic reasons, sharing the pen, and inviting children to write for real-life purposes are influential ways of ensuring that children develop the composition, handwriting, and spelling skills necessary to grow into life-long writers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna H. Hall is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the College of Education at Clemson University. Her scholarship focuses on examining the writing attitudes of teachers and students and developing and adapting instructional writing strategies. In teaching undergraduate and graduate students, she models constructivist strategies and challenges students to design instruction that is meaningful and authentic to young children. She believes in forming research partnerships within her own community, as well as the educational community at large, to improve the writing lives of young children.

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