

Encouraging Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing



Family members, staff, and caregivers encourage alphabet knowledge and early writing in children when they attend to, use, and talk about letters and print and when they help children make marks and write letters and words.

Ten-month-old Juanita cuddles with her abuela (Spanish for “grandmother”) as together they look at an alphabet book. Abuela points to the letters on each page, saying the names of the letters that are in her name and in Juanita’s name. Juanita is learning that each letter (print) is something important and can represent what we say. And that letters are in our names!

Min, who is 2 years and 10 months old, notices the letter M everywhere. He sees it on the milk carton, on signs for McDonalds, and in the title of the book Madeline. He loves to point out every time he sees “his” letter! Min is learning that letters can be used in multiple ways in very different words. His teachers share his enthusiasm for finding M and are helping him to learn other letters as well.



Four-year-olds Ari and Jean can identify many letters by name. Sometimes they point to the environmental print in the class and name the letters in such words as “markers”: “M–A–R–K–E–R–S.” Ari and Jean are learning to recognize the letters of the alphabet. Their teachers support children individually and in small and large groups in identifying letters in environmental print, and now the children are doing it on their own!

Five-year-old Alex likes to look through books on his own, often pretending to read them. With his teacher’s help he tries to sound out the names of his favorite dinosaurs. He sounds out the first letter and then tries to guess the dinosaur’s name. If the first letter is an S, he is likely to say “sssss,” pause, and then say “Stegasaurus!” His teachers are helping him to match letters and sounds.

Ways to encourage alphabet knowledge and early writing

Adults encourage children to develop alphabet knowledge and early writing when they talk about letter shapes, including differences and similarities between different letters, especially in children’s names and in family member’s names.

- ▶ Lowercase b and d look similar, but are backwards.
- ▶ Lowercase l is a line, and b is a line with a “belly.”
- ▶ An o is like a circle.
- ▶ “This letter [name letter] is in your name and in your mommy’s name.”



Adults help children recognize letters in print by pointing them out:

- ▶ In books, magazines, pamphlets, and greeting cards
- ▶ On tablet, computer, and smartphone screens
- ▶ In environmental print, such as signs, charts, or labels
- ▶ During routine writing opportunities—for example, by having preschool children “sign in” upon arrival or by pointing out written names and letters in names when parents sign in for infants and toddlers

What early writing looks like

Whenever very young children show interest in making marks of any kind, when they scribble or draw, and when they try to imitate the written communication of adults, they are developing their early writing skills!

Eight-month-old Juanita sees her mama writing a shopping list. She tries to grab the pencil so she can write, too. Later Juanita’s interest in the pen will develop as she imitates her mother and begins to understand that writing is a meaningful activity.

Juanita’s teacher, Miss Inez, has plenty of nontoxic markers and crayons for the 12-month-old infants in her class to explore and to use to make marks on bubble wrap. They realize how fun it is to make marks and sounds on the paper. It’s even more fun than chewing on the markers!

Min, who is 2 years and 10 months old, finishes his drawing and adds some scribbles at the bottom of the page.

His teacher asks him, "What did you draw?"

He says, "That says Min!" pointing to the scribbles.

His teacher replies, "Oh, this is your name. 'Min'!"

Min said, "Yes, M!" pointing to the scribble.



Min has learned that writing carries meaning and is creating his own emergent writing. Min's teachers provide opportunities for him to "write" and encourage his efforts.

Juan Carlos, who is 3½ years old, loves to "write" store names and make stop signs for the shopping center he has created with his friends in the block area. He is happy that his teacher has provided markers, small pieces of paper, tape, and popsicle sticks in a basket in the center so that they can make these signs and practice using writing for a real purpose—to show which store is the WalMart!

Four-year-olds Ari and Jean are very concerned about producing writing that is "right." They write their own names with care. They like to copy writing they see around the room so they can practice making words and letters.

Ari and Jean are developing their writing skills and beginning to focus on conventional print. Ari's and Jean's teachers support them by providing an alphabet chart and cards with common words combined with illustrations for them to use, like "car," "cat," "dog," and "bug."

Their teachers also encourage them to write, even if they do not know how to form a letter or spell a specific word. They know that children produce more writing when they are not too worried about conventional print.

Five-year-old Alex has begun to write his own stories about dinosaurs. These stories are a mix of writing and pictures. Alex carefully draws the dinosaur and makes emergent writing underneath.

Alex is developing his writing skills by beginning to write connected text, or longer strings of words. These strings are a mixture of conventional writing and emergent writing.

When his teachers ask Alex to read his writing back to them, they reinforce the idea that he is creating print that carries meaning. They help him learn to spell common words, and they encourage him to write longer texts, whether he can spell all of the words or not.

Stages of early writing and drawing development

Children who have seen adults use writing for everyday purposes and who have daily access to writing and drawing tools will do the following:

- ▶ Explore and play with writing and drawing tools by chewing on them and making marks on different kinds of surfaces
- ▶ Use writing and drawing tools, such as crayons, pencils and markers, to make marks on a page, with increasing intention and purpose
- ▶ Begin to make marks that look different from drawing, gradually scribbling with more writing-like marks
- ▶ Make disconnected scribbles when they realize that words are separated by white spaces on a page
- ▶ Attempt to form letters or words by creating the letter shapes on their own, copying letter shapes or tracing letter shapes
- ▶ Write letters and words that begin to look more and more like conventional letters (commonly not mastering this skill until kindergarten or later)



Children develop and use early writing by participating in print-rich environments at home and at school. In these environments, both children and adults use print and writing for real and interesting purposes, which adults model and discuss. In these environments, children are encouraged to write, even before they master conventional print.

- ▶ Children and adults interact with print and writing while shopping together.
 - ▶ Adults make shopping lists while children help.
 - ▶ Children help to follow the list and choose items as they shop together.
 - ▶ Children make lists for pretend shopping at school.
- ▶ Children and adults interact with print and writing while preparing meals.
 - ▶ Adults follow recipes and collect ingredients.
 - ▶ Children help follow recipes, adding ingredients.
 - ▶ Children make pretend recipes and cook at school with a toy kitchen.
- ▶ Children and adults interact with print and writing while making environmental print.
 - ▶ Adults write children's names on sign-in sheets, artwork, and personal belongings, labeling items in the classroom or at home.
 - ▶ Children "write" their name on their own artwork or on their belongings.
 - ▶ Adults make charts and signs that children can use during pretend play.

- ▶ Children and adults print and write together to complete projects and extend learning.
 - ▶ Children make observations in the science center or as part of an outdoor activity and watch as adults record these observations.
 - ▶ Children help adults make lists of needed items to complete a project, then follow the list as they collect the items.
 - ▶ Adults help children to “write” letters, thank-you notes, or other celebratory items.
 - ▶ Adults write children’s own stories, poems, or other texts and use them in class-made books.



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