

From Scribbles to Sentences

By Susan B. Neuman PhD | January 8, 2007

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Just as young children may pretend to read at an early age, they also begin to pretend to write. Children often begin by making marks on paper and calling it writing as early as the preschool years — scribbling a list, drawing circles and lines, filling an entire page with marks and calling it a story. As they move to kindergarten, these behaviors become more purposeful, less random, and more recognizable as writing. By the end of the year, most kindergartners will be able to write their names, as well as a few phrases such as "I love you."

Children often use these early writing attempts in their pretend play. They'll pretend to write traffic tickets, receipts, bills, and take telephone messages and orders from a menu. They'll experiment with the visual features, formats and conventions of writing, exploring and playing with the way language looks on the page. Many of these inventions will not look conventional by any means. But that's okay for now. You'll want to focus more on what your child is trying to write than on how he's writing it. The desire and motivation to write is what counts in these early years, not perfect spelling.

Sometimes drawing and writing, or "driting," is common in the preschool years. Children make pictures that combine letter or letter-like shapes and drawings. Some of children's earliest stories are mostly drawing, probably because drawing is more familiar and easier to control than writing. They may use a mixed medium of pictures, shapes and words to playfully engage in writing. You can support your child's writing by asking her to tell you about her story. Let her point to some of the pictures and marks and tell you what they are. Sometimes you might write a sentence below the "driting" to help her remember her story.

Through kindergarten and first grade, children will use a lot of "invented spellings," writing "bs" for "bus" or "kat" for cat. Parents sometimes worry that if they permit invented spellings, their children will never learn to spell correctly. Yet these spellings are very useful, because they provide a valuable window on learning. Children don't randomly pick letters to stand for a sound. Instead they seem to work hard to pick ones that makes some kind of sense to them. You can see from your child's writings, then, what sounds she is hearing, and what sounds she is not. Saying a word slowly will help her begin to attach new sounds with letter names.

There are lots of ways that you can strengthen your child's natural interest in writing. Bring along paper and crayons wherever you go. Read a story and then write a new ending for it together. You might even write a letter to your favorite author.

To develop as writers, children will need to find a balance between "doing it myself" and asking for help. Remember to offer prompts and encouragement, but use a light touch and follow your child's lead. As noted researcher Anne Haas Dyson, a professor at the University of Illinois, puts it, "We want to guide but not smother the emerging voices of our children."

About the Author

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