

Once young children become aware of the world of print, they want to start writing for themselves. Parents naturally want to encourage this, but it's important to not try and rush the process. There are natural stages of progression through which children pass before they attempt writing letters and words. These stages develop fine motor skills and awareness of what writing is all about. Remember, reading and writing complement each other, so for children to become writers they need to have regular exposure to books.

Making Marks on a Page

This stage, random scribbling, may not seem like real writing to parents, but it's the start. Children learn how to hold a pencil or crayon and start developing co-ordination, getting the writing tool to go where they want it to. Young children experience delight at seeing their own writing appear on the paper. Children just starting out on the writing journey need access to plenty of blank paper and crayons or thick pencils.

More Controlled Scribbles and Drawings

After a while children's efforts become more controlled and more recognizable marks and objects will start appearing. They will start telling a story to go with their writing.

Random Letters

As fine motor co-ordination develops, writing changes from drawings to random recognizable letters. This is an exciting stage for young children, as they recognize that not only can they make deliberate marks on a page, but those marks resemble marks they've seen in their story books. Again, children will be able to tell you exactly what they've written. Rather than ask what the letters say, parents should encourage children to read their stories to them.

Strings of Letters Together

After a while children will start stringing letters together. These may not make sense to parents, but they will to children. It is at this stage that children are ready to start writing their names with guidance from parents or a pre-school teacher. Most schools will ask parents to ensure their children write their names in lower case letters, with only a capital at the beginning, so it's best to learn to form these letters early, rather than having to unlearn a name written in upper case letters.

Conventional Writing

About the time of school entry, or soon after, most children will start unlocking the mystery of writing. They learn letter names and sounds, discover that letters can make words and words create sentences. This stage will happen much more easily if young children have had the opportunity to experiment with writing and progress naturally through the stages.

Hints for Parents

Provide opportunities for children to develop writing skills. Provide blank paper and large crayons or fat pencils initially.

Lined paper frustrates writers at these developing stages. Children focus more on the lines than on freely making marks on the paper. The time for lines will come once co-ordination is in place.

Let children observe you writing and encourage them to write when you are. Praise their efforts constantly.

Remember, don't try and rush the process. Children will learn to write more easily once all the early stages have been passed through. For some children, this may

take longer than others. By trying to hurry the process children will not experience the success they so eagerly look for at each stage.

Enjoy your children's early efforts. Keep a portfolio of selected, dated pieces of their work. They can then look back on their efforts later and appreciate the journey they have travelled.