

Many people believe that children learn to read and write in kindergarten or first grade. But developing literacy skills begins at birth through everyday loving interactions—sharing books, telling stories, singing songs, talking to one another, or pointing out and naming objects. Even painting, drawing or picking up things serve a purpose. These activities help develop hand muscles and coordination—skills necessary for learning how to write.

Adults—parents, grandparents and teachers—play a powerful role in preparing young children for future school success and in becoming self-confident and motivated learners.

Emergent Readers and Writers (pre-kindergarten through first grade)

- understand that written language conveys messages
- pretend read and write: they turn pages of books, invent the story using pictures and their memory of a story
- begin to match spoken words with print
- may know some letter names and some letter sound associations
- may recognize some words and letters in their environment or in texts; but not again in a different context; they may still be unsure of the concept of "word" or "letter"
- can write some letters, usually those in their own names
- in writing may reverse some letters, and may use mostly upper case letters
- may make scribbles or strings of random letters with no spaces; one letter may represent a whole word
- may "read" or attribute meaning to his or her marks; may not be able to "re-read" these marks at a later time.



Children in this phase benefit from:

- seeing reading and writing modeled through listening to good stories and seeing others write meaningful messages
- supported practice while reading engaging, predictable books with pictures that clearly relate to and illustrate the story line
- encouragement to experiment with writing
- experience with sorting words and pictures to build letter and sound recognition
- experience with rhyming and other word play
- activities that engage students in using oral and written language

NOTE: Keep in mind that the grade levels associated with each phase described below are only approximate. In each grade there are likely to be children in all phases of literacy acquisition. Also, remember that within each phase there may be a range of learners who are developing in different ways.

(<http://www.bnkst.edu/literacyguide/early2.html>)

A Scribble or a Masterpiece? How Your Child's Writing and Art Changes Over Time

Creativity is a bridge to learning. When your child is creative and curious, she can come up with answers to the problems she encounters—like how to keep the block tower from falling. Creativity helps your child become a thoughtful, inquisitive, and confident learner later on, when she starts school.

One of the most important ways that your toddler is tuning in to her creativity is by experimenting with art materials. As she grabs that chunky crayon and gets to work, you will see her art and writing change and become more controlled and complex as she grows.

For very young children, art and early writing skills are one and the same. At first, it's all about just figuring out what these cool things called crayons can do. Then your child discovers the link between her hand holding the crayon and the line she made on the page: Presto! She experiences the power of cause-and-effect. Imagine how exciting this must be for her! She can now make a real "mark" on the world. This leap in thinking skills is helped along by her new ability to hold things in her hands and fingers. The growing control your child has over the muscles in her hands lets her move a marker or paintbrush with purpose and with a goal in mind.

For very young children, there are four stages of drawing and writing that you may see as your child grows from 15 months old to 3 years of age. Note that the timetables listed below are approximate; your child may master these skills faster or slower and still be developing just fine. Growth doesn't happen at the same speed for every child, but by offering repeated fun experiences with a variety of art and writing materials, you will see forward progress over time.

Stage 1: Random Scribbling (15 months to 2 1/2 years)

This is the period when young children are just figuring out that their movements result in the lines and scribbles they see on the page. These scribbles are usually the result of large movements from the shoulder, with the crayon or marker held in the child's fist. There is joy in creating art at all ages, but at this stage especially, many children relish the feedback they are getting from their senses: the way the crayon feels, the smell of the paint, the squishy-ness of the clay.

For other children, this sensory information may be too much and they may not enjoy some art activities at this stage (like finger-painting). As they grow to tolerate more sensory input, you can incrementally re-introduce art activities into their routine.

Stage 2: Controlled Scribbling (2 years to 3 years)

As children develop better control over the muscles in their hands and fingers, their scribbles begin to change and become more controlled. Toddlers may make repeated marks on the page—open circles, diagonal, curved, horizontal or vertical lines. Over time, children make the transition to holding the crayon or marker between their thumb and pointer finger.

Stage 3: Lines and Patterns (2 1/2 years to 3 1/2 years)

Children now understand that writing is made up of lines, curves, and repeated patterns. They try to imitate this in their own writing. So while they may not write actual letters, you may see components of letters in their drawing. These might include lines, dots and curves. This is an exciting time as your toddler realizes that his drawing conveys meaning! For example, he may write something down and then tell you what word it says. This is an important step toward reading and writing.

Stage 4: Pictures of Objects or People (3 years to 5 years)

Many adults think of "pictures" as a picture of something. This ability to hold an image in your mind and then represent it on the page is a thinking skill that takes some time to develop. At first, children name their unplanned creations. This means that they finish the picture and then label their masterpiece with the names of people, animals, or objects they are familiar with. This changes over time. Soon you will see your child clearly planning prior to drawing what he will create. You will also see more detail in the pictures, more control in the way your child handles the crayon or marker, and the use of more colors. What else to be on the lookout for? Children's first pictures often build off circles. So, you may see a sun—an irregular circle, with lots of stick "rays" shooting out—or a person (usually a circle with roughly recognizable human features).

Once your child has begun to purposefully draw images, she has mastered symbolic thinking. This important milestone in thinking skills means that your child understands that lines on paper can be a symbol of something else, like a house, a cat or a person. At this stage, your child also begins to understand the difference between pictures and writing. So you may see him draw a picture and then scribble some "words" underneath to describe what he has drawn or to tell a story. When your child is able to share his story with you, he will be motivated to "author" more and more work as he grows.

Stage 5: Letter and Word Practice (3 to 5 years)

Children have had experience with letters and print for several years now and are beginning to use letters in their own writing. Usually children start by experimenting with the letters in their own names, as these are most familiar to them. They also make “pretend letters” by copying familiar letter shapes, and will often assume that their created letter must be real because it looks like other letters they have seen (Robertson, 2007).

During this time, children also begin to understand that some words are made of symbols that are shorter and some words are made of symbols that are longer. As a result, their scribbles change. Rather than one long string of letters or letter-like shapes, your child's writing now has short and long patterns that look like words or sentences. While these letters and words are probably not technically correct, it does not matter. This exciting milestone means that your child is beginning to understand that text and print have meaning.

What Can You Do to Encourage Art and Writing Skills?

Make art a regular part of playtime. Offer chunky, easy-to-grip crayons, thick pencils, and washable markers. Cut paper bags up to draw on. Sometimes it helps young children out if you tape the paper down on the table so it doesn't move as they draw. As your child grows, you can include washable paints, child-safe scissors and glue, and homemade salt-dough as part of your child's creative time. (For salt-dough recipes, check the Internet or your local library.) Let your child wear an old shirt of yours (with sleeves cut off) as a smock and lay newspaper or an old shower curtain over the table to keep it clean.

No need for instructions. Let your child experiment and explore. Creativity means having the power to express yourself in your own way (Lagoni, et al., 1989). This independence is just what a growing toddler is looking for to feel confident, competent, and clever. By sitting nearby, observing and taking pleasure in your child's creation, you are providing all the guidance he needs.

Notice the process, not just the product. As parents, we often tend to compliment children on their successes: What's that a picture of? A house? That's great! And sometimes we get hung up on the fact that trees should be green, not purple. Sometimes we quiz: What's the name of that color? But children learn more when we don't focus so much on what they are drawing, but on what they are thinking about their drawing. Take a few moments to observe your child's work: Look at the lines you are making—there are so many of them! Or, That picture is really interesting. Those colors make me feel happy. Or, I see you are working really hard on your drawing. Or just: Tell me about your picture. Then see if your child is interested in sharing more. Experiment with a variety of art materials as your child nears 3. Let children paint with cotton balls, q-tips, sponges, string—you name it. Give your child crayons and rub over a textured surface (like a coin or a screen). Draw with chalk outside on a sidewalk; see how water changes the color of the chalk. Add powdered paint or glitter to your child's sand play. Or add a new dimension to water play by adding drops of washable food coloring to the water. What happens when you mix two different colors of water together?

Use art to help your child express strong feelings. Is your child having a tantrum? Offer some play-dough or set out the markers and paper and suggest she make a very, very angry picture. Creative activities can sometimes help children express and make sense of feelings that are too intense for them to share in words.

Encourage your child's attempts to write. If your child scribbles something and then tells you what he "wrote," take it seriously. Let him take his "shopping list" to the supermarket or mail his (scribbled) letter to grandma. This is how children learn that words are powerful and have meaning.

Display your child's art and writing. This is how your child knows her work is valued and important.

Creative activities help children to learn how to solve problems, come up with their own answers, discover the cause-and-effect of their actions, and feel confident about the choices they make. Art experiences help children develop independence within limits, and gives them the opportunity to represent their ideas on paper or in other formats. Most importantly, creative expression lets children tap into the magic of their own imaginations—which is what being a child is all about.

Books: Supporting Early Reading

Choosing Books for Babies and Toddlers

For Babies 0-6 Months

- Books with simple, large pictures or designs with bright colors.
- Stiff cardboard, "chunky" books, or fold out books that can be propped up in the crib.
- Cloth and soft vinyl books with simple pictures of people or familiar objects that can go in the bath or get washed.

For Babies 6-12 Months

- Board books with photos of other babies.
- Brightly colored "chunky" board books to touch and taste!
- Books with photos of familiar objects like balls and bottles.
- Books with sturdy pages that can be propped up or spread out in the crib or on a blanket.
- Plastic/vinyl books for bath time.
- Washable cloth books to cuddle and mouth.
- Small plastic photo albums of family and friends.

For Young Toddlers 12-24 Months

- Sturdy board books that they can carry.
- Books with photos of children doing familiar things like sleeping or playing.
- Goodnight books for bed time.
- Books about saying good-bye and hello.
- Books with only a few words on each page.
- Books with brightly colored, engaging illustrations.

- Books with simple rhymes or predictable text.
- Touch-and-feel books.
- Animal books of all sizes and shapes.

For Older Toddlers 24-36 Months

- Books that tell simple stories.
- Simple rhyming books that they can memorize.
- Bed time books.
- Books about counting, the alphabet, shapes or sizes.
- Animal books, vehicle books, books about playtime.
- Pop-up books, pull-the-tab books, touch-and-feel books.
- Books with humorous pictures and words.

For Preschoolers 3-5 Years

- Books about children that look and live like them, as well as about children living very different lives.
- Counting books or other "concept" books about things like size or time.
- Simple "science" books about things and how they work—like garbage trucks, flowers or tools.
- Books about things in which they have a special interest in such as trains, animals or cooking.
- Books about making friends. (Also books about dealing with the challenges of friendships—making up after an argument, dealing with a bossy friend, etc.)
- Books about going to school or to the doctor.
- Books about having brothers or sisters.
- Books with simple text that they can memorize or read!

Tips for Sharing Books With Babies And Toddlers

The first—and best—tip for sharing books with young children is to have fun together. If children are engaged and enjoying themselves, they are learning. When children have positive interactions with books, they are developing good feelings about reading, which will motivate them to continue seeking out books and other literacy materials as they grow.

Here are some other ideas for nurturing early literacy skills in your baby or toddler:

A Few Minutes at a Time is OK

And don't worry if you don't finish the story. Young children can only sit for a few minutes for a story, but as they grow, they will be able to sit longer. Let your child decide how much (or how little) time you spend reading. And you don't need to read every page. You may find that your child has a favorite page or even a favorite picture. She may want to linger there for a while, and then switch books or activities. Babies may just want to mouth the book! That's okay. When you let your child explore books in the ways that interest her, the reading experience will be more meaningful.

Talk or Sing About the Pictures

You do not have to read the words to tell a story. Try "reading" the pictures in a book for your child sometime. When your child is old enough, ask him to read the pictures to you!

Let Children Turn the Pages

Babies cannot yet turn pages on their own, but an 18-month-old will want to give it a try, and a three-year-old can certainly do it alone. Remember, it's OK to skip pages!

Show Children the Cover Page

Explain what the story is about. If you have an older toddler, ask them to guess what the story might be about.

Show Children the Words

Run your finger along the words as you read them, from left to right.

Make the Story Come Alive

Create voices for the story characters and use your body to tell the story.

Make It Personal

Talk about your own family, pets, or community when you are reading about others in a story.

Ask Questions About the Story, and Let Children Ask Questions Too!

Use the story to have a back-and-forth conversation with your child. Talk about familiar activities and objects you see in the illustrations or read about in the story.

Let Children Tell The Story

Children as young as three years old can memorize a story, and many children love to be creative through storytelling.

Create Books Together

Make photo books of family members. Cut pictures out of magazines or catalogs to make word books. Make a color book by having fun with crayons, markers, and paints. As your child gets older, have him or her dictate a story to you and then draw pictures to go with the words.

Make Books a Part of Your Daily Routine

The more that books are woven into children's everyday lives, the more likely they will be to see reading as a pleasure and a gift.

At Meal Times

Sing or read a story during a moment of quiet nursing or to gather the kids around the noisy breakfast table.

In the Car or On the Bus

Keep a few books in the car or in your diaper bag to keep your little ones quiet and busy.

At Child Care Drop Off

Calm a crying child at good-bye time with a favorite story or lullaby. Leave a photo book with pictures of loved family members at child care so your child can flip through it when she is missing you.

At the Doctor's Office

Read or tell a soothing story to your little one in the waiting room and sing or talk through the scary parts of the visit. Before the visit, read books about going to the doctor so your child knows what to expect.

At the Grocery Store

Put a few board books in the shopping cart or tie a cloth book to the shopping cart so you're not cleaning up books from the floor as you go!

At Nap Time

Familiar routines always help babies calm down. Use books and stories to quietly ease your baby to sleep.

At Day's End

You are exhausted, the baby is fussy. Lie down on the floor surrounded by books. Play a book on tape for your baby. Sing a song together while you all try to relax a bit.

At Bath Time

Plastic bath time books are great fun and may help a fussy baby enjoy the tub a little more.

At Bed Time

Soothing books and stories can work magic with babies who fight sleep!