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# Emerging Knowledge about Emergent Writing

Kelley Mayer

studying what is important in helping children become better readers, we should also consider children's beginning understandings of the writing process. Like reading, writing abilities emerge as children interact with people, materials, and print in multiple environments.

This article reviews the research on young children's emergent writing and discusses the implications of this research base for teaching preschool children today.

## How writing skills develop

Generally, theorists agree that children explore writing by drawing and scribbling. Several studies document that children learn to write before beginning school (Freeman & Sanders 1989; McGee & Purcell-Gates 1997). These studies acknowledge that through this exploration children understand that writing conveys meaning. Frequently, children combine writing and drawing in their early development (Barnhart & Sulzby 1986; Morrow & Sharkey 1993; Bus et al. 2001). Young children do not distinguish between the two mediums but use both to express themselves.

As children begin to notice print in their environments, they try to create products that look like real writing in an attempt to communicate messages. For example, children may include letterlike

**P**olicy makers now regard preschool as foundational in helping children become successful readers and writers. State and national standards for early education, being implemented across the country, emphasize early experiences with print as important for children's later literacy development.

Although researchers in education have begun to investigate and understand the importance of early reading activities for preschool children, less research has focused on the importance of young children's early writing experiences. Marie Clay documents the concern, noting that "most parents and teachers believe that preschool reading experiences are very important but know almost nothing about the value of preschool writing experiences" (2001, 13).

To focus on reading alone disregards the importance of children's experiences with writing. Reading and writing skills develop simultaneously and are interconnected. Progress in one fuels development of the other. Thus, when

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figures or write in continuous lines from left to right. Eventually they learn to form alphabet letters appropriately and start stringing letters together. The ability to write their first names is generally one of the first skills children grasp. Tolchinsky (2006) believes this is due to the self-centeredness of children at this age. Their names are meaningful to them; thus they are motivated to learn to write them.

These attempts to write words may or may not represent actual spellings of the words intended, yet children's writing is purposeful and meaningful. Children use their writing to tell stories or relate personal experiences, often exploring topics that are familiar to them. Once children master the idea that letters represent sounds, they use their knowledge of sounds in their attempts to spell words. As their abilities improve, they are likely to create texts of greater length and conventionality as well as compose complex messages from a variety of genres.

### Evidence of writing knowledge

While we can tie writing development to the chronological age of the child, research findings show that children often move between levels of writing (Barnhart & Sulzby 1986; Fox & Saracho 1990; Burns & Casbergue 1992; Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998; Bus et al. 2001). Writing development generally occurs between the ages of three and five, during the preschool years, and can extend into the years of kindergarten and first grade. *Emergent writing* means that children

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begin to understand that writing is a form of communication and their marks on paper convey a message. Emergent forms of writing include drawing, scribbling from left to right, creating

letterlike forms, or creating random strings of letters, *all used*—sometimes even simultaneously—in the child's attempt to communicate an idea through print.

Children continually explore different forms of writing. Even as they add new forms to their knowledge base, older forms continue to appear, but with less and less frequency (Fox & Saracho 1990; Burns & Casbergue 1992; Greer & Lockman 1998; Bus et al. 2001). As educators we can think of this process of children's attempting to solve the written language puzzle, with children gradually putting the pieces (in this case, writing skills and writing processes) together to build a complete picture, a coherent written message (Fox & Saracho 1990).

Children display their knowledge of writing in many ways, depending on the communication task. The more complex the task, the more emergent the form of writing used by the child (Barnhart & Sulzby 1986; Fox & Saracho 1990; Strickland & Morrow 1991; Burns & Casbergue 1992;

Greer & Lockman 1998; Bus et al. 2001). Yet, even when young children are aware of the representative function of letters, they may still produce writing samples characteristic of lower levels of development in order to preserve a message they are trying to convey (Barnhart & Sulzby 1986; Fox & Saracho 1990; Burns & Casbergue 1992).

**Hannah, a kindergartner, abandons all knowledge of letter sounds when her teacher asks her to write a letter to her friend Sylvia. Hannah generally writes words well, labeling each with its beginning consonant. This time, however, Hannah is eager to tell Sylvia about her upcoming birthday party. To represent this message, Hannah writes only the date of the party, with assistance from her teacher, and draws a picture of a birthday cake. Rather than attempting to spell a longer word, like *birthday*, she chooses to represent the idea by drawing a birthday cake.**

**When Hannah's teacher asks her to write additional information about the party, she writes only her name and Sylvia's but does not attempt any other words.**

Children continue to produce writing at lower levels of development until they have gained sufficient confidence in using more advanced skills (Barnhart & Sulzby 1986; Fox & Saracho 1990; Morrow & Sharkey 1999; Schickedanz 1999). Moreover, as Schickedanz and Casbergue (2004) argue, initially children do not distinguish between drawing and writing because both convey meaning.

### Learning to write—A social process

Children gain knowledge about how to write through their observations and interactions with more advanced writers (Teale 1995; Chapman 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates 1997; Morrow & Sharkey 1999; Schickedanz 1999). Before formal schooling, a great deal of learning occurs through a child's interactions with people and things in the home and the larger community environment (Teale 1995; Chapman 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates 1997; Schickedanz 1999).

In these environments learning to write is an interactive process, with children writing in active and constructive ways versus inventing knowledge (Chapman 1996; Schickedanz 1999). Helping parents construct grocery lists or write letters or e-mails to distant family members are examples. Children also learn a great deal about print when families point out and discuss signs and other environmental print in their neighborhoods, such as popular restaurant, store, or gas station signs (Neuman & Roskos 1993).

### Writing with peers

In addition to their family, children learn from their peers. Having opportunities to explore writing through interactions with peers is important for children in preschool. In studies of children's writing development, Dyson (1997, 2003) illustrates how children learn about writing by constructing texts with one another and expressing their ideas in other unbounded ways. Through various opportunities to write with other children, interact with them about topics of interest—such as famous sports figures or

cartoon characters—children play around with conceptions of themselves as authors. These informal writing experiences help children understand the responsibility of a writer to an audience of readers, as they work with others to coconstruct the written word or clarify intended messages (Dyson 1997, 2003).

Children's interactions with one another help them explore and understand the process and purposes of writing (Morrow & Sharkey 1993; Teale 1995; Schickedanz 1999). When writing with one another, children discuss choices they make in the message content. Far less often do teachers or families observe children talking about the mechanics of writing or composition strategies. For example, in *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*, Dyson (2003) describes an interaction between two first grade girls in which they work together to compose a scary story.

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As first-grader Vanessa writes, she consistently seeks spelling help from Denise, as spelling is one of Denise's strengths. However, when trying to come up with a title for the story, Denise seeks the help of Vanessa.

**Vanessa:** What's the title going to be?

**Denise:** "One Boy and Two Girls."

**Vanessa:** That's not good.

**Denise:** What should it be then? "The Man and Two Women."

**Vanessa:** That's not good either.

Denise offers several other suggestions, which Vanessa rejects, until . . .

**Denise:** I know what it should be called: "The Vampire."

**Vanessa:** Ah, whatever you want. (*resigned*) Wait! It should be, "Be Careful What You Wish For."

Denise seems to like this suggestion.

**Denise:** And a girl could say, "I wish I was a vampire." And she could turn into a vampire. (Dyson 2003, 161)

Denise and Vanessa worked together, calling on each other's strengths to aid their attempts at writing a scary story. From the interaction, both girls benefited from being able to discuss the choices they made while writing.

### Writing with teacher support

Children benefit from working not only with peers but also with teachers. Writing with a teacher's support enables children to receive immediate feedback and helps them understand how the writing process works. With supportive teachers, children make greater progress in learning to write. Teachers described as supportive answer student questions thoughtfully, acknowledge writing strengths, scaffold children's writing activities, and encourage writing with verbal affirmations (Saracho 1990; Strickland & Morrow 1991; Burns & Casbergue 1992; Chapman 1996; Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998).

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Several studies emphasize the importance of teacher modeling in children's acquisition of writing skills. Modeling is an interactive process in which a child constructs knowledge with a more advanced writer such as the teacher. Through interaction, children better understand the purposes of writing as well as the mechanics (Teale 1995; Yaden &

Tardibuono 2004). When modeling writing skills, teachers explicitly state each move they make in constructing a text. For example, a teacher may begin by saying,

I want to write a letter to my friend, Mya, today. She lives far away, so we write letters to tell each other about what is happening in our lives. I want to tell her about my recent vacation in this letter. I will start my letter by writing, "Dear Mya." Then I usually ask her how she is doing, and I write, "I just got back from a great trip." Next, I need to think about the most important or exciting things that happened on the trip that I want to tell her about.

This teacher modeled the process writers use when they construct a text. She began by stating the purpose for writing and then described her plan for the content of the letter. The teacher took time to explain common structures used in letter writing, like the formal greeting.

Opportunities to witness authors in the act of constructing a text allow children to begin understanding the composing process. Over time, children can internalize the thinking process needed and use it when independently constructing texts. In interacting with teachers, children can discuss the use of punctuation, spacing, and spelling, among other things.

### Environments for writing

Children's writing develops further when the learning environment supports early attempts to write. Such an environment includes attentiveness to the classroom setting and materials as well as the instruction provided. Giving children free access to writing materials and print supports their writing development (Tangel & Blachman 1992; Yaden & Tardibuono 2004).

Printed labels on common classroom objects need to be visually accessible for children learning to write (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp 2000). Teachers want to place labels at children's eye level and print letters fairly large. Children often begin to explore writing by copying the names of familiar objects (Saracho 1990; Schickedanz 1999; Clay 2001), such as classmates' names or names of favorite toys. Not only do labels need to be accessible to children, but teachers want to continuously refer to the names of things to stimulate children's awareness of print in their environment (West & Egley 1998).

Teachers should only label items that are commonly referred to or written about in everyday activity. This may include objects or phrases serving functional purposes in the classroom, such as a sign that reads "Please wash your hands" posted on the bathroom door or "Take one cup of pretzels" at the snack table. When labeling items, make sure to use appropriate capitalization, beginning words with capitals letters only when needed, such as in a child's name. Also provide children with print from a variety of script (or font) styles to expose them to the variety of ways words and letters can be written in their environments. For example, children need to see a lowercase *a* written both as *a* and as *a*.

When children are writing, teachers may want to refer them to places in the room where words are commonly found. For example, teachers can steer children to words in books or in poems or songs on posters hung on the walls. Teachers can use alphabet blocks, magnet letters, or *ABC* charts to help children with letter-sound matching or letter formation.

Children need a generous amount of time to write using a variety of writing materials, not just pencils (Aram & Biron 2004; Yaden & Tardibuono 2004). Having opportunities to write with different materials helps motivate children to write and builds fine motor skills (Greer & Lockman 1998). These opportunities are particularly important for children with disabilities. Alternative writing tools that help build the fine motor control needed for writing include pencils with grips, carpenter pencils, pyramid pencils, or crayons. Computers, software programs, and other assistive technology devices are also becoming more readily available to teachers of children with special needs.

Motor control is needed in writing; children learn how to adapt their writing when using different implements or writing on varied surfaces. Some children may need help controlling the paper, so taping it to the surface or using a clipboard can be beneficial. The angle of the writing surface is also a consideration. If children write better when the paper is at an angle, attach it to a large 3-ring binder to give the needed support.

Before introducing these tools to children, it is important for teachers to model their appropriate use, discussing with the children how each tool aids their writing (Morrow 2005). A variety of materials encourages creativity, as children explore and discover new uses. Classrooms with writing centers stocked with multiple materials for children to write with and write on foster a high level of writing development.

Effective early childhood teachers help children feel free in their writing (Strickland & Morrow 1991). They interact with



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children engaged in play in classroom activity centers and introduce the idea of using writing as a part of children's play. For example, when children are acting out a hospital scenario, the teacher can encourage them to write prescriptions for one another or record patients' medical problems on a chart.

A supportive environment is one in which children feel empowered to write for real reasons. When engaged in center play where writing materials are readily available, children will be able to brainstorm authentic ways (Burns & Casbergue 1992; Chapman 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates 1997) to use the materials to aid their play. Examples include writing menus at a restaurant center, creating road maps at the block center, or recording observations of the results of experiments conducted at the science center. Children may even enjoy having writing materials available during outdoor play for labeling sandbox creations, drawing treasure maps, or establishing and recording the rules for a new outdoor game (Giles & Wellhousen 2005).

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### **Supporting children's emergent writing**

In this synthesis of research on emergent writing are several important implications for preschool teachers.

**1. Developmental awareness.** Children's writing development is not linear in progression, nor is the progression the same for all children. It is important for teachers to be aware of each child's developmental strengths and needs. Teachers can encourage young children to concentrate more intently on their message than on letter formation or spelling. Children should have plenty of opportunities to choose their own writing topics. These opportunities not only increase children's motivation to write but also serve as effective ways to support children's cultural understandings of literacy.

By encouraging children to write in ways they are comfortable with, teachers are more likely to enhance their development, lowering the chance of hindering learning progress by requiring them to write in an unfamiliar style or genre. By not honoring children's early conceptions of writing expressed in their initial explorations, we risk being culturally inappropriate. Children who write in an imaginative, playful style may need help later if they have difficulty writing for more informative purposes.

**2. Supportive instruction.** Teachers can observe children and provide instruction tailored to address individual interests and needs. When children choose their



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own topics, they are not overwhelmed by having to both think of something to write about and remember to use appropriate mechanics or accurate spelling.

Once children feel confident with the mechanics of writing, they will begin to demonstrate this knowledge when writing and will benefit from additional support in their use of writing skills. Understanding when children are ready for instruction that focuses on mechanics requires a teacher to do a great deal of "child watching." Observe children in the act of writing. This is the best way to identify developmental needs and to be ready to meet them at the appropriate level.

**3. Opportunities to write.** Give children plenty of opportunities to write without their having to conform to adult standards. Journal writing is not just for kindergartners. With encouragement, preschoolers can write in journals on a daily basis and choose their own topics. Children are motivated to write in journals that have special meaning, like diaries of activities carried out at home or scientific logs in which children observe and record changes in plant growth. Some may enjoy

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writing in the traditional, black and white composition notebooks, reasonably priced in office supply stores. To create journals in the classroom, children can staple together blank pieces of white paper along with a construction paper cover with the child's name. Children can personalize their journal covers by decorating as they choose.

**4. Models for writing.** Research shows that children learn new skills by observing others engaged in meaningful writing activities (Fox & Saracho 1990; Saracho 1990; Burns & Casbergue 1992; Chapman 1996). Thus, structuring time in the day for children to interact with various others on writing projects is vital. Moreover, exposing children to advanced writers modeling both the mechanics of and purposes for writing furthers skill development.

Parents, teachers, and older students can serve as writing models for younger children. For example, teachers can engage the whole class (or a small group) in writing a story about a recent field trip or special class event. Using large paper on an easel allows children to see their teacher model letter formation, directionality, spacing, and text placement, among other things. A parent volunteer might model writing by helping the class handwrite, or use a computer to create, thank-you notes to school staff or a newsletter on class events to be shared with families.

**5. Motivating environments and resources.** Classrooms encourage appropriate writing development through their physical arrangement and the types of materials and activities available to the children. Young children enjoy and benefit from practice writing with pencils, pens, markers, crayons, chalk, and paint. Provide these materials in a variety of sizes to fit young hands appropriately so children can explore how to use them and grow in skill and creativity.

Children can write on a variety of surfaces and planes other than flat paper, such as chalk boards, dry-erase boards, painting easels, and the playground blacktop. Different surfaces require different amounts of hand strength and positioning. Having choices not only helps increase children's motivation to write but also provides challenges that help build the fine motor skills needed for letter formation. Encouraging children to experiment with writing in more

tactile ways, such as in sand, shaving foam, confetti, or salt, stimulates creativity and makes writing fun.

Many young children best demonstrate their learning success through other forms, such as kinesthetic activity, and teachers want to be sure to give children these opportunities. An example is to have children practice letter formation using movements involving their whole arm to write letters in the air or lie down on the ground to create letter shapes together using their entire bodies.



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**6. Locations for writing.** Preschool teachers will want to make materials for writing available throughout the classroom and outdoors to encourage children to write at different times and as a part of varied activities. The teacher can suggest how children can integrate the use of writing materials in various centers as a part of their play. This writing for child-centered, meaningful purposes serves as one way to encourage the development of writing skills.

The block center provides an example. Children can use writing materials to create road maps, street signs, or blueprints. Teachers can invite children to write about a structure they have created, adding the steps they took to build it. Children might make a sign asking others to leave their building standing. Displaying this writing in the block center encourages other future builders to refer to it and to write additional ideas.

At the reading center, children can use writing materials to express what they enjoyed in the stories or to write letters to friends about a good book they have read. Tailoring writing instruction to meet children's needs in developmentally appropriate ways is the teacher's goal rather than strictly following a direct skills approach. Opportunities to teach writing occur naturally as children ask questions when engaged in writing activities. For example, when asked about a particular spelling, the teacher can refer the child to a resource in the room where the word can be found (like a book or ABC chart) or help the child identify the beginning sound in the word.

## Conclusion

Writing develops differently for each child. Understanding this, teachers can use their knowledge to provide learning experiences that meet children's individual needs and engage their individual interests. Giving children opportunities to learn about writing through interactions with peers and teachers are foundational to children's early conceptions of writing. When these opportunities are abundant in preschool classrooms, children enter kindergarten with a strong literacy base and the potential for experiencing school success. Children leave preschool with a feeling of empowerment, seeing themselves as budding readers and writers.

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## To Correct or Not to Correct? The Answer May Surprise You

Do you ever wonder about whether to correct children's letter formations and invented spelling? Although it may seem counterintuitive, correcting may not facilitate writing development, and in some instances may hinder it. Young writers need to test boundaries—and when they do, they tend to make errors. It's important to view those errors not as problems, but as opportunities to learn about each writer (Clay 1975). Common errors occur at each level of writing development; knowing these errors helps you place each child on the continuum. Correcting every error may discourage early writers from fully exploring this new way of conveying meaning. When you allow developmentally appropriate errors, children become eager to write!

As early childhood educators, we should always be asking ourselves *why* we are considering making certain corrections and *how* those corrections will promote early writing skills. If you feel that particular children are not transitioning into the next level as you would expect, don't hesitate to intervene.

Perhaps one of your children always writes letter strings from right to left. You can model that we write from left to right a number of times in the day, such as when you are writing names for jobs of the day in front of the whole group or when you're working with individual students as they write in their journals. Always ask children to write their name in the upper left corner of their paper (not the right, as students typically do in middle school). This orients children's eyes to the left and gives them nowhere else to go with their letters but to the right. Put a mark in the corner where they should start writing.

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From V.S. Bennett-Armistead, N.K. Duke, & A.M. Moses, *Literacy and the Youngest Learner: Best Practices for Educators of Children from Birth to 5* (New York: Scholastic, 2005), 147. Reprinted with permission. Available from NAEYC.

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