

Laying the Foundation for Writing

FAMILY FEATURES

Learning to write is one of the defining milestones of early childhood, but it doesn't happen all at once. Children build writing skills over time, from indecipherable scribbles to writing letters and words. While children progress at their own pace, families can help foster early writing development.

Dr. Lauren Loquasto, senior vice president and chief academic officer at The Goddard School, and Dr. Sonia Cabell, professor of reading education at Florida State University and member of The Goddard School's Educational Advisory Board, provide this insight and guidance for families.

Early Writing Milestones

Writing begins in early toddlerhood, around 18-24 months. The earliest developmental milestone is when children scribble on paper with a crayon.

By 2-3 years old, children often draw shapes and narrate their writing. Parents should show genuine interest to help build confidence and interest. Ask your children to read what they write, as this helps make the connection that marks on paper represent thoughts and ideas. It's not expected for children younger than 3 to write identifiable letters. Instead, encourage them to make marks on paper without constraint, allowing them to freely express themselves.

Around ages 3-5, children begin to move from writing (making marks) to handwriting, which is the formalized motion of making numerals and letters in recognizable forms. It's vital for parents to value their children's writing no matter what appears on the paper and provide opportunities for them to regularly engage in writing. Children at this age tend to write letters in different ways. It's common, for example, for letters to appear backwards or from right to left. These are not causes for concern; this is a natural part of the development process.



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Writing Supports Reading (and Vice Versa)

Reading and writing skills develop in tandem, reinforcing each other. Through writing, children experiment with how written language works, learning English moves from left to right and top to bottom. By estimating spelling – using their knowledge of letter shapes and sounds to attempt to write words – they are beginning to break the code of reading. Moreover, when children are composing stories, they are supporting comprehension and oral language growth, which are critical for reading development.

Encourage Writing at Home

Make writing part of everyday life. While ensuring paper and writing utensils are accessible is a start, materials alone won't spontaneously create writing experiences. Children naturally want to engage with things they see, so parents and older siblings should serve as writing models. For example, when writing a grocery list, ask your children to write their own lists. When you're writing a thank-you note, have them write their own.

The development of fine motor skills is also essential. One way to do this is provide tools like chopsticks or tongs that require them to use their forefinger and thumb in a pinching motion; this strengthens the hand muscles that

are used to write. Also encourage play with small toys like blocks or beads that engage the hands in different ways. As fine motor skills improve, it becomes easier to grip writing utensils and write for extended periods.

Writing Tools

From apps to workbooks, countless tools and resources tout their ability to help children learn to write. Be wary. Typing on a tablet or computer is no substitute for learning to write by hand. Multiple studies have shown that writing – not typing – better promotes cognitive and literacy development.

Avoid activities like workbooks that require repetitive writing of letters over and over, as this inhibits creativity and experimentation. These activities can cause children to fear making mistakes, which can lead to anxiety, frustration and a loss of interest. The best tools are often the simplest: a small writing utensil (not big or bulky; children have small hands and need appropriately sized utensils) and a blank piece of paper.

Remember, children develop at their own pace. Provide encouragement and focus on effort, not perfection.

To watch a writing webinar featuring Loquasto and Cabell and access additional parenting resources, visit the Parent Resource Center at GoddardSchool.com.