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Let's Get Writing.docx

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Let's Get Writing

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What do you think of when you hear the phrase “writing in preschool?” For some, the word “writing” conjures up visions of dotted worksheets with repetitive alphabet letters. Others may think of the squiggles and lines and circles drawn on notepads and chalkboards throughout their classrooms. For many teachers, the bigger question becomes, “Is teaching writing developmentally appropriate in preschool and, if so, how?”

Just like reading great books, engaging in rich conversations, understanding the concepts of the alphabet, and strong foundational language skills matter, writing is a critical component of the early childhood Language Arts curriculum. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has described appropriate writing practices in early childhood in the book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 3rd Edition*.¹ The following focus areas provide guidelines and suggestions from NAEYC for supporting writing development in the classroom.

Focus on Fine Motor Development. Getting ready to write takes a lot of fine motor development. This is because children develop control over their hands and fingers last. It is during the early childhood years that we help support this development. Beading, lacing, squeezing, tearing, cutting, gluing, hammering, building, and so on, help children strengthen their fine motor skills on a daily basis. Maria Montessori called these “preparatory exercises” for writing.² These types of activities have been used in early childhood classrooms for decades because they work! When parents ask, “Why do you build and lace and hammer in preschool?” you can confidently say, “We are preparing their hands for writing.”



Children practicing fine motor skills through hammering, lacing and building.

Focus on a Print Rich Environment. In order for children to care about writing, they must understand the purpose of it. Most often children begin paying attention to print long before they enter the early childhood classroom. Even very young children learn to recognize familiar places they frequent such as grocery stores, restaurants or gas stations. They also learn to identify familiar foods by its packaging. Teachers can support children’s print awareness bringing in familiar environmental print, using teacher

writing, and labeling classroom spaces. In this context, children continue to build an understanding that “print provides a message.” With this understanding, they begin to develop the desire to create messages of their own.



Bringing environmental print in the classroom, teacher writing and signs around the room.

Focus on Learning about Print. Children’s earliest attempts at writing are simple marks and scribbles. With practice and experience, these markings will progress into recognizable drawings and letter like forms.³ In order for this to occur, children need ample opportunities to use writing and drawing materials. Our classrooms should be filled with crayons, markers, pencils, papers, paints, and brushes. Beyond this, children need to be given meaningful opportunities to write.

One of the first ways children strive to convey messages is through drawing. For the child, the picture is the message! As teachers, we can support their efforts by giving them ample opportunities to draw, paying attention to what they draw and writing the messages that they share, as appropriate. Maria Montessori describes the importance of drawing to writing development in this way- “Writing precedes reading...we do not need to teach writing. The child who draws will write.”²

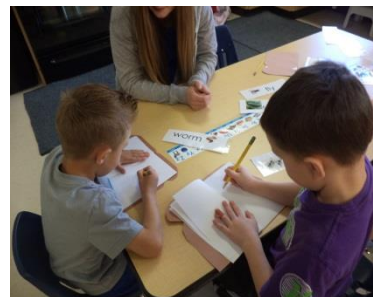
The other important step in learning about writing is building alphabetic awareness. When this concept is understood, children begin to realize that drawing and writing can both convey a message. Children begin to discover that writing and drawing differ, and that writing is composed of a limited amount of letters, with repeating lines and strokes. We can see this transition in the classroom as children begin to combine both forms to create messages. The NAEYC encourages teachers to promote writing in the early childhood classroom as a way to help them gain a better understanding of alphabetic awareness and states that, “Engaging children in early writing helps them learn about print and the letters and words they will eventually read and spell.”¹



Focus on Meaningful Writing Experiences. So how can teachers create these experiences in the classroom? First of all, get rid of the worksheets! Children don't need them to learn how to write. What children really need are experiences that provide motivation to engage in writing.¹ These meaningful experiences can happen everywhere in the classroom. When you look at your Dramatic Play center, what do you see? Do your children have access to recipe books, order forms, restaurant menus and signs? Look at your Writing Center. Do children have access to a variety of writing tools, ample paper, notebooks, envelopes, chalk, chalkboards, printed words, stencils and etc.? If so, you are providing opportunities that will encourage writing. But what else can you do to support writing on a daily basis, to get even the most hesitant writers to write, to actually see children reading what they have written? Here are a few examples of some of the things that we do!

Sandwich Writing: When we learn about sandwiches, we read a story called, *Sam's Sandwich* by David Pelham. In this story a boy named, Sam, makes his sister a sandwich. As he does so he sneaks crazy items inside the sandwich like spiders, flies, snails, and caterpillars. The children love the story. After the reading we give each child a simple book that is made to look like a sandwich. (See example 1) Then we have word and picture cards with all of the items Sam sneaks into the sandwich. Then, the children get to decide what they are going to put in their sandwiches and write the words. They love this and laugh as they write. We have been very successful in seeing even the most hesitant writers engage in this activity and show excitement at being able to "read" what they put in their sandwiches when their parents arrive.

Example 1



Authors and Illustrators: When we learn about authors and illustrators we provide writing books for the children to create their own stories. These booklets are very simple. The front cover has a place for the title and the author. (See example 2) We introduce the activity by providing a wide variety of story cards that the children can use. We try to choose topics that are relevant to them such as their families, friends, class and favorite activities. We show them how they can look at the cards and decide what they want their story to be about. Then they choose their story card and write that as the title. Then they put their name on as the author. They can open their book and draw a picture and write any other words they choose.

Example 2



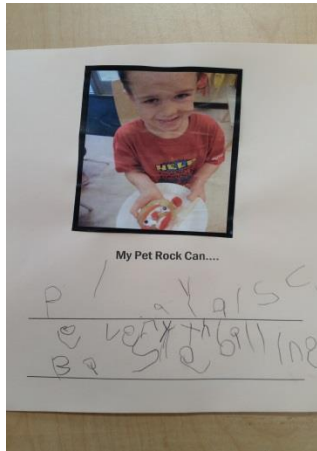
Gingerbread Man: When we learn about the Gingerbread Man, we use one of our centers as a writing activity. We have each child's name written on a Gingerbread Man and we tape them around the classroom. Each child gets a clipboard with a simple lined paper that says, "The Gingerbread Man ran away from..." The children get to go around the classroom and write the names of their friends on the paper. (See example 3)

Example 3



Pet Rocks: In our rock unit we have children bring rocks from home and create their own pet rocks. We take a close up picture of each child and their pet rock to use for our writing activity the following day. For our writing activity, each child is given a paper with his/her picture on it. On the paper it says, "My Pet Rock Can..." The children get to tell us something that their pet rock can do. We write it on a paper and the child takes that paper and writes the words on his/her page. (See example 4) It is always amazing to see what their rocks can do and how much each child loves to write about it.

Example 4



These are just a few of the hundreds of ways that you can bring meaningful writing experiences into the classroom. Writing is exciting for children. Writing can be **fun** in the classroom and writing is an **essential** component of the early childhood curriculum. Make it relevant to the children and you will see writers blossom within your classrooms!

Notes

1. Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (Third ed.). Washington D.C., District of Columbia: NAEYC.
2. Hainstock, E. (1986). *The essential Montessori* (Updated ed.). New York: New American Library.
3. Schickedanz, J., & Casbergue, R. (2004). *Writing in preschool: Learning to orchestrate meaning and marks*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.