

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

You've Got Mail

 *Invented Spelling and Writing*

Create a classroom mailbox to encourage your preschoolers to try their hands at writing. It will help them learn the many uses of print and written language.

What is the practice?

Preschool children need practice scribbling, using “made up” spelling, and experimenting with language before they can write in a conventional way. One way to increase their interest and confidence in writing is to have a classroom post office. A classroom mailbox provides children with a place to leave written notes for each other and for their teachers.



What does the practice look like?

A preschool classroom mail center can be simple to create. Begin with a group of shoeboxes or a large divided box with children’s name labels placed in each section. Place items like paper, envelopes, stamps, old greeting cards, markers, pencils, a small scale, maps, and stickers nearby. Mailbags, mail carrier costumes, and books about the post office can also be helpful resources.

How do you do the practice?

A mail center can be a regular part of your classroom or a rotating dramatic play center. Either way, this emphasis provides lots of chances for writing. Talk about the ways children use the mail center to keep in touch with each other.

- Introduce the mail center at group time. Find out what the children know about the post office and letter writing. You might make a word wall of “mail” terms. Talk with the children about all the reasons people use mail.
- Children often enjoy stamps and stickers. You can explain the purpose of postage stamps and have a few types for them to use. You can also include other objects from the post office such as scales, maps, and types of mailers. This could be a good time to talk about addresses and to help children begin to learn their home addresses.
- You can model letter writing by putting stamped, addressed cards or notes in each child’s box. This will give children who do not know about letter writing some idea of its purpose and convention.
- Let the children explore the mail center by working with different kinds of stationery, envelopes, and stamps. Invite them to bring in supplies from home. Parents might provide the address of family members or friends to whom children can write.
- Change the contents of the mail center from time to time by switching the stationery, stamps, and writing materials. Depending on the time of year, you can find seasonal greeting cards on sale or at dollar stores. Families can often be a great resource for old (even used) cards and other materials.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your preschool students enjoy playing in the mail center?
- Do they leave notes and letters for other children and teachers?
- Has their writing become more conventional and confident?

Take a look at more fun in the mail

Making the Most of Mail

The mail center is a well-liked fixture in Kelley's classroom. Her preschool children often leave scribbled and made-up notes for each other in the cardboard box she made into mail slots. At first the children were unsure of what to do with the mail center. After Kelley shared many books about mail at circle time and modeled letter-writing behavior, the children began to explore more. Kelley brought a mail scale and a mail carrier outfit into her classroom. Both were used daily by children taking turns being the "mail boy" or "mail girl." They passed out letters to classmates who would pretend to "read" them before "writing" back.



Children Create Mail Center

To start their unit about the mail system, Bennett's preschool class takes a field trip to their local post office. They learn about what happens to letters and other kinds of mail once they are dropped off there. They get a behind the scenes look at package processing. Each child receives some souvenirs to take back to the class. These include stickers and mail circulars. Back in the classroom, Bennett has the children help him set up a mail center. They include a scale, shoebox mailboxes, writing materials, and dress-up clothes. He also adds picture books about the mail. Bennett writes new vocabulary the children learned at the post office on the classroom "word wall." The children spend a lot of time in this new center. They "write" messages to each other, put letters in envelopes and stamp them, and "read" them back. Bennett has noticed that their writing is getting more "conventional" and their confidence as writers has grown.

Mail for All

To make the best use of her preschool students' writing opportunities, Ilene uses a mail center in her inclusive classroom. First, the class brainstormed reasons why people write letters. They also talked about whom they might want to write. Ilene set up a mail center to accommodate the range of her children's special needs. The center has adapted writing materials and a computer with an extra large keyboard and a voice recorder. She also added embossed cards and envelopes to help children "feel" the letters. With parents' help, Ilene made a list of people who were happy to receive "real" mail from the children. She taught a lesson about how mail works. They talked about addresses and where stamps go on envelopes. Then, they all walked to the school office to put their real letters in the "out box." When any of the children receives a response letter, he or she shares it with the class.

