

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Writing Through Art

Emergent Writing

Toddlers are just beginning to understand the concept of writing. They are figuring out that by moving a crayon, marker, or paintbrush over a page, they are leaving a mark that can be seen and understood by others. This understanding is necessary for children to learn to write real words later. Encourage the toddlers in your care to experiment with different kinds of writing materials. It will develop their motor skills and increase their interest in and enthusiasm for this kind of activity.

What is the practice?

Help toddlers understand the connection between moving their crayon or marker and the colorful lines on the page. You can do this in lots of ways. Provide varied opportunities for toddlers to experiment with different kinds of painting, scribbling, and drawing. Talking with them about what they are doing helps them get ready for more formal writing later.

What does the practice look like?

The beginnings of writing for children come in many forms. Toddlers can brush with paint or water on an easel or sidewalk, draw with chalk, and make scribbles on paper. It is the practitioner's job to encourage children to experiment with different kinds of marks and materials. It is also important to get toddlers talking all the while about what they are doing.



How do you do the practice?

There are many ways to encourage toddlers in their scribbling attempts. Provide art and writing materials such as nontoxic paint, glitter pens, markers, crayons, and chalk of various sizes. Create opportunities for writing in varied contexts. "Writing" things like lists, letters, signs, and name plates and drawing with chalk on sidewalks all offer different sensory experiences.

- Some toddlers in your care will prefer artistic-type scribbling such as making pictures with paints or markers. Others might like more sensory experiences, such as drawing or writing in sand trays or with water. Use your knowledge of the toddlers' preferences to encourage their active participation.
- Drawing and scribbling have practical and fun aspects, both of which appeal to toddlers. Ask for their help in illustrating stories read aloud. Let toddlers design name plates for cubbies or tables. Ask for their help decorating with pictures and signs for special events.
- In center-based programs, keep writing materials well-stocked in the art and writing centers and other centers as well. This will encourage toddlers' use of writing materials throughout the day. Paper and crayons can be used for planning block structures and making shopping lists or menus. Toddlers can also use the materials to write books of their own.
- Even though toddlers' writing will not look much like "real" writing, encourage and praise their efforts and interest. Convey the value of what they are doing to them by displaying their work and asking them about it.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the toddlers in your care using a variety of drawing instruments in their play?
- Do they attempt to convey meaning—their names, stories, or letters—through writing?
- Do they show interest in art materials and proudly show off their work to you and their peers?

Take a look at more writing through art

Painting With Water

On a warm, sunny day, Dana arrives for her home visit with 2-year-old Angel. With help from Angel's mom, Dana finds plastic cups, pails, and paintbrushes of different sizes. "What do you think we'll do with these without any paint?" she asks Angel. They go outside, where Angel's mom fills the cups with water. "We're going to paint the deck," Angel's mom tells Angel. "Try to paint it and see what happens." Angel is fascinated by the way the wood darkens wherever she touches it with her paintbrush. "Keep going," her mom says. "See if you can paint the whole thing." The three of them paint with water together. They make designs, different shapes, and even some letters on the wooden deck. They are having so much fun that they begin painting on the house and even the sidewalk!



Variety in Classroom Centers

During a free-play period in Miss Lisa's toddler class, many of the children go straight toward the art and writing centers. Miss Lisa wants to set up her classroom to encourage more creative work. She asks María, her center's early intervention specialist, for some ideas. María suggests she talk with the toddlers about what they might paint. Miss Lisa talks to the children about what colors and brushes they might use. "You're using the big brush for the red," Miss Lisa comments. "And what color are you going to use with the little brush?" At the table, another child uses a nontoxic marker to make dots on a piece of colored paper. "What are you making here?" María asks the boy. "Can you tell me about it?" Three children at another table share trays of paint that they push with cotton balls on shiny white paper. "Look at all that pink you're using," Miss Lisa comments. "What shape are you making there?" The children's art/drawing play is guided and enhanced by the adults' interest and attention.



Glitter Glue

In Ms. Perez's inclusive toddler class, there are some children who are already beginning to write letter-like forms. Others are not as interested in writing or drawing. Ms. Perez has an idea for how to interest her reluctant "writers," including Kara, who has Down syndrome. Ms. Perez gathers a few students at a big table with glitter glue. She shows them how a little pressure on the modified bottles gets the glue flowing. Kara struggles to get started, and Ms. Perez uses hand-over-hand guidance to show her where to squeeze. Once she gets the glue going, she laughs and points at her paper. "Great, Kara," Ms. Perez says. "You've got red glitter coming out!" The children practice leaving glitter tracks all over their papers. Kara squeezes the bottle of glitter glue some more. Then, along with the others, she pushes the glitter around on her paper with her hands. The children make lines and whorls as Ms. Perez encourages them to experiment.

