

Especially for practitioners working with toddlers! 

Writing the World

Emergent Writing

Toddlers are beginning to understand that when they move a crayon, marker, or paintbrush over a page they are leaving a mark that can be seen and understood by others. Although they are not writing real words yet, they need lots of practice. This builds their enthusiasm and confidence about communicating through writing.

What is the practice?

There are many ways to get toddlers excited about beginning to write. Throughout your day, include them in the writing activities that you do. This helps give them a sense of all the uses and purposes of writing. It encourages them to try writing on their own.

What does the practice look like?

Provide toddlers with many opportunities to experiment with different functions of writing. They might try painting or drawing “messages” or “letters” to their parents and friends. Be an interested listener and ask them to read you their “stories.” Let toddlers help when making a list of needed supplies.

How do you do the practice?

There are many ways to encourage toddlers in their writing attempts. Provide a well-stocked writing and art center in your classroom with materials such as nontoxic paint, glitter pens, markers, crayons, and chalk of various sizes. Ask for toddlers’ help in writing lists, taking attendance, making class posters or decorations, lists of classroom rules. Encourage them to write letters of their own.

- Toddlers love to help and feel they are doing “grown up” work, so use this to encourage their writing. When you are writing something, provide interested children with similar paper and writing utensils so they can write alongside you. They may like to “help” you when you write lunch lists, notes, or take attendance.
- Ask for their help in writing their names on their artwork, designing name plates, and decorating the classroom with pictures and signs for special events.
- When a child is absent, encourage the others to “write” her letters or notes. They may write about what the class did during the day, and tell her that they miss her. You can collect these notes or have the children leave them in the absent child’s cubby.
- Even though toddlers’ writing will not look much like “real” writing, encourage and praise their efforts and interest. You can convey to them the value of what they are doing 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 writing instruments in their play?
- Do they attempt to convey meaning—their names, letters, or stories—through writing?
- Do they show interest when you or other adults are writing, and try to imitate you?

Take a look at more emergent writing

Inviting Invitations

Jim is a home visitor for 35-month-old Nola and her mom. He brings a variety of writing and art materials on his visits. This morning Nola and her mom are excited about Nola's birthday party, which they will be hosting in a few weeks. "We still need to make invitations," Nola's mom says. "I have a few of them done but she won't leave me alone long enough to finish." Jim looks at the stack of invitations and offers Nola a paint set, crayons, and colored pencils. "Would you like to decorate these?" Nola nods enthusiastically and reaches for a paintbrush. "How about you write something?" her mom says. "What do you want to tell people?" "Come my party," Nola says. "Great," replies Jim. "Let's write that in all different colors so everyone will know how much you want them to be there."



"I Gonna Write, Too!"

Sam, a home visitor with two-year-old Bao, is making notes in his folder at the end of the visit. Bao comes to his chair and hovers, watching him write. "What you doing?" she asks. Her mother makes a move to quiet her, but Sam says, "I'm writing, Bao. Would you like to help me?" She nods, and he gives her a piece of his notebook paper. "I'm writing about what we played today." "I gonna write dat, too," Bao says, and begins making marks on the page. Looking over her shoulder, Mom says, "You're writing a lot there, Bao. Why don't you read it back to me and help me remember what we played?" After they finish writing, Sam and Bao compare their notes, and both "read" them back to Bao's mom, who responds with enthusiasm.

Flour Scribing

Lisa is a home visitor working with Taeko, a 20-month-old with a fine motor impairment. Taeko loves to play with tactile materials like play dough and flour. Lisa prepares a tray of flour and several tools—a plastic rake, a pencil, and a small cup of water. She brings it to the kitchen table where Taeko is waiting in her mom's lap. "Look what we have today," she begins, and shows Taeko the flour. Taeko waves her arms and yells, "Oooo!" "That's right, it's flour," Lisa says. "Let's see what kind of pictures we can make in the flour." Taeko takes a fistful of flour and lets it fall from her fingers. Taeko's mother encourages her to use her fingers and the tools to scratch designs into the flour. "Try making a circle," Taeko's mom suggests. She guides Taeko's hand until Taeko can make a circle on her own. She helps Taeko add water, making the flour feel different. They play with the flour, adding food coloring, more water, and different toys. Taeko gets better and better at drawing in the flour with her fingers and whole hand.

