

How to prepare your young child to write

Writing is a very complicated skill and we should try not to forget this when we try to help our children! On the one hand, writers have to come up with ideas of what to write and on the other hand we need to know how to form the letters and words. In this video we will help you get your child started with both. All of this advice comes with the usual health warning that a small child has a very short attention span so a 'little and often' approach is best. If your child isn't interested, just leave it for today and try another time.

From speaking to writing

The most important prerequisite for knowing how to write is knowing how to speak. If children can't tell us their ideas, they are never going to be able to write them down! So, the best way we can help our children in learning to write is to allow them lots of practice speaking, especially taking part in proper conversations. Good writing is mostly about expressing our ideas in a written form, rather than about how neat our handwriting is. So if your child is able to tell you his ideas and speak in something like full sentences by the time he goes to school, then he will be off to a flying start.

Sharing books

Books are a great way to introduce children to the printed word. If we can make reading books a part of our young child's daily experience, then they will learn that ideas can be written down and shared with other people. They will learn about how writing is organised and how stories are told, that some books tell us about real things we are interested in - such as creepy crawlies, and that some books tell us stories, which are make-believe. And they will probably learn all of this while enjoying a cuddle from their favourite people.

Mark-making

Long before they are able to write words or even draw recognisable pictures, most children go through a phase called 'mark-making'. This involves making marks with pencils, sticks, their fingers, paint, in short almost anything on any surface (including paper). An older brother or sister might call it 'scribbling'. Whatever it looks like, treat these marks as meaning something. Ask your child what their writing 'says'. As time goes by children develop 'scribble writing' and intend it to mean something quite specific. It won't look like that to you or anyone else, but the fact that it carries meaning for your child is important. It means he sees himself as a writer.

Be a role model

Children like to imitate adults and, at this age, love being involved in 'proper' jobs and activities. So before shopping, write a list and involve your child as you do so. Perhaps she can draw pictures on your list, or maybe she would prefer to make her own list consisting of a series of marks, which look nothing like true letters of course. When you get to the shop, let your child hold the list and ask her to 'read' from it. Likewise, ask your child to help when you're writing birthday cards or leaving a note for someone. If your child can see that writing has a purpose she will be much more motivated to learn to write.

Drawing pictures

Drawing pictures is usually a child's first step towards writing down ideas in words. It's a good idea to have a small table (an upside-down box will do!) with paper and crayons, at which your child can sit to write, stick and cut whenever she wants. If drawing and sticking are part of normal play for your child, the step to writing ideas in words won't seem so big. It will also help to make school a less strange place. It's fine to help your child or show her how to draw something, but only if she asks. And here's a tip, one of the best ways to avoid getting it wrong is to say: Wow! Tell me about your brilliant picture!

I can write my name!

Write your child's name as often as you can with her watching - on her pictures, books, bedroom door, wellies, etc. This helps her start to recognise her name, or at least the first letter. Don't write the whole word in capital letters, just the first letter! When she is ready your child will try writing the first letter of her name herself. Then, if she is happy to, it can become her job to write her 'name' herself on pictures, birthday cards, labels etc. Bit by bit your child will probably start to show an interest in writing some more of the letters in her name.

Developing physical co-ordination

In order to write, children need to develop good 'hand-to-eye' co-ordination skills. This involves them in learning how to control their physical movements, and gradually becoming more co-ordinated. Lots of physical exercises we do automatically with our young children help this process: touch your toes, reach for the sky, stretch out like a star, jump from one foot to another, move about the room like different animals. As your child grows, encourage the development of fine motor skills - building with lego™, doing puzzles, threading beads, and of course, cutting and sticking using child-sized scissors and glue. Writing is much easier for children who have really learned to control their hand and finger movements - so all that craft work really pays off!

How to hold a pencil

In order to write with ease, it is important to hold a pen correctly. Everything described up until now involves fun enjoyable activities. However, it can be VERY difficult to persuade an independent-minded 3-year-old that she isn't holding her pencil correctly. Nonetheless, it is worth trying! Be positive and give lots of praise. Show your child what you mean by holding the pen correctly yourself. Younger children are better off with quite wide and short crayons or pencils until they get the hold right. Try demonstrating *once*, explaining *once* and then turning your back and walking away! Mention it again a few days later in the same brief, calm, disinterested way. Sooner or later most children will try it out, possibly when they think you're not watching! Remember as well that an older child or a different adult might have more success than you! Getting a child into the habit of holding a pencil correctly saves a lot of bother further down the track in their writing career. But if your child is one of those children who just can't be told, leave it alone. It is more important to keep them feeling positive than to get them holding a pen correctly but hating to draw or write!