

# How to help your infant child with writing



## A big ask

Anyone who has ever taught their six year old to cycle a bike knows that it's a skill which involves a number of smaller skills. Not only does your child need to learn to balance, but they need to master steering, starting, stopping and of course paying attention to where they are going. Writing is very like this! It might appear to be one skill but in fact it is many!

- having an idea,
- planning how to organise the idea on the page,
- choosing the best words to describe that idea,
- knowing which letters are needed to represent or make up those words
- then finally putting pen to paper and scribing it.

It takes most of us our whole school-life to fully master writing because it is such a complex skill, and we should try not to underestimate this as we help our children get started in learning to write.

## Start with talking

Although forming letters and words is the most visible bit of writing, it would be mistake to think it is the most essential. Thinking coherently is actually more important and harder to achieve. And the best way to encourage clear thinking in our children is to talk to them and, most crucially, listen to them when they speak. Conversation is essential. A child who can express his ideas and opinions aloud in words and sentences is well along the road to being a great writer. Learning to form letters is the easy part.



## Tell each other stories

People tell each other stories all the time - I was on my way to work today when... I was standing in the supermarket queue when... We all tell stories - real or embellished! These anecdotes are children's



first introductions to stories. Involving them in these stories is great for their writing skills too. If you have time, take it up a level and make it into a game - for car journeys perhaps. This is where you make up a short story together and take it in turns to add a sentence each. You start: 'Once upon a time I was running down the road.' Your child goes on: 'Suddenly a gorilla appeared from behind a tree!' You continue. 'I was very surprised when the gorilla spoke to me!' They have to add the next sentence. Keep taking it in turns. Start the story from the beginning each time. How long a story can you tell?!

## Provide opportunity

Try to provide a small writing and drawing area for your child to play at somewhere in your home. This can be a small table or a large strong cardboard box turned upside-down. Ideally here your child keeps scrap paper, pencils, crayons, felt-tips, scissors, sellotape or glue. Your child should be able to access this whenever they want to draw or write. It is surprising how often children will go to the cutting, drawing and sticking table if it is there! Have a wall, board or washing line somewhere nearby as well to hang up your child's creations so that everyone can see how wonderful they are!



## Reluctant writers



Of course there are some children who are reluctant to draw or write as part of their play, just as there are other children who get nervous whenever they're expected to throw or catch a ball. Sometimes it is really good to use other strategies to get them writing - drawing on the ground outside with chalk, or writing on windows with special window-crayons, or even using bath crayons or fabric pens and writing on a T-shirt... These can all be enticing alternatives to writing on paper. Likewise, in their play, pirates often need to draw treasure maps, footballers need results tables and every astronaut could do with a well kitted-out cardboard

rocket. Don't force your child to engage in writing or drawing as part of his play but do make it possible. Likewise, if drawing outside with chalk isn't grabbing him today, just leave it. She might try it out another time.

## The idea's the thing

When your child does show you some writing, whether it's done at school or at home, do your best to focus on the meaning first and foremost. This isn't easy! For most parents, our initial instinct is to praise or criticise the handwriting. The message this communicates to our child is that we value how your writing looks far more than what it says. Now of course presentation and legible handwriting are VERY important but they are not as important as having a good idea and phrasing it well. The parent who says - 'I can see you've really tried your best and I love the way you've used the word 'sparkly'' gives much more encouragement than the parent who simply comments 'Well done love, what neat writing'. Of course it is great to praise neat handwriting, but what the writing says should be recognised first!

## A helping hand

Inevitably as children start school, if not before, it dawns on them that there is a 'proper' way to write things. One sad day they realise that their random string of adorable marks or letters doesn't actually say 'To Mummy I love you'. With this realisation children can lose confidence - that their own writing or drawing isn't 'proper' or good enough. Tackling this can be tricky - on the one hand we want to keep up our children's confidence and encourage them to follow their own creative impulses but on the other hand, it is true that they haven't written what they intended. Getting your child through this stage does require sensitivity. There isn't any harm in showing your child how to write or draw something every now and then, but in the long run you want them to feel confident about trying things independently and to have a go themselves. Involve your child in your own writing process by sharing the decision-making:

'What sounds can you hear in the word?', 'Should I start by drawing the top or the bottom of the flower?' and let them see you making mistakes or improvements: 'Hmm, I think my elephant's trunk is a bit too short ... I might try to make it longer by adding on a bit' or 'Oh dear I've only got 3 legs on my dog - where should I put the fourth?'

Likewise it's fine to write something out for your child to copy if they ask... but let them know that you'd be really pleased if they had a go at it themselves and praise them to skies when they make an attempt.

## Keeping it real

If children can see that writing has a purpose in real life they are far more likely to be interested in mastering it. Involve children in writing birthday card messages, even if they only sign their name. Ask your child to make a 'don't-forget' note to stick on the front door before school tomorrow. Ask them to mark important dates on the calendar. Make it your 6 year old's job to write down when you run out of yoghurt or biscuits and it needs to be put on the shopping list. And although there aren't many letters written by hand today, many children see their parents regularly sending emails or text messages. Even though your child can't type yet, involve him in composing those messages. 'Grandad wants to know if we've found his hat yet. What shall I say?' One of the most important things you are showing here is that it's good to think our ideas or sentences through in our heads BEFORE we write them down. This is a very useful lesson indeed!

## Phonics and learning to write

Most UK schools now teach children in their first years of primary school to read and write using 'phonics'. And, for the first time in the history of teaching children to read and write, we have scientific evidence that this approach works best for most children! 'Phonics' is from a Greek word meaning 'sounds' and it simply means that children are taught to recognise the individual sounds in the words we speak. They are then taught, systematically, all the different ways to write those sounds down and also to recognise them when they read. This teaching will take place at school nearly every day for a short but intense 15 minutes or so, because that is now known to be the most effective way to teach phonics.

As a parent, the first thing you are likely to notice is that your child is naming letters by the sounds they make rather than calling them by their letter names. So, they will say cat is spelled /c/ /a/ /t/ rather than 'See ay Tee'. What you will next notice is how this approach continues. For a year or two your child will spell most words the way they sound, rather than the way they should be spelled!

Orini Pink bloo

Enjoy this stage of your child's writing and do not worry that they will be writing like this forever - they won't! They ARE going to be taught proper spelling once they have mastered the complicated notion that we can write on a page the sounds that come out of our mouths! ([see Phonics@Home on this site](#))

## Spellings from school

Of course many words in the English language cannot be spelled by sounding them out. At school, these are called 'irregular' or 'tricky' words: *once, was, because, of, could* and many others. They need to be learned by heart. Some schools have spelling tests each week and some schools don't. But most schools will send home words for your child to learn and practise writing. Many recommend a 'look, cover, write, check' approach.



It is important to practise these words together, partly because it is a very valuable opportunity for learning and partly because spending time on it tells your child just how important you think it is to get this right. However, it is worth remembering that your child is likely to continue misspelling these



words in his independent writing for a little while longer because, as he writes, he is trying to juggle so many other new skills in his head. It is fine to gently remind him about ONE of his misspellings in his amazing space-ship description but only after you've heaped him with praise for his effort, his ideas and his wonderful picture. After a while all those learned-by-heart spellings will start to filter through to his normal independent writing as he gets to grips with some of the other aspects of writing.

### Forming Letters

It is always best to encourage your child to write in lower case and to form the letters correctly. Download the sheet on this site which shows you how to write each letter correctly. The reason this is so important is because in the end it helps your child to write with the greatest ease and fluency, especially when they have to move on to joined-up writing. Bad habits learned at this stage are extremely hard to unlearn. If your child isn't managing to form his letters properly, try practising it in different ways - writing in sand with his finger or using a stick, or with chalk on the ground outside, or painting it on a wall using just a brush and water. Try writing enormous letters together in the air by moving your whole arm, your feet, heads and even bottoms! Get him to write each letter using a toy car or a marble on the floor instead of a pen. Children often find it easier to start with large lower case letters before moving on to smaller ones that could fit on a page. With practise, forming each letter will become automatic - it might take a bit of effort but it is definitely worth it.

