

Scribbling and mark making: Promoting infants' and toddlers' emergent drawing behavior

What does research tell us about stages of infant/toddler scribbling and mark making, and what interventions facilitate and reinforce pre-writing behavior?

The development of young children's pre-writing skills progresses through a series of age-related drawing landmarks, the first eight of which are (1) marking, (2) making dots, (3) random marks, (4) random circles, (5) controlled marks, (6) controlled strokes, (7) geometric shapes, and (8) simple figures.



Researchers at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) analyzed 25 studies that included 1,675 children to determine what practices promote the acquisition of these important skills. Findings show that visual and spoken prompts, adult-child drawing activities, and children seeing the results of their drawing efforts promoted and strengthened infants' and toddlers' emergent drawing behavior.

Other noteworthy findings included:

- Drawing surfaces that included some sort of image in the background (rather than blank paper, for example)—especially images of human figures, faces, or animals—prompted the children to draw in more complex ways for longer periods of time.
- Slanted work surfaces made it easier for children to use crayons and magic markers.
- Standard-sized crayons and other writing/drawing tools, as opposed to thicker “primary” ones, led to more complex and mature marking/scribbling/drawing efforts.
- Engaging in drawing activities with an adult—such as imitating adult drawings or following adult directions and requests—led to longer child involvement in drawing.
- The more often children were provided with writing tools and materials for mark making and scribbling, the more quickly they advanced to higher levels of early drawing behavior.
- Magic markers and crayons were found to be the best tools for encouraging early mark making and drawing behavior.
- The “artwork” that resulted from infants' and toddlers efforts served to reinforce their interest in continuing drawing behavior.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., & Gorman, E. (2009). Development of infant and toddler mark making and scribbling, *CELLreviews* 2(2), 1-16.

Acting on the Evidence

Download free, two-page *CELL* practices guides in versions for parents or practitioners at www.earlyliteracylearning.org

Staff of CELL have created a number of practice guides especially for parents and early childhood practitioners to encourage putting this research evidence to use in home, community, and classroom settings. All of the two-page practice guides listed below are available for free download on the CELL project web site: www.earlyliteracylearning.org. At this web address you can also find interactive posters called *CELLpops* and multimedia practice guides such as videos that illustrate practices supported by this research.

Take a look at more infant finger drawing
Play Dough "Drawings"

Once a 1-year-old, her mother has found a fun way to let her daughter use her fingers to make her marks. She fills the baby's walker tray with play dough, cloths, paper, and scissors, and encourages her to make shapes and marks. If it fits the bill, she gives Glenda her own set of play dough. It takes Glenda time to get used to the play dough and look at her marks. She likes to see the marks she makes and squeeze it between her hands.

What is the practice?
A lot of activities can help infants learn to use their fingers to draw paint. Before a child can use a crayon or pencil, he can use his fingers to draw and "write." This handout is filled with ideas for helping your baby learn pre-writing skills.

What does the practice look like?
This type of writing happens any time your child uses his fingers to scribble or make marks. Babies working their fingers through play dough or squeezing whipped cream between their fingers are examples of pre-writing activities.

How do you do the practice?
This is the only way to finger draw. All sorts of unusual "media" are perfect for finger painting (paint)! The only way to finger draw is to use your fingers to draw and "write." This handout is filled with ideas for helping your baby learn pre-writing skills.

How do you know the practice worked?

- In your child's drawing, fingers more often refer to "draw" or "mark" it.
- Does your child seem pleased about or intent on trying to mark about or intent on trying to mark?
- Has your child shown interest in trying to do different things with his hands and fingers?

Especially for parents of infants!
Infant Finger Drawing
Scribbling and drawing

Before a child can write with a crayon or pencil, he can use his fingers to draw and "write." This handout is filled with ideas for helping your baby learn pre-writing skills.

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Take a look at more writing through art
Painting With Water

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Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!
Writing Through Art
Emergent writing

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Especially for PARENTS

Infants:
Infant Finger Drawing
Scribble Scribble
Mark My Word

Toddlers:
Art of Writing
Books and Crayons of One's Own
Get Write on It!

Preschoolers:
Delighting in Writing
Write Right
Mail Call

Especially for PRACTITIONERS

Infants:
Infant Scribbling Activities
Let Little Fingers Do the Drawing

Toddlers:
Writing Through Art
Writing the World

Preschoolers:
Starting Write
Author! Author!
You've Got Mail