Starting *Write*

Invented Spelling and Writing

Before children ages 3-5 begin to spell and write like adults, they start to understand that writing uses symbols to carry meaning that others understand. To encourage their exploration and interest in written language, show them how to use invented spelling. This lets them focus on the process of communicating through writing, rather than on a perfect finished product.

What is the practice?

Beginning writers can get frustrated by not knowing the exact spelling of words they are trying to use. This can lessen their motivation to write. Encourage preschool children to write using the letters that sound right to them without insisting on exact spelling or letter formation. This is the best way teachers can help children develop writing skills.

What does the practice look like?

A preschool student may sign his art project with some letters in his name reversed or missing. Another child might make a shopping list with a combination of letters, numbers, and other symbols. These are examples of how children begin to experiment with written language. It is important for children to explore written language this way and talk about their writing with an interested adult. It allows them to gain the important motor and cognitive skills needed for "real" writing skills to develop.

How do you do the practice?

You can find a world of opportunities to use invented spelling in your preschool classroom. For a start, have the children compose a list of class rules at circle time. Post sign-up sheets at popular activity centers. Encourage children to sign their work and write their own descriptions or stories about their art.

- You can arrange your classroom to encourage the use of writing. Include writing materials at every center, not just art and writing. Demonstrate the many uses of writing to groups or individual children. For instance, pads and pencils in the blocks center could be used for drawing roads or maps. Show how writing could also be used to label works in progress. In the housekeeping center, writing materials can be used to make play menus or grocery lists. The book corner can include items for children to make their own books.

- You can encourage children to take their work seriously in many ways. Have them read it aloud to you and show your appreciation. Display functional examples of their writing, such as handwritten cubby labels or welcome signs for class parties. Set up a classroom mail center for children to leave notes and messages for each other.

- Provide plenty of examples of conventional writing all around the room. This can be done in the form of books, posters, the alphabet, and printed labels. When children struggle for the right letter, they will have access to familiar models all around them.

- Some children are more concerned with "getting it right." This can cause them to be hesitant to write something if they are not sure how it is spelled. Support these children by helping them listen for the sounds in letters and words. Encourage them to work with other children on how to spell something.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the children in your classroom eager and motivated to write?

- Do they understand that what they write carries meaning?

- Does their writing and spelling grow more conventional over the course of the year?

CELL practices
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Writing "Thanks!"

At circle time in Ms. JoAnn's preschool class, the children are discussing their recent field trip to the grocery store. Everyone wants to talk about the best parts of the trip and the goodie bags they were given. Ms. JoAnn unrolls a large piece of paper. She tells her class, "Let's make a list of all the interesting things we saw and learned at the grocery store. Then we are going to write thank-you letters to Mr. Black. We'll thank him for showing us around his store." The children take turns talking about their favorite parts of the trip. They all liked going back into the bakery to watch bread coming out of the big ovens. Ms. JoAnn writes all their ideas on her large sheet of paper She reads and points out the words as she does so. She invites the children to help her with spelling the words. She hangs the list where everyone can see it. Then she sends the children to nearby tables with construction paper and markers. The children make thank-you cards for the store manager using a combination of pictures, letters, and words.
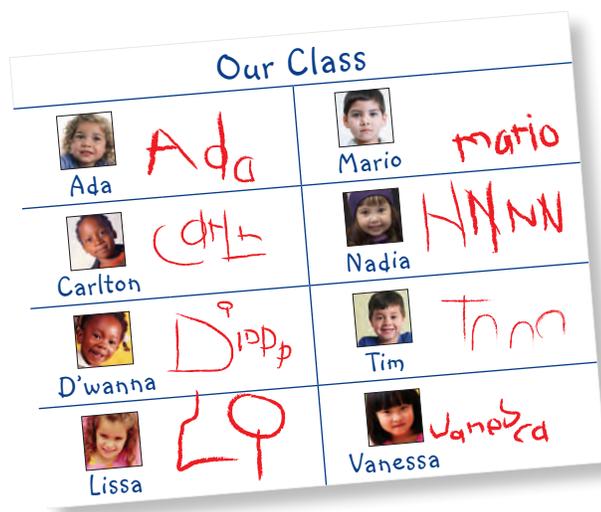
Sign-In Charts

The preschoolers in Mr. José's class use sign-in sheets every day when they come to school. First they find their pictures on the laminated sheet by the door. Next they use markers to write their names next to their pictures to indicate they are present. Some of the children are not yet making any recognizable letters. Still, they enjoy "signing in" to show others they have arrived. They use this sign-in system during free center time, too. They sign up for the most popular centers by writing their names on the waiting lists at those centers. The children get to practice their writing throughout the day and learn to recognize one another's names as well.

All Kinds of Greetings

In Ms. Amy's inclusive preschool class, the children have access to writing materials throughout the day. They also have a mailbox system to leave notes and letters for each other and for their teacher. Many children are in the habit of writing greetings to each other. They will write special birthday messages or notes for an absent child. Some children in Ms. Amy's class have trouble with fine motor skills. Ms. Amy encourages them to also type messages on the classroom computer. It is equipped with an extra-big keyboard and a microphone. This allows children to speak their messages and watch them appear in print on the screen. Ms. Amy helps the children print out their messages and find the right mailbox. This way all children, regardless of disability, can participate in the composition process and deliver messages to their friends.