

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

A Place for Writing

Literacy-Rich Experiences

What is the practice?

Writing can be a special event for preschoolers when they have their own writing materials and a special place for writing. A “writing box” is a great way for 3- to 5-year-olds to see themselves as writers. It includes all the tools they need to express their own ideas. A writing box puts different types of writing materials in one place so they will be on hand whenever she gets the writing spark.

What does the practice look like?

Fill small plastic bins or similar containers with a variety of materials that preschoolers can use to draw, write, and create. You can have writing boxes that the whole class can make and then share. You can also have each child make his own writing box out of an old cigar or tissue box. Place the writing bins in different places in the classroom like the art and house-keeping areas. The writing bins should have materials that will interest children and motivate them to write. These might include markers or pencils in bright colors or notepads decorated with popular characters.



How do you do the practice?

Your class’s writing boxes depend on the children’s interests and preferences. Have the children help make writing boxes. It is a great way to keep them involved and excited about writing as part of their everyday classroom experiences.

- Take an ordinary plastic bin that is large enough to hold papers and writing tools. Your children can help decorate the bin using stickers, bits of ribbon, and other trims.
- Fill the bin with many different types of writing materials. You can include small packs of crayons, wide-lined paper, construction paper, pencils, recycled paper, notebooks, washable markers, and erasable colored pencils. Remember to use nontoxic writing tools. Adding cellophane tape, envelopes, stickers, and other supplies to the box can enhance their writing experiences.
- Let the children make their own boxes. Give children a chance to pick their own supplies and make choices about what materials they will use.
- Using small sets of pencils, markers, crayons, and paper will keep the children from being overwhelmed with choices and items to clean up. Extra stationary, old greeting cards, or used papers with a blank side can also be used. Crayons that do not roll, extra-thick pencils and markers, and child-sized safety scissors with rounded tips work well for preschoolers who are learning fine motor control.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your children spend time using the materials in the writing box?
- Do they show you books, cards, papers, or other writing that they have created?
- Have your children shown interest in trying to write with different tools, or do they explore new uses for writing?

Take a look at more places for writing

Our Own Errands List

Four-year-olds Angie and Marco play together in the housekeeping center of their preschool classroom. Angie pretends to be the mother and Marco is the child. Using her “mom” voice, Angie tells Marco, “We have to go to the bank and then we’ll go to the store.” She gets the play checkbook and puts it in a purse. “Oh, where’s our list? We have to have a list.” She takes out a pencil and sheet of paper from the writing bin the teacher keeps in the housekeeping center. Angie sits down with Marco and asks, “What do you want for dinner, son?” Marco answers, “Pizza and ice cream!” Angie writes random letters on the page and says, “OK, and what else do we need? Milk. And eggs. And cookies.” She writes each of the words on the page using invented spelling, while Marco watches. When Angie is finished writing, she gets the purse and the friends pretend to go to the bank and the store.



“I miss you, Grandma”

At circle time, three-year-old Mira tells her peers and early childhood teachers about her grandmother’s visit to her house over the weekend. Later that morning, she tells her teacher, Miss Anna, that she misses her grandma. “Would you like to write her a letter and let her know you want to see her again soon?” Miss Anna asks. Mira nods and the teacher suggests she get some paper and writing tools from her writing box. Mira chooses some colored pencils and soon is busy drawing short lines and squiggles on the paper. Then Mira reaches for a crayon and colors on the paper. “Oh! That’s a nice letter,” comments Miss Anna. Mira hands her the paper and she pretends to read the writing. She puts it in an envelope and places it in Mira’s cubbie for her mother to take home to mail. “Your grandma will be so happy to get your letter,” the teacher tells Mira.

Greeting Card

Four-year-old Ava has a developmental coordination disorder that affects her fine motor skills. Her occupational therapist is ill and Ava tells her mother that she’s going to make her a card. Ava takes her writing bin from her dresser. She pulls out the thick markers and crayons that her therapist explained to her parents would be easy for her to grasp. Her mother clips a large sheet of paper onto a writing board so that the paper will stay in place. There are some large-sized animal stickers in the box and Ava puts the stickers on the paper. She uses the markers and crayons to draw and color a flower. The crayons are non-rolling, so Ava can set them down and retrieve them with ease. She asks her mother how to spell “get well” and her mother patiently sounds out the letters and waits as Ava slowly writes each one. When she is finished, her mother puts the letter away to give to the OT when they next see her.



Take a look at more keyboarding fun

Super Approach!

Five-year-old Michael's preschool teacher has noticed his interest in superheroes. She has found a computer program for children in which they interact with superheroes. When Michael's teacher first shows him the program and computer, she helps him use it. She shows him how to use the mouse to explore the many activity options. Michael chooses an activity that lets him pick different options to create his own superhero. "Okay, first we have to pick a special power," says the teacher. "What should it be?" Michael quickly chooses to be able to fly. The teacher helps Michael guide the mouse to select that choice. Michael continues making choices until the hero is complete. "Now he needs a name," says the teacher. Michael enthusiastically says "Michael!" "What letter comes first in "Mmm-Michael?" asks the teacher, emphasizing the first letter. "M is for Michael!" he says proudly. "That's right!" says his teacher. "Can you find the letter M on the keyboard?" She waits patiently for Michael to locate and press the key. "Great! You found it!" says the teacher. "Now let's figure out the next letter." She helps Michael identify and locate each letter in the name. Then she lets him take the lead in creating adventures for Michael the Superhero.



Picture-Word Software

Four-year-old Mara goes to the computer center in her early childhood classroom. She flips through the software case until she finds a picture of the reading rabbit that she likes. She takes the CD from its pocket under the picture, and her teacher helps her load the program. Mara uses the mouse to move the cursor on the screen. When the cursor is over an activity picture that she wants, she clicks the choice. She begins to play a game. When she clicks on a picture, it animates and displays the spelling of its label. "Cat" says Mara, as the cat on the screen meows. "That's right, very good," says her teacher, "Those letters spell the word cat." Mara smiles and clicks another picture. "Cookie," she says as the cookie image rolls. "Yes, those letters spell the word cookie," the teacher agrees. "Both of those words start with the letter C. It makes a Ccc sound. Do you see any other words that start with the letter C?" Mara looks and clicks another picture. "What is that word?" asks the teacher. "Cake!" says Mara excitedly as the cake image dances around and the word is displayed. "Good job!" says her teacher as Mara continues to "read" the rest of the words.



Listen Up!

Three-year-old Tyra, who has visual impairments, loves to have stories read to her. Her interventionist gave her parents a software program that will read stories aloud. The interventionist made tactile cues on the computer mouse. She showed Tyra's parents how to help Tyra learn to move the mouse on a pad inside a cardboard box. This helps keep the cursor in the screen area. When Tyra moves the mouse over the icons on the screen, the computer reads the titles aloud. By stopping the mouse when she hears the story title that she wants, Tyra can use the tactile cues on the mouse to click and start the story. She enjoys climbing into one of her parents' lap and snuggling while the story she picked is read to her. She laughs at the different voices and sound effects that the computer makes as it tells the story.



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Words Everywhere

Literacy-Rich Experiences

Preschoolers need to be exposed to lots of words and printed language to get them ready for reading and writing. Teachers can help by making environmental print a major part of their preschool students' classroom experience.

What is the practice?

Environmental print can include handwritten labels on furniture, walls, posters, and children's own scribbling or writing. Including environmental print in your classroom is most useful when it is read and "used" throughout the class's daily routine.



What does the practice look like?

A teacher writes down a story a small group of 4-year-olds dictates. He posts the story, along with the preschool students' drawings, on a bulletin board. The classroom's cubbies and hooks are labeled with the children's names and photos. The shelves are also labeled to help show where toys go. The teacher often refers to this print in the classroom by asking children to "find their names." He also provides opportunities for them to add to the printed messages around the room.

How do you do the practice?

There are lots of ways to include environmental print in your classroom. The main goal is to make it relevant. Use it as part of a daily routine to familiarize preschool children with all the uses of print.

- Start with children's names, which are often the first words they are interested in and can point out. Label cubbies, tables and coat hooks. Encourage children to use these labels as models when writing their names on their own work.
- To show the value of environmental print, refer to it. Take the time to point out posters with learning center labels, and handwritten or typed labels on shelves. For instance, when it is cleanup time, say, "Please put the blocks where it says 'blocks,' on the second shelf." During free play, say "Let's go sit in the 'Reading Corner' to look at this book."
- Encourage children to add to the environmental print themselves. Let them scribble or write stories, write their names on their work, and create classroom decorations for special events.
- Use environmental print during group time by pointing out the words on posters showing songs you're singing. Write discussion words on a whiteboard or large pad. Refer to these words when you use them in conversation or future lessons.
- Create a bulletin board of labels and logos. Ask children to find and bring in logos from places they like to go, like pizza places and local fun spots. Children often are able to point out labels and logos before they can actually 'read' the words. They learn to connect the words in the logos to the place or object itself. This helps focus their attention on characteristics of letters and words.
- Use stop signs and street signs in the blocks area. It's an easy way to include environmental print in children's play. The iconic nature of these signs, such as red, eight-sided "STOP" signs, makes them easy for children to identify.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do children in your class attend to environmental print?
- Are they learning to recognize more words and symbols?
- Do they understand the uses of environmental print?

Take a look at more words everywhere

Focus on Print

Noelle's preschool students have helped create their own literacy-rich classroom environment. Noelle invites the 4-year-olds to bring in pictures from magazines, food and drink labels, and other kinds of environmental print. The children pick their favorites for a rotating bulletin board of labels and signs. They refer to the display at group time. Pictures of signs from the neighborhood, magazine print, etc. are displayed around the classroom where they make sense. Street-sign pictures are in the blocks center and a photo of their public library sign is in the book center. This project has helped the students in Noelle's care focus on print even when they are not in the classroom.



Growing Confidence

In Marco's 3-year-old class, he makes a regular effort to engage his children in creating environmental print for the classroom. He helps them to write or scribble their names on their own work. He provides letter stamps, stickers, and sponges for the children to use to create artwork with letters and words. For special occasions, Marco will often write a simple message like "Happy birthday!" on a large piece of paper. When the class receives a new student, Marco makes a sign that reads, "Welcome to our class!" He will have the children decorate the paper while talking about the words and letters and what they convey. The children in Marco's class enjoy these activities. Their confidence in themselves as writers has grown!

Wonderful Word Walks

Every week, Sarah takes her inclusive preschool class on a "Word Walk" in the school's rural setting. Some children walk holding hands with each other or the teachers. Others who have limited mobility ride in wagons or wheelchairs. The goal of the walk is to notice all the words they can find. Some of the children "write" the words down on their clipboards using scribbling and invented spelling. A few of the students are able to sign the words while Sarah records with her camcorder. Some of the students speak words into audio recorders to remember for later. The words can be on signs, buildings, even trash. Once they get back to their room, the children become excited for what comes next! They add the words they collect each week to their ongoing list of words they've seen outside.

