

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

Writing Through Art

Emergent Writing

Toddlers are just beginning to understand that when they move a crayon, marker, or paintbrush over a page they are leaving a mark that can be seen and understood by others. This understanding is necessary for children to learn to write real words later on, and you can encourage the toddlers in your care to experiment with different kinds of writing materials in order to develop their motor skills and to increase their interest in and enthusiasm for this kind of activity.

What is the practice?

There are many ways that you can help toddlers understand the connection between moving their crayon or marker and the colorful lines on the page. Providing lots of varied opportunities for toddlers to experiment with different kinds of painting, scribbling, and drawing, and talking with them about what they are doing, helps them get ready for more formal writing later on.



What does the practice look like?

Toddlers painting with paint or water on an easel or sidewalk, drawing with chalk, and making scribbles on paper and then explaining them to you are all examples of the beginnings of writing for children. It is the practitioner's job to encourage children to experiment with different kinds of marks and materials, all the while talking about what they are doing.

How do you do the practice?

There are many ways to encourage toddlers in their scribbling attempts. These include providing art and writing materials such as nontoxic paint, glitter pens, markers, crayons, and chalk of various sizes, as well as engineering opportunities for writing in varied contexts. "Writing" things like lists, letters, signs, and name plates, and drawing with chalk on sidewalks all offer different sensory experiences.

- Some toddlers in your care will prefer more artistic-type scribbling—making pictures with paints or markers—while others might like more sensory experiences, such as drawing or writing in sand trays or with water. Use your knowledge of the toddlers' preferences to encourage their active participation.
- Drawing and scribbling have both practical and fun aspects, both of which appeal to toddlers. Ask for their help in illustrating stories read aloud, designing name plates for cubbies or tables, and decorating with pictures and signs for special events.
- In center-based programs, keep writing materials well-stocked in the art and writing centers, and other centers as well, to encourage toddlers' use of writing materials throughout the day. Paper and crayons can be used for planning block structures, making shopping lists or menus, or writing books of their own.
- Even though toddlers' writing won't look much like "real" writing, encourage and praise their efforts and interest. You can convey to them the value of what they are doing by displaying their work and asking them about it.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are the toddlers in your care using a variety of drawing instruments in their play?
- Do they attempt to convey meaning—their names, stories, or letters—through writing?
- Do they show interest in art materials, and proudly show off their work to you and their peers?

Take a look at more writing through art

Painting With Water

On a warm, sunny day, Dana arrives for her home visit with 2-year-old Angelica. With help from Angelica's mom, Dana finds cups and paintbrushes of different sizes. "What do you think we'll do with these without any paint?" she asks Angelica. They go outside, where Angelica's mom fills the cups with water. "We're going to paint the fence," Dana announces. "Try to paint it and see what happens." Angelica is fascinated by the way the wood darkens wherever she touches it with her paintbrush. "Keep going," her mom says. "See if you can paint the whole thing." The three of them paint together, making designs, different shapes, and even some letters on the wood and sidewalk.

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Variety in Classroom Centers

During a free-play period in Miss Lisa's toddler class, many of the children gravitate toward the art and writing centers. Miss Lisa has worked with María, her center's early intervention specialist, for help in setting up her classroom to encourage more creative work. She talks with several toddlers at the easel about what they might paint, what colors they might use, and what brushes to pick. "You're using the big brush for the red," she comments. "And what color are you going to use with the little brush?" At the table, another child uses a nontoxic bingo marker to make dots on a piece of construction paper. "What are you making here?" María asks the boy. "Can you tell me about it?" Three children at another table share trays of paint that they push with cotton balls on shiny white paper. "Look at all that pink you're using," Miss Lisa comments. "What shape are you making there?" The children's art/drawing play is guided and enhanced by the adults' interest and attention.



Glitter Glue

In Ms. Gonzalez's inclusive toddler class, there are some children who are already beginning to write letter-like forms, and others who are not as interested in writing or drawing. In order to interest the reluctant, including Kara, who has Down syndrome, Ms. Gonzalez gathers a few of them at a big table with glitter glue. She shows them how a little pressure on the modified bottles gets the glue flowing, leaving glittery tracks all over their papers. Kara struggles to get started, and Ms. Gonzalez uses hand-over-hand guidance to show her where to squeeze. Once she gets the glue going, she laughs and points at her paper. "Great, Kara," Ms. Gonzalez says. "You've got red glitter coming out!" Kara experiments some more with squeezing the bottle, then, along with the others, pushes the glitter around on her paper with her hands, making lines and whorls as Ms. Gonzalez encourages them to experiment.

