

Especially for practitioners working with young children! 

You've Got Mail

 *Invented Spelling and Writing*

Creating a classroom mailbox for preschoolers can help encourage them to experiment with writing, and to understand the many uses of print and written language.

What is the practice?

Preschoolers need lots of practice scribbling, using invented spelling, and experimenting with language before they start writing in a conventional way. One way to increase their interest and confidence in writing is to set up a classroom post office. Classroom mailboxes provide children with a place to leave written messages for each other and for teachers.



What does the practice look like?

A mail center in a preschool classroom can be simple. A group of shoeboxes or a divided larger box with children's name labels placed in each section are some starting points. Place materials like paper, envelopes, stamps, old greeting cards, markers, pencils, a small scale, maps, and stickers nearby. Mailbags and mail-carrier costumes, as well as books about the post office, are other helpful resources.

How do you do the practice?

A mail center can be a regular part of your classroom or it can be one of a rotating list of special dramatic-play centers. Either way, the emphasis should be on providing lots of opportunities for writing and for talking about the ways children are using the center to communicate.

- Introduce the center to all the children at group time by finding out what they know about post offices and letter writing already. You might make a word wall of relevant terms. Talk with the children about all the reasons people use mail.
- Children often enjoy stamps and stickers, so explain the purpose of postage stamps and have a few varieties for children to try out. You can also introduce other objects related to post offices such as scales, maps, and different mailers. This could be a good time to talk about addresses and help children to memorize their home addresses.
- You can model letter writing by putting stamped, addressed cards or notes in each child's box when you introduce the center. This will give children unfamiliar with letter writing some idea of its purposes and conventions.
- Let the children experiment with the mail center by exploring the different kinds of stationery, envelopes, and stamps. Invite children to bring in materials from home. Parents might provide addresses of family members or friends to whom children can write.
- Change the contents of the mail center from time to time by switching out the stationery, stamps, and writing materials available. Depending on the time of year, you can find seasonal greeting cards discounted or at dollar stores, and families can often be a great resource for old (even used) cards and other materials.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your preschoolers enjoy playing in the mail center?
- Do they leave notes and letters for other children and teachers?
- Is their writing becoming more conventional and confident?

Take a look at more fun in the mail

Making the Most of Mail

The mail center is a popular fixture in Kelley's classroom, where her preschoolers regularly leave scribbled and invented notes for each other in the large cardboard box she has subdivided into mail slots. At first the children were unsure of what to do with the mail center. But after sharing lots of books about mail at circle time and modeling letter writing behavior, the children began to experiment more themselves. Recently, Kelley brought in a mail scale and a mail-carrier outfit. Both were used regularly by children taking turns being the "mail boy" or "mail girl" and passing out letters to classmates who would pretend to "read" them before responding.

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Children Create Mail Center

To kick off their unit about the mail system, Bennett's preschool class takes a field trip to their local post office. They learn all about what happens to letters and other kinds of mail once they are dropped off at the post office. They get a behind-the-scenes look at package processing. Everyone receives some souvenirs to take back to the class, including stickers and mail circulars. Back in the classroom, Bennett has the children help him set up a mail center. They include a scale, shoebox mailboxes, writing materials, and dress-up clothes. He also adds picture books about the mail. Bennett writes new vocabulary they learned at the post office on the classroom "word wall." The children spend a lot of time in this center, "writing" messages to each other, putting letters in envelopes and stamping them, and "reading" them back. Bennett has noticed that their writing is getting more "conventional" and their confidence as writers has grown.

Mail for All

In order to maximize her preschoolers' writing opportunities, Ilene uses a mail center in her inclusive classroom. First, the class brainstormed reasons why people write letters. They also talked about who they might want to write to. Ilene set up a mail center to accommodate the range of her children's special needs, including adapted writing materials and a computer with an extra-large keyboard and a voice recorder. She also added embossed cards and envelopes to help children "feel" the letters. Then, with families' help, Ilene put together a list of people who were happy to receive "real" mail from the children. She developed a lesson about how mail works. They talked about addresses and where stamps go on envelopes. Then, they all walked to the school office together to put their real letters in the "out box." When any of the children receives a response letter, he or she shares it with the class.

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