

The ABC's of Emergent Literacy

Emergent literacy refers to the earliest phases of a child's reading & writing development. It is the gradual process of coming to understand that abstract symbols - such as letters, pictures, or even a stop sign - have **meaning**, and that people use such symbols to communicate.

Researchers studying child development have discovered the following principals of **emergent literacy**:

- ✿ Language (listening and speaking), reading, and writing development are strongly intertwined. Reading and writing skills are built on a strong foundation of oral (spoken) language.
- ✿ Starting from birth, children are busy forming concepts and skills necessary for learning to talk, read, and write.
- ✿ Even children's unconventional efforts in reading and writing are seen as true beginnings of literacy.
- ✿ Literacy development starts at home with a child's family, and occurs in steps along a continuum, not all at once when the child goes to school.
- ✿ Literacy development continues throughout one's life.
- ✿ Children participate in their own literacy development. It is not just something that "happens to" them.
- ✿ Literacy development is based on children's experiences and meaningful interactions with adults and other children. Adults can foster literacy development by creating a home, day care, and school environment that is rich in language and supportive of reading and writing from a very young age, as well as providing opportunities for children to interact with each other.
- ✿ Through experiences, such as exposure to a variety of books; being read to; opportunities to explore their surroundings; frequent interactions with parents, care-givers, and children; and experimentation with art supplies and writing tools, children will gradually build concepts about language, reading & writing.

Specifically, **emergent readers** are in the process of learning:

☆ **that reading and writing are important.** When children see others write a grocery list or note, read a book, or the TV guide, they learn that printed words serve a purpose. They grasp what reading and writing are for, even before they learn to read and write themselves.

☆ **the style and format of books and print.** When children are exposed to books and participate in reading, they learn that all books have a top, bottom, front, back, and pages in sequence. They learn how to open books correctly and that the print runs from top to bottom, left to right. Over time, they grasp that print has meaning, stories have a beginning, middle, and end, and that the language in books is more formal than conversational speech.



☆ **the alphabet, and how it works.** Emergent readers are learning the alphabet's letters, their corresponding sounds, and that spoken words are composed of those sounds and letters. The understanding that spoken words contain identifiable sounds is **phonemic awareness**. For children to read and spell, they need to know that some letters can stand for more than one sound, e.g. short a as in *apple*, and long a as in *able*.

Sources: "What is Emergent Literacy" at www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/literacy/em_lit0.html; "Emergent Reading" & "Assessment of Reading", by Project Literacy, CDFS, Purdue University at www.edci.purdue.edu/projectliteracy/reading/intro.htm; and "Emergent Reading" from www.auburn.edu/~murraba/insights/owenel.html.

The *A B C*'s of Emergent Literacy: From Scribbles to Script

When we think of **writing**, we think of words like the ones on this page. Yet long ago, people used pictures, or **hieroglyphics**, to communicate. Similarly, to children, *writing* can be scribbling, drawing, or inventing symbols to tell a story. The gradual process of learning conventional writing skills is referred to as **emergent writing**.

Emergent writers have a message to convey before they can write "real" words. Therefore, it is important for adults to support children's early attempts at writing - even **unconventional writing**, such as scribbling or drawing - and to recognize these efforts as part of children's overall literacy development. In addition, it is important for adults to support children's reading, as reading gives children practice in recognizing letters and words, which carries over into their writing.

Parents will probably notice their little **emergent writers** doing the following:

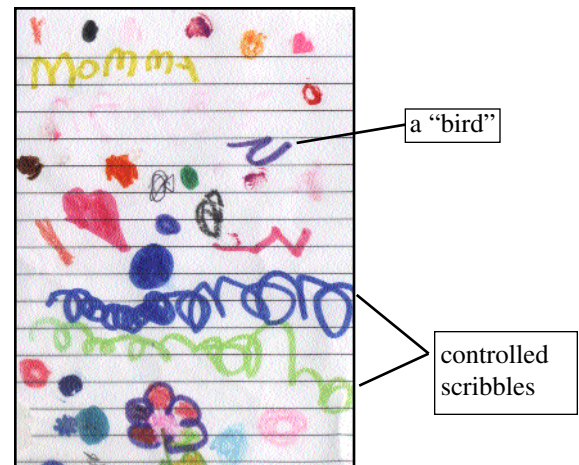
✎ **Irregular (Disordered) Scribbling:** A one- or two-year old may "write" by randomly marking a paper with a crayon. Infants and toddlers take delight in moving writing tools back and forth & up and down. Since this primarily is a physical act for them, they may even look away from the paper as they are scribbling. After some months, they will realize that their movements and the marks they make are connected, and that they can control their scribbles.

✎ **Controlled Scribbling:** Around age 2-3 years, children start scribbling with purpose. They make squiggles, dots, straight lines, and wavy lines running from left to right on the page. Their motions change from gross motor (large muscle) to fine motor (small muscle).

✎ **Named Scribbling:** When children say, "Look what I wrote/drew!" or tell a story based on their scribbles, they have grasped that their marks convey a message. For example, a child may draw a box and say, "This is my house." Do not be surprised if the box does not look like a house. To a child, a green scribble is *more* than just a green scribble! What is important is that the child is applying meaning to the marks. Later, the child may claim the box is a train. He is not lying, just using his imagination and giving the scribble new meaning, which is normal.

Source: The terms for three stages of scribbling (as listed above) were coined by Viktor Lowenfield, a former teacher of art and art education, and author of *Creative and Mental Growth*, 1987.

Representational drawing: Around four to six years old, children's drawings start taking shape. They begin drawing things, such as people, beloved characters, or other things from their environment. As with scribbling, children often tell stories based on these drawings, and change their stories regularly.



By: Alicia, age four years

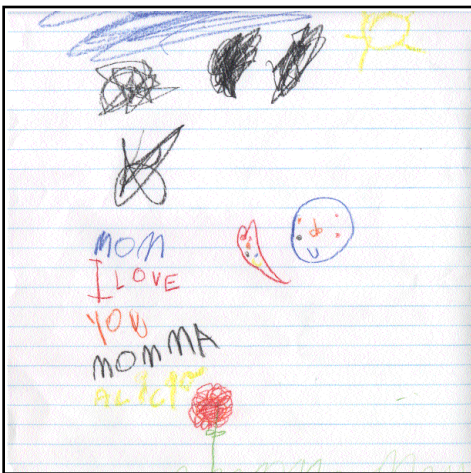
In this picture (above), there are a few components of emergent writing. The squiggly lines running from left to right are examples of **controlled scribbling**. This emergent writer has probably made the connection that print in books is written from left to right, too. This child has also **named** her scribbling; she asserted that the squiggle in the top corner was "a bird." The hearts were written "to show I love." The flower (bottom of the page) is an example of a representational drawing.

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The ABC's of Emergent Literacy: From Scribbles to Script (Continued)

Random letters: It is common for children to add random letters or invented symbols to their drawings. Young children who have learned to write their name might randomly use those familiar letters to "write words." Many will "write a story" by stringing together unrelated (invented or real) letters. For example, a child might print "O C A I L I" then say, "Mom, this says, 'I love you and I want to visit your office.'" The words may not be "real" to adults, but that's okay. What's important is that the child understands that print carries meaning, and s/he is trying to communicate in writing.

Phonetic Stage: As children gain more experience in language, reading & writing, they notice that words are made up of more than one sound; each word is a group of **conventional** letters. For example, a kindergartner may sound out the word "pumpkin" and then write "pmp" on her picture to show, "This is a pumpkin." When children are learning how to form words, they often use **invented spelling**. In addition, when children think about letters, the sounds they make, and how words are formed through their writing, they are also building skills that will cross over into reading, as the two are closely related.



Often, children copy print they see or ask an adult to spell a word so they can write it. This can teach children what words look like and how they are formed. However, it is important not to force children into using conventional letters, even if they already know some, as this may discourage them from wanting to write at all. Keep writing fun and enjoyable by providing the supplies and paper, and letting the children take charge. With support from adults, conventional writing will come in time.

The preschooler who drew this picture (left) asked her mother how to spell "Momma" and "I love you", and now she adds these words to many of her pictures. She is starting to grasp that words are groups of letters. With practice, children learn that letters have their own sounds; that the "m" in "momma" is the same sound as the "m" in "moon", for example.

Conventional writing: As children progress through their school years, they should become more skilled at writing using formal rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling while learning to organize paragraphs and stories. Over time, invented spelling is replaced with "real" spelling with practice, exposure to a variety of written materials, and guidance from teachers and parents.



SEE ATTACHED SHEET, "SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EMERGENT LITERACY:TIPS FOR PARENTS" FOR SPECIFIC IDEAS ON HOW TO ENCOURAGE CHILDREN'S LITERACY DEVELOPMENT!

Sources: "Children's Development of Emergent Writing" posted on the NCREL, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory web site at www.ncrel.org; "Emergent Literacy" from the Yellow Room on-line newsletter, February 2002 edition at www.clc-nyc.org/yellowroomclassnewsfeb2002.htm; "Emergent Writing in the Primary Grades" by Julie Hammink at www.hamminkj.cafeprogressive.com/dl_writing.htm; & "Perspectives: Drawing Development in Children" by Viktor Lowenfield and Betty Edwards at www.learningdesign.com/portfolio/DrawDev/kiddrawing.html. Writing & drawing samples by Alicia Carriere, a preschooler from Massachusetts.

Supporting Children's Emergent Literacy: Tips for Parents

TALK: It is important for children to form a rich vocabulary and an understanding of their language's structure. Talk to your children often, starting at birth, and continuing throughout their childhood. Use feedings, baths, diapering, or walks to introduce new words. In a few months, babies will babble back to you - their way of having a conversation. If they look away when you are talking, give them a break from the chatter. Even babies need down time.



LISTEN: Just as important as talking to your children, is paying attention to them and listening to what they say. This lets them know that they, and their ideas, are important and encourages them to practice language.

READ: When children are read to, they learn new vocabulary and that symbols -letters & pictures - have meaning. With babies, try sturdy **board books** or **tactile books** with a variety of surfaces to feel. When babies are 8-12 months old, let them hold the book and help turn the pages. Continue reading to your kids as they mature. This will help them develop a love of reading. Try books on familiar topics to children, e.g., family, pets, or school. Predictable books - ones that have illustrations connected to the words, or have a repetitive rhyme - are recommended for emergent readers. Encourage older children to point to letters they know during story times. Also, make sure they have books to browse on their own. Books on tape are another way to expose your children to language.



POINT OUT ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT: When you are out with children, call attention to the words that are written everywhere. For example, when you pull up to a stop sign, say, "That sign reads, STOP."

PROVIDE MATERIALS AND SPACE FOR ART & WRITING: Even one-year olds can experiment with art materials & writing implements, such as a wide paint brush dipped in non-toxic paint or fat crayons. Young children may enjoy smearing water on colored paper to see how it changes it. Make sure older children have access to pens, paper, crayons, pencils, etc., too.



WRITE: Write your children a note, such as, "Thank you for helping me set the table", or even a simple, "I love you." Send them postcards via the postal service - children love to get mail! Encourage them to write thank you notes to family members for gifts, even if it means your child draws a picture, then you write the words "Thank you" on the bottom of the note. Have them help you write the grocery list.

WRITING DEVELOPMENT: A FEW FUN IDEAS:

- 📎 If your children write a string of letters, or draw a picture and tell a story, write the conventional words on the bottom of the page, if they'll let you! Then, the story can be remembered and you are modeling writing for them.
- 📎 When your children scribble or draw a picture say, "Can you read it to me? or "Tell me about your picture." This will encourage them to use language, which is very important in developing literacy. Do not be discouraged if your children respond "NO!" when you ask at first. Try again later.
- 📎 Teach them how to write their name and other words of interest to them.
- 📎 Stick a large piece of paper on the wall or floor for them to paint on with non-drip, non-toxic paint. Supervise the activity to make sure the artwork stays on the paper.
- 📎 Take your children outside and encourage them to draw and write outside using sidewalk chalk. This chalk is thick enough to withstand the pressure of a child's hands pressing it on pavement.

OTHER TIPS:

- ☆ Avoid suggesting what children should draw or write. Give them materials and let them take charge.
- ☆ Learning can be messy. You may want to provide children with art materials that are easily washable.
- ☆ Some children do not like the way messy art materials feel. If so, provide other materials for your children to express themselves such as pencils, crayons, or markers.
- ☆ If you give babies a crayon, wide brush dipped in paint, or other art materials, they will probably put them in their mouths. Make sure that the materials are non-toxic, sturdy, and will not break into chokeable pieces.
- ☆ Display your children's writing and drawings. This encourages their literacy development and lets them know they are important.