Literacy development has become a primary focus in education. Much attention has been given to statistics illustrating American children’s lack of achievement in this important learning domain. In an effort to increase achievement and encourage competence and success, reading initiatives have blossomed throughout the country. While this is commendable and necessary, it is also important to look at the other areas of literacy development — speaking, listening, and writing — to ensure complete development.

All literacy development begins from birth and each area of literacy development contributes to the development of the others, allowing children with well-rounded literacy learning opportunities to achieve higher levels of comprehension and success. Early childhood educators have a particular responsibility to play a significant role in this endeavor, as the early years are ideal for introducing and supporting all of these skills and competencies.

Writing development is a component of literacy development that has received much less attention than reading. A novice might assume that a child learns to write in preschool or kindergarten by picking up a writing instrument and practicing, possibly copying dotted letters in a workbook or using a stencil as a guide. However, the foundation for writing begins much earlier. From the first grasping efforts a young infant makes to the rapt attention a toddler gives to story time, the foundational skills needed to write successfully are practiced. Teachers can and should use this captive and enthusiastic audience to extend and enrich the natural progression of writing development.

Writing development through the ages

Although explicit writing development does not typically begin until preschool years, foundational skills and other complementary literacy skills are being developed from birth.

- Infants enjoy listening to environmental sounds including different tone and voice inflections, grasping objects, and the progress from uncontrolled to controlled movements.
- Toddlers can use large paper and large drawing and writing instruments (i.e., chalk, crayons), and real-life pictures or objects with print descriptions and rich story time experiences to expand their skills.

As children approach preschool age their literacy-related developmental abilities increase. They are now able to understand the difference between writing and drawing, the symbolism of letters, phonemic awareness, and possess the ability to communicate through print. Preschoolers benefit from:

- storytelling opportunities
- learning centers enriched with writing opportunities, such as materials for writing directions or creating maps in the block area
- a dedicated learning center focused on writing
- large group modeling and practice
- teacher recognition and praise for each milestone.

The nuances found in children’s writing development can often be missed, and opportunities to enhance development can be lost. Fortunately, adults who understand, nurture, and scaffold literacy skills in their entirety will contribute to the development of skilled and enthusiastic writers.

The stages

Children develop on a continuum of predictable developmental milestones specifically related to writing. While children of similar age may vary in
writing ability and “stage,” the stages, as is true for other developmental stages, are progressive and will occur as children develop cognitively, physically, and emotionally with the support of adults. According to Judy Schickendanz and her colleagues, “Preschool children like to write, will write a lot, and will learn a lot about writing, but only if there is an environment that supports this type of activity,” (Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004, p. 55).

Teachers can support children in this stage by providing many opportunities and varied materials for practice:

- Keeping in mind that children are still developing their motor skills, writing utensils should be large size as should paper.
- All attempts at drawing and writing should be acknowledged and praised.

### Learning Continuum Stages of Writing Skill Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1: Random scribbling</th>
<th>Stage 2: Controlled scribbling</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s first attempts at writing typically are intermingled with drawing. Lu (2000) explains, “Children usually use their drawing and talk to support their early exploration and use of print,” (p. 1). Young children are beginning to understand that they can put lines, shapes, and color on paper and “make” something. Children are imitating and practicing the behavior of adults around them. At this stage they do not know that there is any structure or definition to writing. Their fine motor control is still in development so their creations are less likely to be intentional.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intentional fine motor development opportunities are important as well.</td>
<td>Songs, rhymes, and alliteration are important to teach sound distinction and word roots.</td>
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Adapted from the Phelps, Levy, and Stannard presentation (June, 2005):

Play, the universal language of all children: How appropriate play-based curriculum supports the development of every child. Presentation at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Institute, Miami, Florida.
Teachers should recognize this milestone and work to differentiate writing from drawing.

- Ask children what they are writing and write their words on their paper under their writing to help them make the connection between speech and words.
- Involve children in teacher writing opportunities such as attendance taking, classroom signs, or notes to parents, to confirm their budding understanding that words have meaning.
- Read familiar books and help children grasp the connection between words and print.
- Follow the words with a finger while reading, to demonstrate the connection between speech and print.

**Stage 3: Repetitive lines or patterns**

Children now understand that writing is linear and consists of repetitive patterns. While they may not understand the exact shapes of letters, they have noticed the commonalities of letters, lines, dots, and curves and are beginning to use them (Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004).

Encourage children’s continued development by:

- Encouraging their experimentation with new shapes and patterns. (Keep in mind that children do not yet know that there are only 26 letters to choose from when writing).
- Ask them to tell you about their writing and dictate their words following their line pattern.
- Value their writing and use it appropriately (for example, if it is a sign, hang it up).
- Give them other line sequencing opportunities like stringing beads or line up dominoes.
- Pretend play opportunities are important, and will continue to be. Pretend play allows children to imagine possibilities and use symbols which are essential skills for writing (Lu, 2000).

**Stage 4: Letter practice**

Children have had exposure to some letters and are attempting to use them. It is most common to see children experiment with letters in their name because these are the letters they know the most. They also make mock letters using these familiar shapes, assuming their mock letter must be a real letter because it uses the same shapes. They do not yet understand that specific sounds go with each letter. Now that they have a better grasp of the shapes used to make letters they use these primarily (Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004).

Teachers can support children at this stage by recognizing the developmental challenges they face.

- Closed circles and diagonal lines are particularly difficult and children’s attempts at these should be nurtured and practiced, keeping in mind that the practice doesn’t have to relate to letter writing.
- Worksheets, dittos, or tracing dots are strongly discouraged as they don’t develop skills at this stage as much as encourage memorization.
- Additionally, both letter orientation and lower case letters prove challenging to beginning writers (Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004). Abundant opportunities for practice paired with quality samples of environmental print will help children sort these concepts out.
- Letter modeling opportunities such as labeling, dictation, calendar, notes home, and charting should be abundant.
- Ideally, writing samples should be traditional (no use of all caps or scrapbook lettering) so children have an accurate model.

**Stage 5: Environmental print**

A light bulb has gone off and suddenly children understand that writing is a collection of symbols. In the past they have understood that writing is a form of communication, but often they invented the words their writing represented as they went along, not understanding that letters and words hold predetermined meaning. This new understanding sparks a renewed interest in writing; they are looking for opportunities everywhere. They want to practice and are proud of their accomplishments.

At this stage, teachers can build children’s competence in the following ways:

- As children add new letters to their repertoire, their classroom should be rich with samples.
- Continue to model uses of writing and enrich the learning centers with writing opportunities. For example, children in dramatic play can make menus, take orders, make to-do lists, use...
Beginnings Workshop

- Have children assist in labeling their personal belongings and storage space and putting their name on their work.

Stage 7: Invented spelling

As children develop they begin to acquire phonemic awareness. Now they not only understand that letters are symbols, they also learn that letters have specific sounds attached to them. They are also developing a much broader understanding of the uses of writing and how it is related to reading. Within this stage children’s understanding of spelling starts with the beginning sound, then the beginning and end sound, and finally the whole word (Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004).

Repetitive discussions about and recognition of letter sounds is important to help children make the connections between sounds and letters.

- Use phrases like, “This book title starts with the letter R. What sound do you think that letter will make?” to invite children’s participation in the construction of their knowledge.
- Give children opportunities to tell stories. This allows them to practice the basics of introduction, plot development, and conclusion.
- Group writing projects — like writing a letter to the cook on chart paper — allow children to learn from each other and build their own knowledge.
- Print should be used as often as possible and should be found in all learning areas.
- Activities that encourage children to recognize letter sounds, such as matching games, should be common.

Stage 8: Conventional spelling

This stage typically emerges in grade school children. While some preschool children master certain words, conventional spelling should not be the goal in early childhood.

Support creativity and approaches to writing. Avoid sending the message that they aren’t doing it right.

- The English language is incredibly challenging, and children’s attempts at phonological spelling should be revered and encouraged to instill an enjoyment and continued interest in writing.

Stage 6: Name practice

While similar to the previous stage in many ways, this is often the child’s first attempt to write without using a model. Because children are naturally self-centered, their name is typically their favorite thing to write. It is also, typically, the word they have the most exposure to.

Teachers should recognize the pride children feel in writing their name and encourage them to do so often.

- Encourage children to find their names when they check in.
When children ask, “How do you spell . . . ?” ask them what they think and give them feedback on their efforts such as, “I see that you are writing the word phone. You started with an f because you know that f makes the sound at the beginning of phone. Did you know that some other letter combinations can also make that sound?”

Writing center suggestions

A well-equipped writing center is essential to children’s exploration, discovery, and practice. Be creative in equipping this area.

■ A variety of paper and writing instruments are essential. Tape, staplers, ordering pads, letter samples, letter stamps, rulers, envelopes, clipboards, magazines, book making supplies, index cards, and scissors are some of the items that will encourage children to write.

■ Be mindful to display or use their creations. For example, if children make a book, read it to the class and then place it in the library. This will send strong messages to the children that not only can they successfully communicate through writing but that it is valuable and meaningful.

Long-term benefits

Writing development does not just happen organically. While children are “programmed” to learn, they need social interactions and adult modeling to ensure the successful acquisition of writing skills. Children often ask adults to spell for them or ask about the meaning of print. Adults who are knowledgeable about the stages of writing development can enrich and enhance these and other opportunities for development. These additional efforts make a difference. According to Judy Schickendanz (1999), “Children who acquire a lot of literacy knowledge and skill before entering first grade are most likely to be those who have had a rich history of skillfully mediated literacy experiences” (p. 3).

References


Phelps, P., Levy, A., & Stannard, L. (2005, June). Play, the universal language of all children: How appropriate play-based curriculum supports the development of every child. Presentation at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Institute, Miami, FL.
