
Foreword

Once upon a time encouraging—or even allowing—young children to write was considered ridiculous. Parents and teachers were loathe to introduce writing early and their excuses were legion: the kids might mark up the walls, hurt themselves with sharp pencils, waste paper by just scribbling, or, heavens to behaviorism, they could develop bad habits that would stay with them long into the future (like awkward penmanship or deficient spelling). Even some “scholars” got into the act with cautionary tales that claimed that if we involved young children in academic learning “too early” we would stultify their growing brains. Among the forbidding warnings, few parents or teachers could see any potential value worth the terrible risks. The message was clear: early writing was to be avoided.

Alas, even as those unsubstantiated fears have evaporated and the value of early writing has come into clearer relief, writing still has not gained much of a foothold in the early childhood curriculum. This continued neglect owes something to reading’s “big shoulders.” Early reading is now such a concern that it has made it difficult for teachers and parents to fit writing in among the phonological awareness exercises, letter and word cards, and decoding practices that are usually the purview of an early reading curriculum.

The publication of *Learning to Write and Loving It!* shows how times have changed, and it is a change for the good. Teachers, parents, theoreticians, and researchers have been shifting their positions on early writing, and thank goodness. Early writing doesn’t have the portended bad consequences: it doesn’t harm children’s small muscles, if anything, it provides valuable exercise; young children’s writing practice doesn’t lock them into early misspellings never to be forgotten, but instead helps to strengthen early understanding of spelling and decoding in ways that actually improve reading abilities. As a scholar, I can tell you that early writing helps children to develop literacy skills. Not surprisingly, writing bolsters early phonological development, strengthens phonics skills, and gives children greater purchase on their knowledge of the alphabet. This, of course, is all to the good.

However, as a parent and former child, I’d situate the value of early writing experience elsewhere. Having observed my own children when they were dictating their stories and keeping diaries of family trips and experiences, I gained a deep appreciation of the *real* value of their early writing. Sometimes these efforts to compose were easy and sometimes painstaking, but my daughters always emerged with a profound sense of accomplishment (writing, unlike reading, leaves a physical record) and they gained a more thorough grasp of the value of their ideas and a joy

in being able to make themselves understood. Such experiences provide kids with insights into their potential power over memory and a greater awareness of the changes they themselves are going through. (You may be surprised at how quickly a piece of writing shifts, in the child's eyes, from being a proud accomplishment to nothing more than embarrassing baby work.)

I remember my own childish efforts to write as well. My grandmother would write letters to me and send them all the way from Florida (sometimes along with a handkerchief or a dime, and always ending with a series of Os and Xs symbolizing her grandmotherly hugs and kisses). Mom would read those letters to me, and I so wanted to write back that one day I gave it a try. I scribbled a "letter" (Gram's cursive looked like scribbles to me) and thought Mom would send it off with the postman, but scribbling isn't writing, and I was puzzled: how could Mom read grandma's letters, but not mine? My failure led to me think harder about the problem and to watch more closely to try to discern what I was missing. Nothing especially remarkable in any of that: writers know that writing always falls a bit short of our aspirations, but we gain deep moral and intellectual insights from those shortcomings (and such insights into communication, love, expression, and creativity are good to start on early, as humans have been known to struggle a bit with humility).

Miriam Trehearne's aspirations are very high. She encourages the teaching of early writing (and shows us some successful ways of encouraging it and supporting it) and she obviously does so for the love of children and the love of literacy—ultimately the only legitimate reasons.

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