

From Pictures to Words

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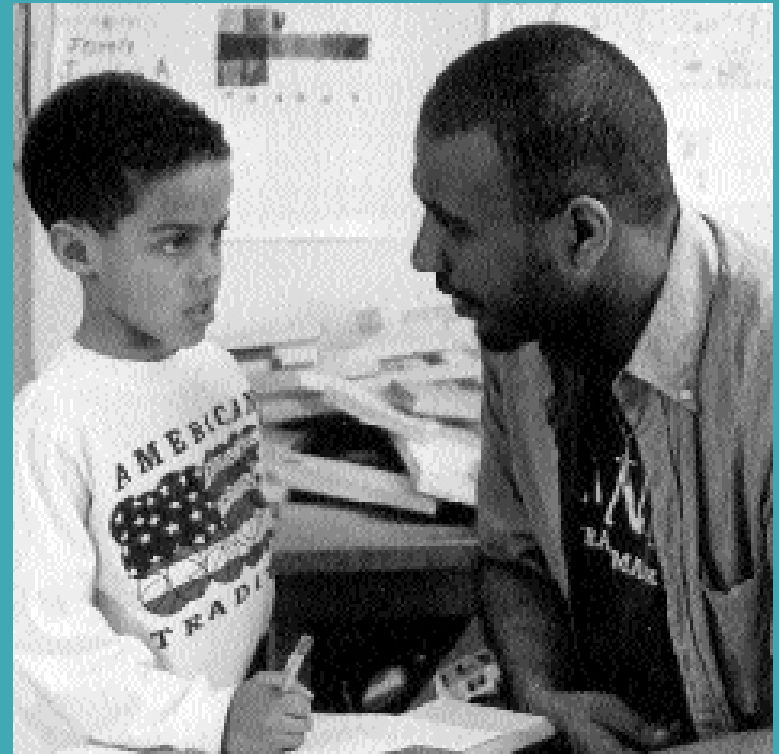
Photographs by Margery B. Franklin
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Early Childhood Center

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*Understanding
The Foundations
of Literacy Learning*



Why are pictures important?

Children paint and draw as naturally as they play. Watching the sweep of a paint brush across paper, an early effort to recreate a face or figure with crayons, or an attempt at a line drawing tells us that painting and drawing are more than self expression: they are creative, joyful acts that indicate intellectual development and provide fuel for beginning writing and reading.

Pictures hold meaning for children

Allowing and encouraging young children to draw sets the literacy process in motion. As children begin to draw pictures of things they see or think about, they are tapping into the fundamental understanding that the marks they are making on paper are a picture of something else. For instance, the child knows that the “tree” he has drawn is not really a tree, but a picture that means “tree.” The ability to hold in mind that an image stands for something else—it’s not the tree itself, but tells you about the tree—opens up all kinds of possibilities for further symbolization.

Letters are a kind of picture

Letters are seen by children as lines, straight and curved. As children gain experience with written language by being read to, playing around with the sounds of language, and having opportunities to experiment with crayons, markers, pencils, and paint at

home or in school, they begin to realize that these “lines,” alone or in combination, represent sounds. Along with this realization comes the understanding that by putting these “lines” (or letters) together, you can form words.

A word consists of a specific pattern of letters that represent sounds. Once a child knows that a particular pattern of letters forms a word, she is more likely to recognize the pattern—or word—again. This is true if the child is building a word using magnetic, plastic, or wooden letters, writing the letters herself, or recognizing a word that occurs again and again in a picture or story book. Later, the child is able to see lines of print as patterns of words that represent sentences in a story.

Painting and drawing lead to writing competency

Most children paint, scribble, and draw before they attempt to write words, and as they paint and draw they are experimenting with issues of control: “If I move the marker this way, what kind of line will it make?”; “If I want to draw a face, what sort of shape will I get if the brush goes this way?” When children are encouraged to choose from a variety of writing and drawing tools, they will select those that bring them the most success. Drawing pictures is the logical beginning place for the development of eye/hand coordination, and provides meaningful fine motor skill practice that is a necessary foundation for learning to write.

From pictures to stories

Story is a part of what makes us human. Every event, every day in our lives, is a story. Both pictures and words are related to the concept of story, and young children make us aware of this through their desire to describe their pictures and “tell what happened.”

The role of dictation

Children who are tentative about attempting to write enjoy having their stories and ideas written down by interested adults. Teachers and parents have the opportunity to serve as “scribes” when children have a lot to say but do not, as yet, have the

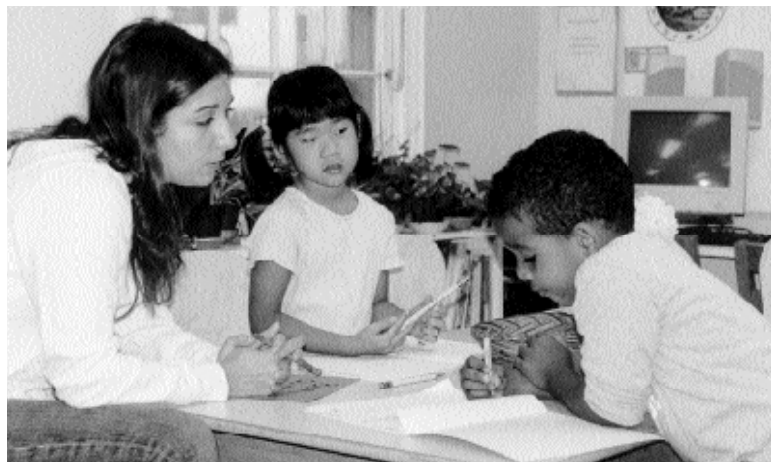
ability to put their words down on paper. Adults can encourage children to dictate, enabling them to tell much longer and more fluent stories than their emerging writing skills would otherwise allow. An adult who takes down a child's dictation is then able to read it back to him as she points to each word on the page: the message here is that each graphic pattern (or word) on the page stands for, or is the translation of, the child's spoken word.

The adult who serves as a child's "scribe" is a collaborator in the child's creative process. She asks questions that help him clarify his ideas: these questions encourage him to articulate the sequence of events, and to make clear what's happening in the story.

The importance of an audience

Children want an audience for their pictures, and they want an audience for their stories. There is nothing more exciting than reading your story to another child or group of children, and you can attempt it more easily because you know what you were dictating or trying to write yourself.

Pictures become frequent jumping-off points for a dictated caption or commentary. Letters and cards to friends and relatives provide good opportunities for adults to ask a child what he



or she would like to say and to transcribe the message word for word. This kind of writing becomes material to be read, re-read, and responded to.

From pictures to writing and reading

Many young children make early connections to reading through their experiments with writing, although when and how they become interested in putting a drawing or writing implement to paper will vary. Each child evolves into a writer in a somewhat different way, and long before children can formally read and write they will engage in time-honored acts of imitation—which adults call "pretending." Imagine two four-year-olds: one is making a series of marks that flow conventionally from left to right; the other is turning the pages of a picture book and pointing to them in sequence. Both of these children have made the basic connections between the way print moves across a page and the way a story progresses through a book. They understand that directionality, the movement of print and pictures from the left to the right side of the page, is a basic convention of literacy in our culture.

Early steps

Forming letters



Learning to write is much more than correct letter formation. Young children deliberately explore written language through experimentation, turning letters into drawings and shaping them in different ways. Some children love to practice making letters and will do so for long, uninter-

rupted periods of time. Others have uncertain pencil grips and struggle to conquer letters like **b**, **d**, **p**, **q** and **s**, but they may like to draw—and drawing often leads to writing. All children can be encouraged at each stage of their writing development if adults remember that every effort is an active step toward discovery about creating print.



From letters to words

Learning to read and write involves more than just deciphering words on a page. Emerging literacy entails children's search for meaning in print, the intricate and individual blending of a set of literacy connections. These connections don't just happen: they come about because children are

problem-solvers and, in the particular case of written language, "literacy detectives."

Often, the first word a child undertakes to write is his or her name. If there is one supremely meaningful word, your name is it! There is no need for surrounding text to make a statement: you are the whole story. Other words soon follow, such as *DOG* and *CAT* and the names of close family members. This personal writing and reading vocabulary is often connected to drawings or paintings that form a basis for further writing and reading development.

Transitional spelling

Children frequently begin to write their next words using letters that represent the most prominent sounds they hear, along with a growing understanding of short and long vowel sounds. In many cases, children who are writing words, however partial, will be able to read them back, and thus transitional spelling becomes a powerful key to reading.

It's easy to think that if young children are allowed and encouraged to invent their own spelling systems, this will impede their eventual ability to spell conventionally. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Because they want others to read what they write, children are eager to adapt to conventional spelling once they begin to write with fluency.

Six- and seven-year-olds

A setting that encourages literacy learning

In home and at school, it is very important for children in the early elementary years to continue to have time to play, to draw and paint, to build, and to create things that will then inspire them to write. Constructing a block building, writing labels for the building, and then writing a story about it will carry more meaning and inspire a more complex story than any "assignment" possibly could.

Working with others

Working with other children in a relaxed atmosphere, one in which children are not mandated to sit in specific places, allows for a dynamic and interactive learning process. At school, this means that learning is not just between you and the teacher, but also between you and other children.

When children help each other, or sit next to each other, there's a real sense of companionship in a literacy activity: this allows for a social context, minimizing the sense of loneliness or difficulty that can be present in an isolated task.

Reading and writing together

Picture two children sitting close together, pencils in hand, gleefully reading their written work to each other. Competition is absent, as they show delight in each other's stories; yet each child is serious about helping the other edit her work. "This isn't right!" exclaims the first: "Oh! This shouldn't be an s, it should be an i...n...g!" her friend responds. This kind of interaction shows real thinking, an editing process that leads to clarity for both writer and audience.



Working together as readers and writers, children often illustrate their stories or add on to what has already been written. Perhaps a picture helps to extend the story's meaning: "I didn't write it down, but this is also something that's going on."

Editing writing on your own

A child editing work on her own may demonstrate a different process. With a fairly complex narrative already on paper, the child reads aloud what she has written so far. At one point she questions her own choice of words: “That’s not what I meant. I’ll have to say it another way.” Intense involvement, engagement and pleasure are present as a young editor works. Another writer gets to a point where he stopped writing, he tells his teacher what he intends to write next—how he is going to finish the sentence that is in midstream. This is editing at a high level, supported by an attentive adult.

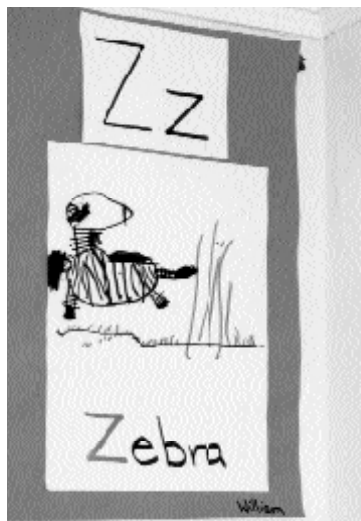
Seven- and eight-year-olds

From writing to reading

Seven- and eight-year-olds who have been read to on a regular basis, and have had plenty of opportunity to read their own and others’ writing, possess the capacity to problem-solve and predict as they read. Although children may continue to love to read and reread simple stories, a basis of meaningful reading and writing at earlier ages enables them to take on the hard work of more challenging independent reading. For some children, the path to reading and writing is more difficult than for others: but with encouragement and help, pressure is minimized and the obstacles will be overcome. Now, the excitement and pleasure of attempting to read longer and more complex texts can prompt them to a deeper examination of their own creative efforts.

The power of words

At this age, children are learning about how powerful words can be in generating emotions and images. With their increasingly advanced skills, they can begin to make their written language more subtle and precise. Questions such as “What do you see?”; “What do you smell?”; “What do you feel?” lead to a



new threshold of expression. Words are no longer just sitting on the page, they are images that allow for expression of ideas, thoughts and feelings. When children begin to see and appreciate the way words evoke images, in a sense they have moved from drawing pictures... to writing words... and back again to pictures, or images, in the mind.

Maintaining enthusiasm: the fuel for successful literacy learning

The enthusiasm with which very young children begin to paint and draw can be maintained as they grow and develop. The journey to literacy begins with those first pictures, and step by step the words follow. Each step along the way, if connected to feelings of satisfaction and self esteem, leads to increasingly competent and complex modes of self expression. Learning to read and write, if imbedded in situations that are meaningful to the child, becomes not just work that is necessary, but work that is worth doing.

Children’s first steps on the path to life-long literacy will be central to their ability to organize and experience the world throughout their lives. Helping our children to see that reading and writing are joyful and engaging activities, worth the hard work of mastering the skills required, will allow them to embrace literacy learning and encourage them to leave their mark on the world.



Suggestions for encouraging literacy at home

- Let your child tell you stories—fictional, or a story of the day. Keep in mind that stories are often connected to pictures, drawn with crayons, markers or paint. And share your own stories, modeling a beginning, middle and end.
- Encourage your child to dictate captions for a picture, or even an entire story, as you act as the scribe. This is an important step in understanding that what is said can be written down—and then read back.
- Keep a generous supply of paper and crayons, markers, pencils or watercolor paints at hand for easy access. Allow even very young children to experiment with drawing and writing tools: a toddler's drawing can be a fulfilling first step into the world of print.
- Honor your child's early efforts to form letters: most children need an extended period of experimentation in order to figure out their varying shapes and directionality.
- Find opportunities for your child to engage in meaningful drawing or writing, such as lists or thank you notes: "I miss you" communications will be treasured by the recipients—and answered. For maximum enjoyment, remember that you are a "guide" rather than an "instructor."
- Accept your child's forays into transitional spelling. Most children are eager to read what they have written, so be an attentive audience. Remember that, in a phonetic language like English, your child's own writing is a natural and meaningful way to investigate letter/sound relationships.
- Play around with the sounds of letters, as you and your child build words together using plastic magnetic letters on the refrigerator, or wooden letters on a table. If possible, have both upper and lower case letters available to discuss their different uses.

- Read to your child on a regular basis—and read books that you yourself enjoy. Your delight in reading, be it a picture book, poetry or prose, sharpens your child's intuitive sense that written language often has a different cadence and rhythm than speech does.
- Reread beloved books to your child, no matter how many times you've read them before. This special time together is one of sharing and warmth, and leads to good feelings about oneself in relation to the reading experience.
- Invite your child to cook a meal with you. Read the recipe together from the recipe book, or create your own recipe as you draw pictures of the ingredients and include math words and symbols. Enjoying the results together adds extra meaning to the experience.
- Notice words and symbols in the environment together with your child: the traffic signs STOP or SLOW; words on boxes in the grocery store; signs or emblems that represent restaurants or gas stations. Children also enjoy making signs to place on the bedroom door, toy shelves or block construction.

