



Early Learning Areas / Literacy

Writing Names



Dear Debi,

I have a 3-year-old who speaks very clearly and has a wide vocabulary. What can I do to help her learn how to write her name?

– **Kim**, Chico, CA

Debi's Tips



Debi Gutierrez

Host

- Expose kids to their names
- Do name-related activities
- Kids learn to write their names at different times

Expert Advice



Ann Barbour, Ph.D.

Early childhood specialist

Children are interested in their names because they represent who they are. They're an important part of their identity and children are proud of them. Think of how often they're asked, "What is your name?" and "How old are you?"

It is important for children to hear their own names and see it written down because names are abstract. You can't touch a name or hold it in your hands; children need lots of opportunities to make connections between themselves and the way their name sounds and looks.

Children's names are the first words they understand and can identify with – so they connect print with something very meaningful. This leads to an interest in trying to "copy" it by scribbling at first, and then by writing in a more conventional way.

There are lots of ways you can use children's names to get them interested in reading and writing. Write children's names everywhere, sing songs and play games that include children's names. Plan activities that incorporate names, such as making letters with play dough, painting letter shapes and so on.

Children's names and the names of other important people in their lives (such as "Mom") are usually the first words that they try to write because they see and hear them a lot. Children's names are usually the first word they "read" and "write" in their own way and that helps them feel powerful and interested in what more they can do and learn.

To be able to write, kids need to do many things at once. They need to want to write, they need to hold a pencil/crayon and have enough fine motor control to make the pencil do what they want it to do, they also need to know what the letters look like, and be able to reproduce them.

When writing English or Spanish, we want them to begin at the left of the paper and move to the right. (Direction is specific to each language. In English and Spanish, we write left to right, but in Chinese it's top to bottom, and in Hebrew right to left.) Then there are other things to consider – using a capital for the first letter, but lower case letters for the rest. Trying to write on a line. So to expect that young children will be able to do all these things at once is unrealistic.

But what we **can** do to encourage them in this developmental process is to help them take small steps. We can provide materials and lots of opportunities to write. Stick paper and crayons in your bag so kids can even write while they're in the car or on the bus or at a restaurant. Unlined paper is better than lined paper. We can point out different features of the letters in their names, such as, "Your name starts with M, like two mountains." We can even simplify the writing process by letting children try to write in a sand tray or in shaving cream on a tabletop. We can provide pencils that are easier to hold and control -- particularly important for children with physical delays. We can help them feel proud of any efforts they make, from scribbles to more accurate writing.

At the same time, it's important to let children know that we don't expect perfection. Display their attempt to write their names on the refrigerator or the door to their room. This helps them to feel like they've really accomplished something and that's a powerful motivator to do more.

Child Care provider Comments



Clarissa August

Family child care provider for 21 years

I expose kids early to their names. Their names are written in their coloring books, their backpacks, their drawings, and just about anything that belongs to them. Even when they can't read or know their letters yet, they are being exposed to their names. I also put paper on the walls so that the kids would feel free to draw and write on the walls. This gets them starting to scribble and write their names. I also like to start off every day by singing "Look Who Came to School Today" and we go through all the names of the kids in the song. I think by doing these different activities they will develop the skills they need to be able to write everything from their names to everything else.



Sonnia Corzo

Child care provider for 6 years, mother of four

I noticed that at about 3 years old, kids show a strong interest in their names. They begin to want their names written everywhere and on everything. So I will write their names for them and help them practice writing their own names. They don't need to know the whole alphabet. It is helpful for them to know some letters so that they can recognize the letter of their names, but the more they see their names, the easier it will be for them to learn to write it. I also like to reinforce the concept of their names by singing songs and playing games where we can take advantage of using a letter with objects.

I think it's very important to wait until a child shows interest in writing their own names



Verdis Ferraro

Child care provider for 23
years

and not push them into doing it. When a child starts asking me about how to write their names, I usually introduce kids to specific writing skills at around the age of 3 and 4. I have some stencils with letters that they can trace and I also write their names in dots and have them connect the dots.

But I also like to incorporate it in our arts and crafts. For example, we write the kids' names on their artwork. We spell their names out loud as we write it down. We also write the names on the top, left hand corner because that's how we begin to read: from left to right.

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