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ABSTRACT

Children begin school with some very basic ideas about written language and reading. The first is that of sign and message. That a graphic representation, a "sign," conveys meaning is an early and easy concept for children that stems from their visually attending to print in their environment. The realization that spoken language can be written down signifies the attainment of the concept of "message." As children progress, their writing begins to look more like adult representations. They also develop the concept of "directionality," that letters and print move from left to right, and from top to bottom of the page. Once children begin to combine letter forms into single words and groups of words, it becomes necessary for them to adapt to the requirement that a space distinguishes between words. Parents and teachers who help children develop these ideas about written language are also helping them develop skills for beginning reading. Parents should provide preschool children with opportunities to enhance their awareness of print in their environment and with a variety of activities that allow practice of print. Teachers can further children's experimentation with written language by providing a school atmosphere that is conducive to spontaneous writing activities. Children who are able to produce a written message that is recognizable as such to an adult have mastered a very important concept in learning to read--they have established the relationship between oral and written modes of language and have acquired the knowledge that what they want to say can be written down and read by them and by someone else. (HTH)

Reading Readiness Through Writing

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Reading Readiness Through Writing

Early writing behavior plays a significant role in early reading development. Writing provides opportunities for the child to use and to synthesize what he knows about written language, thereby developing understanding for reading. Current reading readiness programs, however, focus mainly on the assumption that the child has few concepts about written language when he enters school. Standardized readiness tests and informal readiness checklists assess such skills as auditory and visual discrimination, listening ability, and general language ability, skills recognized as directly related to a child's success in reading. Children, however, come to school with some other very basic ideas about written language and reading. Parents and teachers who help children develop their ideas about written language are also helping them develop skills for beginning reading.

Concepts About Printed Language

What types of information about printed language must a child have attained in order to become a fluent reader? From her work in New Zealand with five year-olds, Marie Clay (1975) has identified and discussed what she labels basic concepts about print and written language that are directly related to learning to read.

First are the concepts of sign and message. That a graphic representation, a "sign," conveys meaning is an early and easy concept for children that stems from their visually attending to print in their environments. The realization that spoken language can be written down signifies the attainment

of the concept of "message." At an early stage, the child assumes that what he has written corresponds to what he has said. It is at this point in his development that the young child scribbles a message on a piece of paper and optimistically asks, "What did I write?" When the child realizes that the messages he speaks can be written down, he has grasped the main concept required for reading and writing progress.

Children construct their theories about print from a variety of experiences. For example, they see print in the environment. Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1980) found a significant number of three year-olds were easily able to identify the word "MacDonalds." Young children such as these thumb through magazines, turn the pages of newspapers, and pretend to read books. They put pencil to paper and even crayon to walls as they attempt to develop ideas about print. Some children receive birthday cards or invitations to other children's birthday parties to which they may respond. In many homes, children have been read to by parents and/or older siblings since they were tiny infants. They have seen their parents writing down telephone messages: they have watched them make a grocery list. They have seen written language used in context. They see the purposes for writing, and they, too, want to write.

As the child progresses, his writing begins to look more like adult representations. He begins to copy letter forms he has seen, but because copying is such a laborious task, the child tries to create a variety of forms that look like letters. Clay states that the child is attempting to "explore the limits [to which] each letter form may be varied but still retain its identity" (1975, p. 64.). She labels such exploration as "flexibility." Clay believes that flexibility leads to the child's improved structuring of more orthodox letter forms as imitation becomes more precise.

As children explore writing they also develop the concept of "directionality." The child who is trying to locate a starting point on a piece of paper may happen to choose the upper left-hand corner. If he does, he has little difficulty moving in the correct direction for writing more refined representational forms. However, if he starts elsewhere, he may not necessarily move in the correct direction. Therefore, the starting point is critical for appropriate directional responses. However, children should be allowed to experiment with directionality for themselves. Young children just beginning to explore writing should not be made to start in a specific place.

Direction does not necessarily refer only to the fact that letters and words are written from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom. It is quite common to find young children reversing individual letters and entire words at this stage. Mirror writing frequently occurs because the child has selected a starting place on the right-hand side of the page. In most cases, the child naturally corrects as his directionality is refined.

As writing skill progresses the child begins to combine letter forms into single words and groups of words. He thus encounters new problems. It is necessary that the child adapt to the requirement that a space signifies the end of one word, as he sees it, from the beginning of the next. At first, a child may not form word boundaries (the "space" concept) in language as adults do. He may represent the message "Daddy kicks the ball" as "Daddykickstheball" in hieroglyphics or adult-like letters. As he gains in experience with written language, he will begin to recognize the need for space.

In addition, knowing where a story begins, that the print rather than the picture carries the message, that letters are different from words, and that written language must be read from left to right with a sweep back to the

left have a much greater impact on the child's success in learning to read than traditional readiness skills.

Parents and Teachers Can Help

What can parents and teachers of young children do to influence the children's understanding of the basic concepts about print? When most young children are invivted to write whatever they wish they will first produce their names and then other words or letters in their repertoires. At this time, children may not think they are being flexible, but they are anxious to write and eager to make printed words that can be read, so they keep trying.

As Clay (1979) points out, somewhere between the ages of three and five years, most children in literate cultures acquire the idea that people make marks on paper for a reason. Parents should provide a variety of activities to allow their pre-schoolers opportunities to notice and practice print. Children make relationships between what they say and what they write. Adults can help them establish these relationships.

Just as oral language is acquired in context through use, so is written language. Therefore, parents should provide pre-schoolers with opportunities to enhance their awareness of their surroundings. Parents can focus on the aspects that are regular parts of the child's environment. For example, children can make grocery lists. They can write to grandparents, aunts and uncles, and they can be encouraged to read the messages that they have written even though they may not yet know how to read. Attention can be given to familiar places such as home, church, or the babysitter's house, to familiar items such as soap, cereal boxes, toothpaste, and toys, and to the child's particular interests such as trucks, license plates, or fast food restaurants. Household items and the

child's personal belongings can be labeled. In this manner, parents can pave the way for kindergarten and primary grade teachers. The pre-schooler's experiences will already introduce him to those all important concepts about print. The child will have a heightened awareness that what can be said can also be written.

Teachers can further the child's experimentation with written language by providing a school atmosphere that is conducive to spontaneous writing activities. Teachers who stress penmanship above the message expressed by the child will most likely inhibit his spontaneous efforts as he attemps to write. Rather than large-group, direct instruction where children practice the teacher-selected "letter of the day", children should be given opportunities to record messages that they spontaneously or incidentally need or want to write. Teachers should encourage children to label their own models and constructions or perhaps to write about pictures they have drawn or painted. In addition teachers can record the child's statements about his product, and then the child can trace over or copy the teacher's handwriting. Carol Chomsky (1971) points out that children enter the classroom well equipped to learn language and are able to do so by methods of their own.

The child who is able to produce a written message that is recognizable as such to an adult has mastered a very important concept in learning to read. He has established the relationship between oral and written modes of language; he has acquired the knowledge that what he wants to say can be written down and read by himself and someone else.

Allowing children the freedom to experiment with print and written language is a key to reading readiness. Kindergartners and first graders do not always have to use fat pencils, nor should they all be expected to stay within the lines of ruled paper. Also, because reading and writing are reciprocal processes, a large number of children's books placed on

shelves the children can reach is imperative. As children develop concepts about written language by being allowed to explore and experiment with writing, they are also acquiring concepts about print that will facilitate their learning to read. Teachers who keep their children from the experiences of free writing do their students no favor. Children want to write, so let them!

Writing Activities for Youngsters: developing concepts of print

Daily Activities

Talk about: How was your day?
What did you do?
Did you have a good time?
With whom did you play?
What are you going to do tomorrow?

Read to: favorite stories
newspapers
letters

Allow for spontaneous writing: grocery list
letter
phone message

Daily routines: make bed/straighten room
eat breakfast
go to school/sitter
run errands
get dinner

A Trip or Vacation

List of what to pack
Map of route
List of chores: stop paper
stop mail
take pet to kennel

Traveling in Car

Dashborad
Record mileage
Road signs
Street signs
Store names
Billboards
License tags

A Birthday Party

List of people to invite
Menu: look through recipes
grocery list

List of special items: trays
coasters
table setting

Writing invitations

List of people coming

Eating Out

Selection of restaurant form phone book
Newspaper coupons
Restaurant menu
Placemat: doodling
pretend order
Read sugar packets
Signs on doors: men
ladies

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