



Parents wait for that wonderful day when their child learns to read. But reading words is only part of early literacy — writing is important to literacy, too. And, no matter what your child's age, he is learning to write.

My baby can't even hold a pencil

Long before a child can pick up a pencil, the stage is set for the development of writing. When your baby uses her index finger and thumb to grasp objects it is called the pincer grasp. This skill forms the basis for holding a pencil in a mature writing position.

Being able to control a pencil depends on stability of the shoulder and arm, and strength and dexterity of the hand and fingers. Babyhood is one of the few times in life when a child bears her weight on her arms and shoulders to strengthen them. A baby bears weight on her hands when she is on her tummy and pushes up to raise her head or chest off the surface. Crawling is a major source of weight bearing for babies in the last half of their first year. Be sure to give your baby lots of tummy time to build strong back, shoulders and arms for crawling and writing.

Vision also plays an important role in writing. Children have to use their hands and eyes together to coordinate the movement of the pencil. When babies gaze and focus on their parents' faces or accurately reach for and grasp objects, they are practicing eye-hand coordination.

Toddlers are scribblers

Toddlers are driven by their curiosity to explore with their hands and eyes. Let

your toddler play with materials of different textures and consistencies, such as shaving cream or play dough, to provide stimulation for fine motor development. Unscrewing lids or turning doorknobs helps your toddler's wrist become strong yet flexible. Supply lots of paper and a variety of writing tools to encourage your child to scribble often. Drawing with a child helps him associate writing with comfort and enjoyment as he moves into writing in the preschool years.

Preschoolers are writers

Your child will probably show an interest in writing by using it in her pretend play, such as scribbling a "shopping list" while playing store. When they do this, preschoolers demonstrate an understanding that spoken language can be written down and that it must be read in the same way every time. They know that the symbols of writing have meaning and they begin to reproduce those that have the most meaning to them! Your child will probably begin by writing the letters of her name or M-O-M and D-A-D.

As children begin to write, they creatively use space on the page, sometimes moving their writing from right to left or slanting it up the page. After much experimentation and experience, children gain the awareness and control to place letters on a line and write from left to right. Your child will begin to have more control over writing tools when she

starts to use a mature grip, called a tripod grip, to hold them. This is a good sign she's ready to learn to write and read in school.

Encourage your preschooler's writing by giving her old calendars, notebooks, or address books to write in. She will enjoy imitating you. Point out letters you see while running errands, especially letters that are in her name. Sit with her and let her enjoy the process of learning to write without pressure to make the letters right. That will come with time.

Steps in learning to write:

- ▶ Experiments with writing tools by scribbling
- ▶ Scribbles left to right
- ▶ Understands the difference between drawing and writing
- ▶ Makes letter-like forms and perhaps some letters
- ▶ Writes letters all over the page
- ▶ Strings letters together to represent writing
- ▶ Groups letters separated by spaces to imitate words
- ▶ Copies a letter by looking at a model
- ▶ Writes a first word, usually his name