



Tips to Support Reading and Writing: Every Writer Needs a Pencil

Evelynn excitedly picks up the chunky crayon and writes a note to her mother. While it may look like a bunch of random squiggles to us, it is the foundation of what will eventually become conventional writing. The tips shared here focus on supporting the development of writing for children, like Evelynn, with significant disabilities.

1. Find a pencil

An initial challenge in encouraging children with significant disabilities to write more may be finding the right pencil. An alternative pencil might need to be identified if a traditional tool cannot be used. Alternative pencils include weighted pencils, pencil grips, an eye gaze board, a keyboard, word prediction software, and much more. The Center for Literacy and Disabilities Studies has a CD available of alternative pencils and can be found at www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/products/available-for-purchase.

Scribbling is an important form of writing for all children, including children with significant disabilities. Because your child may be using an alternative pencil, scribbling may look different. A group of random letters made on a computer may be more legible, however they are very similar to Evelynn's random squiggles made with a crayon. Developmentally, both writing opportunities are very similar. Both are attempts to generate a message and eventually will become more conventional.

While noting what writing is, it is also important to note what writing is not. Writing is not copying or tracing; those are fine motor tasks. It is also not name stamps or using a software program to put an entire sentence into writing.

2. Provide opportunity

Learners need daily opportunities to practice and explore writing. There are many times during the day in which parents can model writing and provide opportunities for their child to write. Children with significant disabilities will need practice for those random squiggles and shapes to eventually form letters, words, and sentences. Below are some writing activities:

1. A thank you note
2. Photo captions
3. Journal writing
4. Seasonal opportunities (holidays, birthdays, etc.)
5. Shopping list
6. Invitations
7. Email or letter to a favorite relative or friend
8. Chore list
9. Guest list
10. Wish list

3. Support the process

It is important to note that learners do not need to know how to independently read or spell words in order to use an alternative pencil (Center for Literacy and Disability Studies, 2013). As we do with typically developing children, we should Attribute Meaning to their writing and scribbles. Attribute Meaning is making guesses about what we think they are writing. We might find clues from family members, a picture they are using, or what the learner can tell us about their writing. We can also provide Informative Feedback. Informative Feedback is important for helping learners understand the how of writing (Erickson & Hanser, 2010). For example, “I see some of the letters from your name; let’s find them,” or “Wow, I see a lot of E’s,” or “Let’s make some words with the letters you wrote.”

Be positive and have high expectations. If you would like more information on alternative pencils, contact PACER’s Simon Technology Center at PACER.org/stc/library.