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## **Supporting Preschoolers' Writing Identities in the Scribbling Stage**

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## Pause and Ponder

- Have you ever wondered what to say to a child who proudly shows you their page filled with scribbles?
- How familiar are you with the stages of writing development?
- How is your classroom designed to encourage emergent writing?

Ms. Gomez's (pseudonym) classroom of 4-year-old preschoolers is buzzing in morning learning centers. Maliki runs up to Ms. Gomez with glowing eyes and a bright smile, "Look!" he exclaims proudly. Ms. Gomez looks up and sees a page of white paper filled with scribbles. She knows that Maliki has been working hard to mimic writing like the adults in his life with lines and squiggles representing his thoughts on paper. She also knows Maliki will soon be expected to form letters in kindergarten and start to use invented spelling. She wonders what to say to him to celebrate his current writing stage and to help him begin experimenting with the next stage of writing; letter-like forms.

Early or emergent writing includes a number of processes for young learners, including: the manual act of producing physical marks, the meaning children attribute to these marks, and children's understanding of how written language is used (Berninger & Chanquoy, 2012). Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston (2008) divide early writing development into three emergent stages of writing: early, middle, and late. *Scribbling* falls in the *early emergent* stage followed by letter-like forms and invented spelling. Scribbling lacks directionality and may not serve a communicative function initially; however, scribbling is an important milestone in the writing development process. As preschoolers move toward the end of the early emergent stage, they begin to use scribbles for representational drawings and begin to distinguish print from drawings (Bear et al., 2008). However, current research provides little guidance regarding *how* teachers should interact with children in the scribbling stage of writing (Bear et al., 2008; Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004).

When Ms. Gomez looked up and saw Maliki's scribbling, she considered both where her student was in the early emergent stage of writing and how she hoped he would develop through the subsequent emergent stages of writing in their time together in preschool. She determines her instructional strategies with Maliki by combining her knowledge of Maliki's abilities with an understanding of the early emergent writing stages.

### **Self-Efficacy in Emergent Stages of Writing**

Early learners' self-assessments of writing ability can be rooted in their writing performance, in social comparisons they make between themselves and others, and in the messages they receive from adults (e.g., parents & teachers; Hall, White, Guo, & Emerson, in press). Teacher interactions with early emergent writers, or children who are in the scribbling phase, generate some of the first social experiences preschoolers will have regarding writing. It is important that these interactions be intentional and positive.

Teachers should encourage and applaud (through words and actions) scribbling in children's spontaneous, play related, or focused writing activities (Bear et al., 2008; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Teacher interactions with children in the early emergent stage of writing are important because teachers' actions and non-actions have an influence on children's writing self-efficacy. The early emergent writing behaviors that teachers notice and encourage versus overlook or discourage send specific messages to young children.

### **Motivation in the Emergent Stages of Writing**

Moreover, children will write if they are encouraged to write and if their current writing stage is valued by their teachers (Bear et al., 2008). Rowe (2008) considered preschooler and teacher writing conversations and found that, “In order for children to understand what was really valued at the writing table, they had to carefully notice what adults did not recognize and acknowledge as well as what they did” (p 417). Teacher’s words and actions had powerful implications for children’s self-assessments of the earliest stages of writing.

Encouragement and guidance are key elements in supporting children’s motivation to write especially in the early emergent stage of writing, when children frequently scribble (Bear et al., 2008; Fogo, 2008). Moreover, it is more important for emergent writers to openly engage in writing activities rather than focus on correctness and conventionality (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik, 2012). As teachers, we might wonder how to encourage children in the scribbling stage and celebrate their current level of writing development. Here are some teaching tips for supporting preschoolers in the scribbling stage of writing:

### **Considerations for Supporting Preschoolers in Early Emergent Writing**

#### **Set the Stage**

Teachers can scaffold young learners in the early emergent stage of writing by providing positive interactions, focused instruction, and by setting up the classroom environment to support emergent writing. Teachers can also set the stage for writing opportunities throughout the classroom in both play and instructional time by way of teacher modeling (Bear et al., 2008; Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004). To do this, we suggest you outfit all of your early learning centers with related writing tools such as blank paper, markers, crayons, hole punches, staplers, and stamps. In the dramatic play center, you can add small spiral notebooks with pens slid in the coil to serve as a grocery list for a play family, an order taking pad for a pretend restaurant, or a to-do list for an imaginary small business owner. In the blocks center, you can add clipboards and carpenter pencils to encourage children to sketch and label their building plans. In the manipulatives center, you can provide butcher paper and freshly sharpened skinny pencils to encourage tracing and labeling of some of the interesting shapes that can be found there. In the book center, you can provide a journal type notebook with a pen on a string to encourage children to write book reviews. Provide homemade sticker of a few popular book covers currently on the shelves to help preschoolers get started.

#### **Expect Scribbling**

Developmentally appropriate writing goals should always be utilized to support children in the early emergent stage of writing in order to help them develop positive perceptions of themselves as writers and to help them develop confidence in their own writing abilities (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Mata, 2011). Before writing letters, children will scribble in ways that begin to resemble lines and letters (Sulzby, 1989). From scribbling, to letter writing, to word writing, to conventional writing, children learn communication by putting words on papers (Bay, 2014; Fogo 2008). Emergent writing is a developmental sequence that includes scribbling, random letter-like shapes, as well as constructing conventional letter (Kaderavek & Justice, 2004; Welsch et al., 2003). Supporting children in their attempts to use writing is a crucial role in their writing development” (Bay, 2014, p 999). Remember scribbling is a natural part of writing

development. Praise scribbles (Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde, 2013). Moreover, step-in to preschoolers scribbling by asking questions with regards to planning, explaining, and evaluating these important early emergent writing products.

### **Acknowledge with Authenticity**


First, it is important to inwardly and outwardly acknowledge scribbling as a natural part of writing development. Teachers can root this understanding in the body of literature that has studied the products of early emergent stage writers for the last fifty years (Clay, 1975; Rowe, 2008). The developmental sequence of children's early writing and the power of teacher encouragement and interest in these nascent stages are well established (Clay, 1982).

Next, teachers should be vocal about the importance of scribbling. While encouraging preschoolers in the form of opportunity and modeling are commonly cited as appropriate supports for learners in the early emergent stage of writing, little guidance as to *what* to say or *how* to react to scribbling has been offered (Bear et al., 2008; Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2004). We would like to present three scribbling support strategies.

**Notice** when a preschooler is scribbling and label it as an important early stage of writing, this active attention, of both teacher and student, helps generate *self-awareness* and *empower* preschoolers on their developmental writing journey (Bailey, 2001). When teachers notice and explicitly refer to scribbling as a writing stage they leave developmentally appropriate space for preschoolers to be comfortable with their own skills as they develop.

**Ask questions** related to both the processes and products in the early emergent writing stage. Strong teacher questioning has been linked to improved writing topics, more scribbles, and mock letter and letter writing among early emergent writers (Peyton et al., 1989). When teachers ask questions about scribbling they acknowledge scribbling with their attention. Questions that illicit preschooler's intended messages help them to articulate their ideas and stimulate more writing practice. "What" questions can promote metacognitive activities by asking early emergent stage writers what they think about their writing. Moreover, questions facilitate children's understanding of writing as a form of communication as they begin to think and describe *what and how and to who* they will write. Teacher questions provide opportunities where "children can plan, explain, and evaluate their own writing by giving their responses to such teacher questions" (Bay, 2014, p 995).

**Encourage** scribbling through both ample opportunity and verbal praise. Teachers can be supportive of emergent writers through willingness to answer student questions, acknowledgement of writing strengths, scaffolding of children's writing activities, and encouraging writing with verbal affirmations (Mayer, 2007). Praise should focus on effort and processes without making assumptions about products. The following table provides some specific suggestions for these strategies.

	<p>Noticing (Bailey, 2001)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I notice you are putting pen to paper.</li><li>• Tell me what you are working on...</li><li>• I see you <i>writing</i>.</li></ul> <p>Questions (Bay, 2014):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are you finishing your <i>writing</i>?</li><li>• Can you tell me about your <i>writing</i>?</li><li>• What do you think about your <i>writing</i>?</li></ul> <p>Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can you sign your work? (opportunity)</li><li>• You did it, you put your thoughts on paper! (praise)</li><li>• You <i>wrote</i> a lot!</li></ul>
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#### Final Thoughts (conclusion)

- See scribbling as a springboard
- Ask and listen carefully
- Invite writing *and writers* at every age and stage

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