
I N S I G H T S

FOR FAMILIES

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How to help your children be better writers

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❖ **INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES** is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Adapted by Judy McDaniel, communications consultant, from an article published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Parents and teachers working together are the best means for assuring that children and youth will become skillful writers.

Because the situation in every home is different, we can't say when the best time is to pursue each of the following suggestions. In any case, please be aware that writing skill develops slowly. For some, it comes early; for others it comes late. Occasionally a child's skill may even seem to go backwards. Nonetheless, with your help and encouragement, your children will certainly progress.

Things to Do at Home

- ❖ Build a climate of words at home. Go places and see things with your children, then talk about what has been seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched. The basis of good writing is good talk, and younger children especially grow into stronger control of language when loving adults -- particularly parents -- share experiences and rich talk about those experiences.
- ❖ Let children see you write often. You're both a model and a teacher. If children never see adults write, they gain an impression that writing occurs only at school. What you do is as important as what you say. Have children see you writing notes to friends, letters to business firms, perhaps stories to share with the children. From time to time, read aloud what you have written and ask your children their opinions of what you've said. If it's not perfect, so much the better. Making changes in what you write confirms for children that revision is a natural part of writing -- which it is.
- ❖ Be as helpful as you can in helping children write. Talk through their ideas with them; help them discover what they want to say. When they ask for help with spelling, punctuation, and usage, supply that help. Your most effective role is not as a critic but as a helper. Rejoice in effort, delight in ideas, and resist the temptation to be critical.
- ❖ Provide a suitable place for children to write. A quiet corner is best, the child's own place, if possible. If not, any flat surface with elbow room, a comfortable chair, and a good light will do.
- ❖ Give children, and encourage others to give, the gifts associated with writing:
 - pens of several kinds
 - pencils of appropriate size and hardness
 - a desk lamp
 - pads of paper, stationery, envelopes -- even stamps
 - a booklet for a diary or daily journal (Make sure that the booklet is the child's private property; when children want to share, they will.)

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- a dictionary appropriate to a child's age and needs. Most dictionary use is for checking spelling, but a good dictionary contains fascinating information on word origins, synonyms, pronunciation, and so forth.
 - a thesaurus for older children. This will help in the search for the "right" word.
 - erasers or "white-out" liquid for correcting errors that children want to repair without rewriting.
- ❖ Encourage (but do not demand) frequent writing. Be patient with reluctance to write. "I have nothing to say" is a perfect excuse. Recognize that the desire to write is a sometime thing. There will be times when a child "burns" to write; others, when the need is cool. But frequency of writing is important to develop the habit of writing.
 - ❖ Praise children's efforts at writing. Forget what happened to you in school and resist the tendency to focus on errors of spelling, punctuation, and other mechanical aspects of writing. Emphasize children's successes. For every error a child makes, there are dozens of things he or she has done well.
 - ❖ Share letters from friends and relatives. Treat such letters as special events. Urge relatives and friends to write notes and letters to your children, no matter how brief. Writing is especially rewarding when a child gets a response. When thank-you notes are in order, after a holiday especially, sit with your children and write your own notes at the same time. Writing ten letters (for ten gifts) is a heavy burden for a child; space the work and be supportive.
 - ❖ Encourage children to write for information, free samples, and travel brochures.
 - ❖ Be alert to occasions when your children can be involved in writing, for example, helping with grocery lists, adding notes at the end of parents' letters, sending holiday and birthday cards, taking down telephone messages, writing notes to friends, helping plan trips by writing for information, drafting notes to school for parental signature, writing notes to letter carriers and other service persons, and preparing invitations to family get-togethers.
 - ❖ Writing for real purposes is rewarding, and the daily activities of families present many opportunities for purposeful writing. Involving your children may take some coaxing, but it will be worth your patient effort.