

# Marking time

Young children are helped to become confident writers in a project described by *Michael Jones*

**W**hen I talk to parents about how their young children will learn to write, most of them tell me that the first step will be when they can write their own name. While this is an exciting milestone in any child's development, it is only the tip of a very big iceberg.

The body of the iceberg should contain knowledge about how letters are formed in the child's culture, and how these relate to sounds in their language. Ideally, this understanding will have been gained through practice and experimentation, by making lots of marks, in lots of different ways, and with lots of different materials.

Like learning to talk and to read, children go through clearly defined stages in their journey to becoming confident writers. Learning to write is closely linked to language development and understanding of reading.

Like talking and reading, writing involves handling abstract symbols. Children begin the process by making random marks, and move through several phases to eventually put symbols and letters in linear form, as they emerge as prolific writers who use clearly identifiable words to express their ideas.

Motivation and confidence are the most important ingredients for mastering a new skill such as writing. For children, these develop through seeing other people writing, and making sense of and practising the skill through play, in an environment where adults respond with pleasure and praise as the child's skills progress. In fact, being involved in a wide range of fun mark-making activities provides the best possible foundation for the process of learning to write.

## SOLID FOUNDATIONS

Four vital points need to be understood if we are to provide children with solid foundations as confident writers:



Children at Sacred Heart wear writing belts and use builders' tools for their mark-making role play

- Confidence comes through experimentation
- Experimentation needs to be with lots of different mark-making tools and media, and not just pencil and paper

- Skills develop through practice
- Role-play can provide some of the best opportunities for experimenting, practising, and making sense of why we need to write in the first place.

Of course, some children need more support and encouragement than others. By four years of age, there will already be children who shy away from mark-making activities, and in some cases find the act of writing very distressing.

Generally, we would be right in assuming that most of these reluctant children are boys, but from my experience there will be several girls in any setting who lack confidence with early writing. For whatever reason, many of these children feel that writing has to be exact, and have developed a fear of not being able to write their name or numbers properly.

To address some of these issues, four-year-olds in six Luton schools were helped to take part in an experimental ten-week project, which we called 'On Your Marks!'

Each school looked specifically at increasing the range of opportunities in the Foundation Stage for making marks. The schools received funding for materials, and for providing cover so that staff could take time to develop own ideas.

Each set of staff chose the particular areas they wanted to focus on, such as fine motor skills, mark-making outside, mark-making and role play, and music movement and mark-making.

I led the project with a brief to work closely with children and adults to explore new approaches that would develop all children's confidence in mark-making. I worked in each school for six half days, as well as leading an after-school training session.

## ROLE PLAY

An activity in Sacred Heart Primary illustrates how children's confidence and adult practice can be developed. Staff in the Foundation Unit pride themselves on providing a rich learning environment that balances adult-led with child-initiated activities.

Children are particularly encouraged to develop their own creative ideas, and there is evidence of this throughout the setting, with children making elaborate models, a thriving workshop area, and displays celebrating children's imaginative ideas.

Despite this, adults were very aware that there were several children who almost never spontaneously took part in any mark-making activities, and some who would actively resist attempts to support them. However, these children enjoyed some elaborate role play, especially outside. During our training session we decided

that we needed to incorporate mark-making in activities that children were already actively engaged in, and especially in role play.

Nursery nurse Tracey Hill was already leading a building and wood-work project and could see the potential for incorporating making marks within this. However, most of the writing that children took part in tended to be adult-led, such as making plans and recording what they had done. This didn't engage the children who most needed practice. Our question, then, was: 'How can we help children to make marks in their role play, so they can enjoy it, without it seeming artificial?'

During my initial visit I noticed that some children had found a long roll of paper and were spontaneously writing numbers from 1 to 100. They were busily chatting, commenting on each other's attempts, and having a lot of fun trying to write 'big numbers'. Class teacher Katie Monastero became involved and was showing them how the numbers followed in sequence, using a metre rule.

This chance observation provided the inspiration for our idea to develop mark-making in role play. Builders regularly use metal tape measures, and if they are measuring wood, where do they write down their big numbers? On the wood!

## TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Next we invested in some real tools, including tape measures and spirit levels, and spanners and wrenches of various sizes. I was able to provide some wood offcuts to give the role play an extra dimension of reality. We added these to our collection of hard hats and high-visibility jackets, and in no time at all we had a willing group of builders who were all very keen to measure everything they built, and to write down what they had measured.

Initially, we adults assumed the role of 'foreman', telling our 'apprentices' what the tools were called and how they should be used. This helped to provide the ground rules for behaviour and make sure that all children were equally involved. Gradually we stepped back and allowed the children to be totally absorbed in their play, while seeing that they were safely handling the tools and giving support with writing.

A particularly successful addition to our resources was a set of 'writing belts'. These are based on the tool belts that builders have around their waists for their tools and mobile phones. Our 'writing belt' comes with a pen,

## FURTHER READING

- *Mark-making Matters: Young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development.* DCSF, 2008
- *Supporting children's writing development in the early years.* Lawrence Educational Publications, 2010
- Gateway to Writing, <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/254287>
- 'Writing belts' are available from [www.heritagetreasurebaskets.co.uk](http://www.heritagetreasurebaskets.co.uk)

Post-It notes and a decommissioned mobile phone. There are several colours of belt to choose from, including army camouflage, plain green, and white with purple and pink spots. Colour is important, as there can be a gender issue in construction role play, with girls perhaps needing extra encouragement to join in and remain involved. A spotty writing belt with a purple mobile phone is often all the encouragement that is needed!

Tracey Hill and her teaching assistant colleague Jo Elliott felt the building project helped staff to appreciate the importance of language development in early writing. They said, 'Introducing mark-making into the type of play that children are automatically attracted to helps to build their confidence – literally! They can see that writing is for a purpose.'

'Linking it to maths, which they might enjoy a lot, seems like a natural thing to do.'

'Just by being allowed to handle real tools and write on blocks of wood we got so much chat from the children, as well as talking with each other. They made spontaneous comments like: "I can see 100", "I know what that is: that's a very big number".'

'It has also been exciting to see children become deeply involved in activities that they would usually avoid.'

While this was only one of several aspects of our project, it illustrates how important role play is for early writing behaviours, giving children the scope to experiment, and providing a strong foundation for all children to become confident writers. ■

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## STARTING POINTS

- To support children's involvement in mark-making:
- Be aware of the developmental stages that children work through on their way to becoming a confident writer
  - Consider how mark-making can be encouraged throughout

- your early years setting
- Provide appropriate resources and storage for each activity, showing children how to use equipment
  - Plan to spend time with children in their role play, to demonstrate that it is a valued activity, and provide initial ideas and appropriate vocabulary.