11 Ideas for Getting Kids to Write

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Early Stages of Writing

Parents know that they should read to their children, sign them up at the library, and occasionally wrestle the remote control or joystick from their hands and replace it with a book. But reading isn't the only thing that's fundamental.

The other side of literacy is writing, and that's where many parents and their kids fall short. Only about 25 percent of America's kids are considered proficient writers--able to write at their appropriate grade level--and just one percent are advanced writers, according to the latest results of the National Assessment in Writing, which was administered to grades 4, 8, and 12 by the United States Department of Education. The truth is, education experts say, most kids barely write above a basic level.

It would be easy to blame television, video games, the Internet, and cheap phone rates, which have made letter writing a lost art. While these factors contribute to a lack of writing literacy, the fact is that many adults don't know how to teach writing to their kids or to encourage it at home. Or they might be insecure about their own writing, passing that unease onto their children. And there are plenty of young people who simply regard writing as difficult and dull, something akin to punishment.

What children need most from parents are not rules of grammar or how to write a topic sentence for a school essay, but simple encouragement to write and write often. Like carpentry, writing is a craft; the more you do it, the easier and better you get. And kids do need to get better at it. Writing effectively, after all, is a necessary skill, whether your kids need to compose an essay answer on a college exam or want to write an effective memo or report at a future job. Here are some ways suggested by educators, writers, teachers, and parents to make writing as natural as reading around your home.

Create a writing corner. Equip a corner of your child's room with kid-friendly writing and drawing implements: notebooks, construction and composition paper, fluorescent pens, pencils and erasers, markers, crayons, stickers, and word puzzle books. Put up a bulletin board to display word lists, quotes from writers, inspiring illustrations or photos, and, of course, examples of the young author's work.

1. Let them make a list. Writing up the grocery list shows children how writing is used every day. Send them to the pantry or to look at a newspaper ad to copy down brands, serving sizes, and prices. If they want treats, ask for a few written words justifying the purchase.

2. Become your kid's publisher. As soon as kids start telling stories, write them down, suggests Kathleen Yancey, director of the Pearce Center for Professional Communication at Clemson University in South Carolina. Create homemade books in which you write the words and the child draws the pictures. Put stickers onto blank pages and have the child write an accompanying story.

Take pictures with a digital camera of a day in the park or a trip to the zoo, or have your children photograph action figures or toy dinosaurs in various poses. Print the pictures and have the child construct a story.

When you're finished, make covers out of construction paper and write the child's byline on the front. Then include their books in bedtime reading.

3. Tell a relay story. Sometimes kids aren't sure what to write. Here's a way to solve the invention problem. Start a story with something like, "One day, a brown horse munched on white flowers in a green meadow of chest-high grass." The child adds a sentence or two and relays the story back to you or to a sibling. You can do this orally while stuck in traffic, waiting at the dentist's office, or at home. Or push a sheet of paper back and forth across the kitchen table, says Yancey. Inevitably, relay stories take silly twists and turns, but may be quite good and memorable--worth writing down.

4. Pass a note. Cathryn Tobin, a pediatrician in Toronto, and author of The Parent's Problem Solver, writes notes back and forth with her children. She places words of instruction, love, and encouragement ("Good luck on your test") into her kids' lunch boxes, school books, and coat pockets. The children write back and hide notes under pillows and in her shoes. It's become a kind of game, she says, but also a great way to keep in touch with one another.

"Notes help us carry on a private written conversation when we're not together," she says. "Also, they allow us to say things like 'I'm sorry I got mad,' which might be harder to do face to face."

5. Draw up a contract. Want to see some really creative writing? Ask them to draw up a contract when they want an advance on their allowance or permission to adopt a pet. The child has to be persuasive, spelling out terms and conditions and probably writing multiple drafts before the document is finally acceptable to both parties. Hang the signed version on the fridge.

6. Play sentence games. Here's a game to help children learn sentence structure. Tell the child to observe nearby objects or events, such as a cat walking through the backyard. Then ask questions that will build a vivid sentence. What color is the cat? "The cat is yellow with white feet." What is it doing? "The yellow cat with white feet is walking." Where is it going? "The yellow cat with white feet is walking to the grocery store for some chocolate milk."

"Once kids learn to create vivid and lively sentences, they'll start doing that with paragraphs and stories too," says Erika Karres, a private writing consultant and former assistant professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

7. Start a family newsletter. Replace the Christmas form letter with a family newsletter published by your kids. Older kids can write and edit articles; younger siblings can contribute drawings, photographs, and cartoons. Inexpensive computer software enables kids to create slick-looking newsletters or even publish their own Web page.

8. Pen a few postcards. On trips, have the children mail postcards to friends and relatives--even to themselves. But don't wait until you leave home. Buy silly cards at the grocery store or local mall. Take the kids to the post office to pick out cool-looking stamps so they'll have everything already in hand when they start the trip. When they go off to camp or stay with relatives for a few days, hand them a pack of postcards, writing paper, and pre-addressed, stamped envelopes.

9. Send celebrity letters. Brad Kwiatek, an English teacher at The Kiski School in Saltsburg, Pennsylvania, has his teenage charges write to their favorite celebrities--football players, pop singers, actresses, and politicians--and request autographs or other belongings. "It's a perfect way to teach persuasive writing and business letters," he says. The letters should be polite and clearly written, and spell out exactly what the child wants--such as an autographed T-shirt or an old shoe from an athlete. "The more specific the request, the more likely you'll get a personal response," advises Kwiatek.

10. Keep diaries and journals. The child who writes in a journal discovers that writing isn't just a way to record information, but an opportunity to dialogue with themselves, says Karres. Journaling is a great way to learn free writing, and to deal with feelings. Journals and diaries can be done in a number of ways. Kids can keep school journals, personal journals, sports journals, and summer camp journals. Let them experiment and find a form of journaling that works best for them. Start children off with a vacation journal. Encourage them to draw pictures and paste in postcards, receipts, tickets, and other souvenirs. You can provide the narrative.

11. Publish that story. Encourage your children to write a letter to the editor, pen a column for the school paper, or pitch story ideas about their school to the local newspaper, says Sharon Dotson of Bayou City Public Relations in Houston. She is writing a book about teen publishing. "Local papers--especially weeklies--are looking for more copy, more local news," Dotson says. "Stories about schools always have an audience."

Think bigger, too. Many magazines geared to young people--such as Highlights, Seventeen, and Jack and Jill--publish poems and stories from their readers. Web sites geared to children with special interests also publish writing. Kids can publish stories and get online critiques from other kids at www.realkids.com. The Web site www.teenslant.com is produced entirely by teens.

"Once your kids start looking, they'll find dozens of places to send their writing," Dotson says. "Kids who write well and market their writing will get published." And nothing encourages a writer to keep writing like seeing her name in print.

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