

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Learning to Write and Draw

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in Preschoolers

Five Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My three and a half year old becomes easily frustrated when he writes or draws. How can I help him practice writing and enjoy it?

Learning to write and draw is a complicated process, and it is important not to push your child beyond his developmental capacities. Your son is working to strengthen his finger and hand muscles so that he is able to write with precision and control while also learning how to form the words that represent his thoughts. For adults and children, it is difficult to learn when frustrated, but you can help make learning to write and draw more engaging for your child by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

1. Understand the developmental process. There are steps in the process of learning to write and draw. The purpose of both is ultimately to have your child be able to express himself so you don't want to close down that process, especially at his age.

- With drawing, your child should be able to explore colors, shapes and objects. He will move from making marks on paper to being able to draw things that he sees and feels. There is no one correct way to draw a person or a house, for example. He should be able to draw them as he sees them or feels about them, without criticism.
- With writing, your initial focus should be on your writing down what he says so that he can see the connections between the letters on the page and his spoken words. His own writing should begin with his finding a way to write his name (even with its first letter) and then perhaps with other words that mean something to him, like the names of a family member, a pet or a favorite place.

The Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development—a committee of 17 scholars from across the United States—was created in the late 1990s to evaluate what we know about the science of early development. One of their major conclusions was that human relationships “are the building blocks of healthy development.” The Committee went on to say that all of young children’s achievements occur “in the context of close relationships with others.”

2. Remember, your relationship with your child is central to his learning. When children have supportive and trusting relationships with the important adults in their lives, they are much more likely to believe that they can do things, even when they're hard. This kind of motivation is essential to Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. Your child is more likely to pay attention, to remember and to have self control when he feels calm, understood and safely challenged. Some things you can do are:

- Have conversations with your child. Take the time to talk to your child and ask him about what frustrates him when he writes or draws. Is he asked to copy letters or do other kinds of writing drills where it is just memorization? Do his hand muscles get tired quickly? Is he worried about what his writing or drawing looks like? Once you know what your child is thinking and feeling, you can start to work together to find a way to make the process easier and more enjoyable for everyone.
- Praise your child's efforts. When your child makes any attempts at writing or drawing, be sure to praise his efforts and strategies. As children get more interested in writing, they pretend to write by making squiggles on the page. This kind of "writing" should be appreciated. Ask your child: "Tell me about what you are writing?" Don't expect this writing to necessarily represent words or sentences, but rather, ideas. Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that if adults praise children's efforts—"You are working hard!"—rather than their intelligence—"You are so smart!"—they can help your child learn to "love challenge."

The Committee's National Scientific Council on the Developing Child also concluded that: "Cognitive, emotional and social capacities are inextricably intertwined throughout the life course."

3. Involve your child socially, emotionally and intellectually. Children are more likely to be truly involved in learning when they are engaged on all three levels of thinking. You can help your child stay interested in writing and drawing by relating them to subject areas for which he has already shown some passion and interest. For example, you could:

- Help him write—or you write down his words—about things that spark his interest, like animals he's seen or his favorite foods.
- Make a personal book, featuring photographs of your child and his drawings and/or writings. Your child can retell the story of a favorite family experience in his own words. You can write some of the words, and he can write the words he knows.

If the writing tasks have personal meaning for your child, he is more likely to stay with the task longer. It will also give him the opportunity to practice his communication skills. But, most of all, keep it fun!

Robyn Fivush of Emory University studies children's memories of their experiences. She and her colleagues taped conversations between mothers and their preschool-aged children talking about past experiences. In this and other studies, the researchers found that children of more elaborative mothers—it could have been fathers, too—are more likely to have better language and literacy skills. The highly elaborative mothers would:

- **discuss past experience in rich detail;**
- **ask lots of open-ended, "wh" questions (who, what, where, why);**
- **repeat what the child says;**
- **go back and forth in conversation and give feedback; and**
- **show genuine interest in what the child is saying.**

4. Elaborate and extend children's learning. Studies show that children are most likely to remember what they learn by having direct and real experiences. You can then elaborate on these experiences to motivate your child to draw and write. You might:

- Take walk and look for animals (dogs, squirrels, whatever you see). Encourage your child to draw about your animal walk.
- Then ask your child what he wants to say about his drawings and write down his words. He will be so excited to see his words on paper!
- As he becomes more confident, allow him to write some of the letters. You can staple pages together to make his very own book.

5. Help children set and work toward their own goals. From preschool on, children begin to use their higher order thinking, the parts of the brain required to manage their emotions and behaviors, or **Executive Functions**. Being able to set and work toward goals is critical for the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. You can start habits of goal directed behavior in your child by helping him set short-term goals, like: “Tonight, I will write my name on my drawing.” You can also talk about long-term goals, like: “One day, I will be able to fill a whole page with words!” Remember to keep goals manageable and flexible, with lots of encouragement.

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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