

## **How to Help Your Child Become a Better Writer**

Suggestions for Parents from the National Council of Teachers of English

1980

Dear Parent:

We're pleased you want to know how to help the NCTE effort to improve the writing of young people. 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, the child will certainly progress.

The members of the National Council of Teachers of English welcome your involvement in your child's education in writing. We hope you will enjoy following these suggestions for helping your child become a better writer, both at home and at school.

### **Things to Do at Home**

- 1.** Build a climate of words at home. Go places and see things with your child, 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.
- 2.** 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 opinion of what you've said. If it's not perfect, so much the better. Making changes in what you write confirms for the child that revision is a natural part of writing -- which it is.

**3.** 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.

**4.** 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.

**5.** Give the child, 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.)

--a dictionary appropriate to the 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 the child wants to repair without rewriting.

**6.** 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.

**7.** Praise the child'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 the child's successes. For every error the child makes, there are dozens of things he or she has done well.

**8.** Share letters from friends and relatives. Treat such letters as special events. Urge relatives and friends to write notes and letters to the child, no matter how brief. Writing is especially rewarding when the child gets a response. When thank-you notes are in order, after a holiday especially, sit with the child and write your own notes at the same time. Writing ten letters (for ten gifts) is a heavy burden for the child; space the work and be supportive.

**9.** Encourage the child to write for information, free samples, and travel brochures.

**10.** Be alert to occasions when the child 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 child may take some coaxing, but it will be worth your patient effort.

## **Things to Do for School Writing Programs**

**1.** Ask to see the child's writing, either the writing brought home or the writing kept in folders at school. Encourage the use of writing folders, both at home and at school. Most writing should be kept, not thrown away. Folders are important means for helping both teachers and children see progress in writing skill.

**2.** Be affirmative about the child's efforts in school writing. Recognize that for every error a child makes, he or she does many things right. Applaud the good things you see. The willingness to write is fragile. Your optimistic attitude toward the child's efforts is vital to strengthening his or her writing habit.

**3.** Be primarily interested in the content, not the mechanics of expression. It's easy for many adults to spot misspellings, faulty word usage, and shaky punctuation. Perfection in these areas escapes most adults, so don't demand it of children. Sometimes teachers -- for the same reason -- will mark only a few mechanical errors, leaving others for another time. What matters most in writing is words, sentences, and ideas. Perfection in mechanics develops slowly. Be patient.

**4.** Find out if children are given writing instruction and practice in writing on a regular basis. Daily writing is the ideal; once a week is not often enough. If classes are too large in your school, understand that it may not be possible for teachers to provide as much writing practice as they or you would like. Insist on smaller classes -- no more than 25 in elementary schools and no more than four classes of 25

for secondary school English teachers.

**5.** Ask if every teacher is involved in helping youngsters write better. Worksheets, blank-filling exercises, multiple-choice tests, and similar materials are sometimes used to avoid having children write. If children and youth are not being asked to write sentences and paragraphs about science, history, geography, and the other school subjects, they are not being helped to become better writers. All teachers have responsibility to help children improve their writing skills.

**6.** See if youngsters are being asked to write in a variety of forms (letters, essays, stories, etc.) for a variety of purposes (to inform, persuade, describe, etc.), and for a variety of audiences (other students, teachers, friends, strangers, relatives, business firms). Each form, purpose, and audience demands differences of style, tone, approach, and choice of words. A wide variety of writing experiences is critical to developing effective writing.

**7.** Check to see if there is continuing contact with the imaginative writing of skilled authors. While it's true that we learn to write by writing, we also learn to write by reading. The works of talented authors should be studied not only for ideas but also for the writing skills involved. Good literature is an essential part of any effective writing program.

**8.** Watch out for "the grammar trap." Some people may try to persuade you that a full understanding of English grammar is needed before students can express themselves well. Some knowledge of grammar is useful, but too much time spent on study of grammar steals time from the study of writing. Time is much better spent in writing and conferring with the teacher or other students about each attempt to communicate in writing.

**9.** Encourage administrators to see that teachers of writing have plenty of supplies -- writing paper, teaching materials, duplicating and copying machines, dictionaries, books about writing, and classroom libraries of good books.

**10.** Work through your PTA and your school board to make writing a high priority. Learn about writing and the ways youngsters learn to write. Encourage publication of good student writing in school newspapers, literary journals, local newspapers, and magazines. See that the high school's best writers are entered into the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program, the Scholastic Writing Awards, or other writing contests. Let everyone know that writing matters to you.

By becoming an active participant in your child's education as a writer, you will serve not only your child but other children and youth as well. You have an important role to play, and we encourage your involvement.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND  
IMPROVEMENT**

# **Help Your Child Learn to Write Well**

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**American children must be ready to learn from the first day of school. And of course, preparing children for school is a historic responsibility of parents.**

Should you help your child with writing?

Yes, if you want your child to:

- Do well in school
- Enjoy self-expression
- Become more self-reliant

You know how important writing will be to your child's life. It will be important from first-grade through college and throughout adulthood.

Writing is:

**Practical.**

Most of us make lists, jot down reminders, and write notes and instructions at least occasionally.

**Job-Related.**

Professional and white-collar workers write frequently--preparing memos, letters, briefing papers, sales reports, articles, research reports, proposals, and the like. Most workers do "some" writing on the job.

**Stimulating.**

Writing helps to provoke thoughts and to organize them logically and concisely.

**Social.**

Most of us write thank-you notes and letters to friends at least now and then.

**Therapeutic.**

It can be helpful to express feelings in writing that cannot be expressed so easily by speaking.

Unfortunately, "many schools are unable to give children sufficient instruction in writing." There are various reasons: teachers aren't trained to teach writing skills, writing classes may be too large, it's often difficult to measure writing skills, etc.

Study after study shows that students' writing lacks clarity, coherence, and organization. Only a few students can write persuasive essays or competent business letters. As many as one out of four have serious writing difficulties. And students say they like writing less and less as they go through school.

That's why the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) suggests that you help your child with writing. OERI believes you, a parent, can make a big difference. You can use helping strategies that are simple and fun. You can use them to help your child learn to write well--and to enjoy doing it! This leaflet tells you how.

## Things to Know

Writing is more than putting words on paper. It's a final stage in the complex process of communicating that begins with "thinking." Writing is an especially important stage in communication, the intent being to leave no room for doubt. Has any country ratified a verbal treaty?

One of the first means of communication for your child is through drawing. Do encourage the child to draw and to discuss his/her drawings. Ask questions: What is the boy doing? Does the house look like ours? Can you tell a story about this picture?

Most children's basic speech patterns are formed by the time they enter school. By that time children speak clearly, recognize most letters of the alphabet, and may try to write. Show an interest in, and ask questions about, the things your child says, draws, and may try to write.

Writing well requires:

- **Clear thinking.** Sometimes the child needs to have his/her memory refreshed about a past event in order to write about it.
- **Sufficient time.** Children may have `stories in their heads' but need time to think them through and write them down. School class periods are often not long enough.
- **Reading.** Reading can stimulate a child to write about his/her own family or school life. If your child reads good books, (s)he will be a better writer.
- **A Meaningful Task.** A child needs meaningful, not artificial writing tasks. You'll find suggestions for such tasks in the section, "Things To Do."
- **Interest.** All the time in the world won't help if there is nothing to write, nothing to say. Some of the reasons for writing include: sending messages, keeping records, expressing feelings, or relaying information.
- **Practice.** And more practice.
- **Revising.** Students need experience in revising their work-- i.e, seeing what they can do to make it clearer, more descriptive, more concise, etc.

# Pointers for Parents

In helping your child to learn to write well, remember that your goal is to make writing easier and more enjoyable.

**Provide a place.** It's important for a child to have a good place to write--a desk or table with a smooth, flat surface and good lighting.

**Have the materials.** Provide plenty of paper--lined and unlined--and things to write with, including pencils, pens, and crayons.

**Allow time.** Help your child spend time thinking about a writing project or exercise. Good writers do a great deal of thinking. Your child may dawdle, sharpen a pencil, get papers ready, or look up the spelling of a word. Be patient--your child may be thinking.

**Respond.** Do respond to the ideas your child expresses verbally or in writing. Make it clear that you are interested in the true function of writing which is to convey ideas. This means focusing on "what" the child has written, not "how" it was written. It's usually wise to ignore minor errors, particularly at the stage when your child is just getting ideas together.

**Don't you write it!** Don't write a paper for your child that will be turned in as his/her work. Never rewrite a child's work. Meeting a writing deadline, taking responsibility for the finished product, and feeling ownership of it are important parts of writing well.

**Praise.** Take a positive approach and say something good about your child's writing. Is it accurate? Descriptive? Thoughtful? Interesting? Does it say something?

## Things to Do

**Make it real.** Your child needs to do real writing. It's more important for the child to write a letter to a relative than it is to write a one-line note on a greeting card. Encourage the child to write to relatives and friends. Perhaps your child would enjoy corresponding with a pen pal.

**Suggest note-taking.** Encourage your child to take notes on trips or outings and to describe what (s)he saw. This could include a description of nature walks, a boat ride, a car trip, or other events that lend themselves to note-taking.

**Brainstorm.** Talk with your child as much as possible about his/her impressions and encourage the child to describe people and events to you. If the child's description is especially accurate and colorful, say so.

**Encourage keeping a journal.** This is excellent writing practice as well as a good outlet for venting feelings. Encourage your child to write about things that happen at home and school, about people (s)he likes or dislikes and why, things to remember or things the child wants to do. Especially encourage your child to write about personal feelings--pleasures as well as disappointments. If the child wants to share the journal with you, read the entries and discuss them--especially the child's ideas and perceptions.

**Write together.** Have your child help you with letters, even such routine ones as ordering items from an advertisement or writing to a business firm. This helps the child to see firsthand that writing is important to adults and truly useful.

**Use games.** There are numerous games and puzzles that help a child to increase vocabulary and make the child more fluent in speaking and writing. Remember, building a vocabulary builds confidence. Try crossword puzzles, word games, anagrams and cryptograms designed especially for children. Flash cards are good, too, and they're easy to make at home.

**Suggest making lists.** Most children like to make lists just as they like to count. Encourage this. Making lists is good practice and helps a child to become more organized. Boys and girls might make lists of their records, tapes, baseball cards, dolls, furniture in a room, etc. They could include items they want. It's also good practice to make lists of things to do, schoolwork, dates for tests, social events, and other reminders.

**Encourage copying.** If a child likes a particular song, suggest learning the words by writing them down--replaying the song on your stereo/tape player or jotting down the words whenever the song is played on a radio program. Also encourage copying favorite poems or quotations from books and plays. OERI's strategies for helping children learn to write well are helping youngsters throughout the country. We hope they will help your child.

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