

*This article follows on from 'Learning to Read' in the October Newsletter. Thank you for the response to last month's newsletter. A new **Letters** section appears at the end of this issue (pages 5 and 6).*

Learning to Write

There are two aspects to writing: the first is the manual skill required to actually form the letters and the second relates to the content of the writing itself. It is important that these two aspects are not confused.

Historical traditions and current economic factors lead to children being sent to school long before they have developed the manual dexterity required for writing. This explains why so many children experience difficulty in learning to write at school. Instead of recognising this fact and allowing children to do things that do not involve reading and writing, schools put extra pressure on young children to try to make them learn to write before they want to.

“Primary schools were introduced to teach the children of illiterate parents how to read and write. Now that most parents are literate, why do they continue to send their children to primary schools?”

Good teachers do not pressurise children either to learn to read or to learn to write— they make themselves available to help children, when the children themselves want to learn. In view of the fact that few modern primary schools allow teachers to work in this way, it does not make sense to send children to them.

The Importance of Drawing

The actual process of writing is not an intellectual exercise, it is an artistic exercise. To do it well, one has to be a competent artist. Children become competent by constant practice.

The modern education system does not take sufficient advantage of the enthusiasm that all children have for drawing. For young children – up to the age of six, seven or even eight – there is no reason why drawing should not represent the total work that they do on paper. They have no need to write but are happy to draw every day and the more opportunities they have to draw, the more skilled they become and the more they enjoy it.

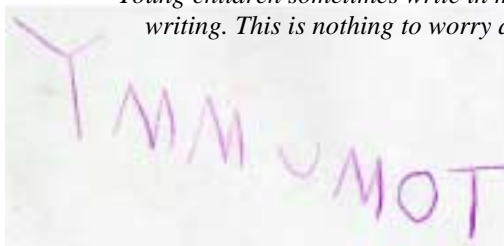
(The idea that some children are 'good' at drawing and others are not is a product of the competitive nature of our so-called education system - it has no more relevance than the idea that some children are 'good' at speaking and others not. Children learn to speak by being spoken to and by being given a chance to speak themselves. It is the same with drawing: children need to practise as much as possible.)

- Parents should get in the habit of drawing with their young children every day.
- Have an unlimited supply of paper: reams of photocopying paper are reasonably affordable. Young children like big pieces of paper, so use A3 size.
- Use the best-quality drawing materials from the beginning. Get chunky wax crayons for young children and the best-quality coloured pencils when they are old enough to use them. Also get a good collection of graphite pencils.
- It doesn't matter if *you* are no good at drawing: your child is your least harsh critic. What is important to them is that you are taking the time to sit beside them and do the same thing that they are doing. They will teach themselves and rapidly develop their own style.
- Sometimes children who have been to school have been told that they have various educational problems. Thankfully, these do not spill over into the world of art. Anyone who can hold a crayon is capable of expressing themselves in colour, on a page. In some ways it is a more valid expression than writing is ever likely to be, and whether or not someone goes on to become a competent writer, time spent drawing and painting will always have been time well spent.

Learning to Write

Young children may want to learn how to write their names and to be able to write short messages. They can use capital letters to do this – simply copying things that you write out for them. This is sufficient for most children up to the age of at least seven. There is no reason why children should be taught to write in non-joined-up, lower-case, letters (printing): it does not look attractive, it makes it more difficult to learn joined-up writing later on and it can cause a lot of distress. It is something that schools do to keep children occupied but it has no educational merit.

Young children sometimes write in mirror writing. This is nothing to worry about.



The time to learn to write is when a child has become a confident artist, the technicalities of writing then become a source of pleasure. This is usually at the age of about seven. A child does not need to know how to read in order to be able to write: children will learn to write simply because it is fun. This means that children who have been told that they have reading difficulties can learn to write in just the same way as anyone else.

If you are teaching your own children to write, remember that the worst thing that you can do is to adopt a 'teacher-like' tone of voice or to force writing upon them. The first step you should take is to improve your own handwriting – select a round, flowing script and practise it until you can form the letters consistently, with very little variation - and you should then wait for them to ask you to teach them to write. Start by writing the letters out in lines, leaving space for your child to copy them underneath. Do lines of the same letters, alternate different letters, combine them to make simple words, etc. Do this for an hour per day for three to four weeks and your child will be able to copy your handwriting with precision: young children learn very quickly.

aaaaaaa...

ccccccc...

eeeeeee...

cacacaca....

lilililililili...

dedededede.....

caca → cat ace act
lili → little tilt

Many parents are frightened of teaching their children to write, but it is not difficult. From a child's point of view, it is much more enjoyable to learn to write in the comfort of their own home with the

one-to-one attention of their parent than in the impersonal atmosphere of a classroom. It does not matter to them that a school teacher has a qualification and that their mother or father does not.

Writing Exercises

Once a child has learnt to write, they can develop their skill through practice. This is best done by copying out poems and texts. You read the poem to them, write it out yourself in your best writing and your child then copies it. The aim is to make the finished work as beautiful as possible. If they wish, they can write it out in pencil first and then go over it in ink. The finished page can be illustrated with pictures, or with a decorated border. Writing should never be treated as a utilitarian exercise.

Learning to write in this way gives a child an intimate connection with letters and words and takes them four fifths of the way to learning to read. When delayed until a child can write, learning to read becomes a very painless process indeed.

Copying

Copying things out of books is often looked down upon as being a slightly inferior activity but its value depends on the quality of the work being copied and the care put into the copying. Copying out poems, passages from the classics etc., is not a waste of time: it gives a good introduction to the book concerned and is also a good way of acquiring a knowledge of spelling, grammar and punctuation. The secret is to copy out the minimum and to put the maximum into the presentation. Work copied out in this way can be given as presents to grandparents etc. The aim is to go to the opposite extreme from school: instead of producing masses of work, most of it scrappy and most of it never looked at again, aim at producing a few pieces of work of which everyone is very proud.

There is no reason why one should ever stop exploring the possibilities of combining art and writing: they have gone together down the centuries and the world would be a poorer place without the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Once you have mastered one script, experiment with calligraphy and try to write in different styles – Italic, Gothic, etc.



Creative Writing

Once a child has learnt how to write, then the focus shifts to what they will write and when they will write it.

It is wrong to force children to write things. Writing is a form of self-expression just as much as speaking. Freedom of speech is as much about being free not to say things as it about having the freedom to speak: making children write essays, poems, letters, or anything else is a cruel form of bullying. Most people have bitter memories of assignments that they were set when they were at school and the punishments that were threatened if they did not write a certain number of words on a particular subject, by a certain time. Nothing could be better designed to alienate a child from writing.

What makes this even more of a tragedy is that all children do have an inherent and spontaneous desire to explore anything and everything that comes in their path – and this includes writing. Everyone wants to write, it is clearly a fascinating and remarkable activity: to be able to put one's thoughts down on a piece of paper so that others can read them is something that appeals to everyone. Children simply have to be given space to come to it in their own time.

After a child has learnt how to write, no pressure whatsoever need be placed upon them to actually do it. There are many ways in which they will start writing without being prompted:

- Writing lists: shopping lists etc. (anything that they see you do, they will want to do themselves).
- Writing cards: children like sending cards to friends and relatives. They like writing messages inside.
- Poetry: left to their own devices, most children enjoy composing poetry, especially poetry inspired by nature. Spend time out of doors, and your children are quite likely to come home and write a poem.
- Diaries
- Letters: when they have not been put off writing at school, children still prefer the written word to messages sent by e-mail. It's more enjoyable both to receive letters and to send them.
- Records, games, clubs, etc.: children like to keep a record of things that they've seen, places they've visited etc; to make up rules for games; and to form clubs with written rules.
- Writing stories: children who enjoy reading are always keen to write stories themselves.

Some of these efforts might be private and some might be for wider attention. As a parent, it is important that you have time to read and to appreciate the work that your children show you: you do not have to be an expert critic correcting all the mistakes of spelling and grammar. The important thing is that children write because they want to write—providing they continue, their technique will inevitably improve.

Getting Better at Writing

Good writing is not something that can be taught, it is something that must be learnt. Only people who enjoy writing will be able to make the effort to learn how to spell correctly, to write in sentences, to extend their vocabulary, to respect rules of grammar, etc. These are not things that you can be bullied into doing against your will.

Writing skills emerge from a combination of reading good literature, engaging in conversation with articulate people, and taking care over all the written work that you do. Of these, the thing that has the most immediate effect is reading good literature.

Examinations and Testing

Ironically, the school system has come to rely on examinations, and examinations depend at least to a certain extent on people being able to write: but schools themselves do more to put people off writing than anything else. Thus being outside the school system for the early years of their education, can actually give children an advantage over those who have been in it from the start.

Where have all the Geniuses Gone?

Many of our greatest writers went to school for only a short time: William Shakespeare spent a few years at the local grammar school, but did not excel and did not go to University; Charles Dickens went to school for only two years; Jane Austen went to school for just a few months; Beatrix Potter did not go to school; Sir Walter Scott was largely self-taught; the Brontë sisters were withdrawn from school; in America, Mark Twain ran away from school at the age of twelve and was proud to boast that 'he had never let school interfere with his education' and Louisa M. Alcott had a dislike of conventional schools. Far from contributing to the development of our culture, school appears to have stifled the originality and genius of the millions of children that have been dragged through its doors. A disproportionate number of our great writers have learnt their trade outside of school.

What should you do if school has put your child off writing?

- Firstly, you should withdraw your child from school – children are sent to school to *learn* to read and write so if school is having the opposite effect, they definitely should not be going.
- Be very sensitive. Try to understand what your child has been through at school. It can take several years before children are able to come to terms with what happened to them at school, so be patient.
- Do a lot of things that do not involve writing: play games, drawing, painting, outdoor activities, gardening, crafts, cooking, etc. If anything needs to be written down, do it yourself, do not try to find clever ways to make your child do some writing.
- When asked, write things down that your child can copy: don't put pressure on them to write things themselves.

Letters

Thank you for your letters on Learning to Read October Newsletter:

Loved that article. We never pushed our daughter to read (she learnt to read at school and home with no difficulty). We adore illustrated books and always read to her, she'd sit "reading" back in her own language at first. The important thing was that we enjoyed reading and she saw us enjoy it. Unlike her peer group at school (she left school at 8 and is now 12) she did not have a T.V in her room so took a pile of books always and we read a bedtime story. I got so much pleasure from illustrators like Shirley Hughes, Rosemary Wells...and so many others. Your emphasis on it being enjoyable is great Holly wanted to know what those words said and it has paid off. She enjoys books from the Redwall series to Isabel Allende but she loves drawing as much, sewing, knitting too. Thanks for the great article. Angie Cox .

Thanks for your article - it really ties in with my experience of my son, now 8. He has never been to school, but a year or so ago I was getting a bit anxious as all he wanted to do was play!!! and he certainly found our attempts at teaching reading really boring! So I tried to relax, and then one day he picked up a book, and read me 2 chapters straight off! I'm still not sure how it happened! Now he reads voraciously all the time and all sorts of books, with ease, many of them very complex. I must say it's made me more relaxed about other aspects of education!

Deborah

Hi,

It was inspiring to read your article on reading in the latest Freedom in Education Newsletter. I must admit it has made me sit up and realise that this is how I wish it to be with my 9 year old son. But programmed as we have been, at the back of my mind has been this little voice saying that he had to practice his 3-R's!!!! I await your article on writing!!

Best wishes, Sonia

Hi, your advice is so refreshing, it is like a breath of fresh air. I am a mother of a 12 year old who has just been released from the school system. My only feeling of guilt is that it has taken so long to make this move. As a 5 year old he once said to me "I want to learn but not at school." He has hated reading with a passion, but his love of literature has come from being read to and audio tapes. You are quite right when you say they will read when they want to. Recently he has found a desire to play Warhammer, to progress he needed to read the rule book. Much to our absolute amazement he had his nose in this book for an hour at a time and even ventured onto the beach with it.

His reaction when questioned about whether he would miss his friends at school was, "friends make school bearable," school appears to a vast number of children as a place to endure. He has followed the Ron Davis, The Gift of Dyslexia programme, and having realized that Matt is a picture thinker has enabled me to plan for our activities. My one desire is to bring back to him the desire to explore and find out about things. To Matt learning had become boring. We are looking at rivers so we visited the source of the river, the mid section and the estuary. We used his Davis technique of claying the concept and the vocabulary. Our map reading skills were well tested finding the source but the rewards when we found it were immense, not only did we find an area of outstanding beauty, but also learnt a great deal from the gentleman who managed the fly fishing at the site. When we sit out on the lawns of a National Trust country home sharing our history book topic of portraits, in the warmth of the September sunshine, the thoughts of the four walls of a class room, copying endless writing from a blackboard, seems a million miles away.

I now have a happy contented child who is eager for the experiences that each week will bring. To Matt and I, learning by roaming the countryside is learning through play.

I wish I had read your piece on reading when Matt was 5, I have always believed that it is what you do with a skill when you have acquired it is the important thing in life.

Liz Jolly

Letters continued....

I thoroughly enjoyed your newsletter article on learning to read. Your emphasis on not pressurising the child was absolutely right. I found that the desire to play computer games taught my dyslexic son to read: he HAD to read the instructions in order to find out how to work the controls!

It was mighty motivation, he really wanted to play his games, and after a few times trying vainly to ask ME which key did what, he gave up and fought to learn to read. Really battled, really stuck to it, and it was so very hard for him - but I could help him with the reading a lot more than I could help him with how the game worked, and he triumphed in the end.

Nothing else taught him to read other than his own intense desire to do so in order to find out how to play his computer games. (The 'Star Wars' and 'Star Trek' games are particularly good for increasing children's language skills!)

His motivation to learn to read came from a desire to 'play' - so reading was not associated with 'work'. No external pressure whatsoever- all the incentive came from within himself.

It really is the best way!

All the best, Debra James

Information and Enquiries:

Charlotte Mason promoted Home Education in the UK a hundred years ago. Her original work has been put online by homeschoolers in the US – at

www.amblesideonline.com.

Thanks to Robin Walters for this info.

The Jamboree has a new Bip and Bop cartoon for Halloween and a new page for your letters, poems, stories, jokes, etc.

www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk

I have received a few enquiries from people interested in Steiner education. Are there any groups of Steiner Home-Educators in the UK?

Please send comments and suggestions to: garethlewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk