

# How Kids

Write

While clarity is often lacking in a child's writing, the meaning is usually present. Here are ten ways to help your child put crayon to paper—with clear results.

By Susan Fleming

Your six-year-old peels off a paper from the wad inside her lunch box and, beaming, thrusts it into your lap. "Read it, Mommy!"

The yellow lined paper has a wide blank space at the top where a crayoned picture shows a girl, a cloud, and black slanted lines. Underneath is written: "oendat a Som Kiam to the T."

Several of these letters have been erased and rewritten, leaving black smudges and a crinkled tear. You want to be encouraging, but doesn't this paper call for a stern talking-to about correct spelling and neatness?

No!

Shouldn't a child do her best at all times?

Technical perfection is not the only definition of best. "Oendat a Som Kiam to the T" ("One day a storm came to the town") shows real progress on the road toward literacy. In evaluating your child's paper, consider the following guidelines:

**Remember the way your child learned to speak.** You didn't teach her to speak; she taught herself. But you did many things that helped her learn. You didn't have to

think about them; they came naturally.

Surrounded by people talking, she happily babbled away, trying to imitate the sounds she heard. When she said something that made sense, you praised her: "That's right, honey, here's *Mum Mum*." Not only did your tone of voice convey approval, but you may have given her a little hug.

You weren't upset because she sometimes called her teddy bear "Mum Mum," too. Nor did you send her to a speech therapist when, sitting in her car seat, she pointed out the window at the truck passing and exclaimed, "Guck!"

When she insisted, "I didn't spill milk in figerator was no!" did you lecture her on proper sentence construction, forcing her to enunciate after you, "No, I didn't spill the milk in the refrigerator? Of course not. You probably thought her sentence was endearing and repeated it to grandparents and friends.

You weren't fearful that her speech mistakes would become ingrained. You allowed her to experiment freely with the language; paying more attention to her successes than her failures. Follow the same commonsense strategy when dealing with your child's writing efforts.

**2** *Take her work seriously:* Behind that messy paper in your hands is a Great Idea. It isn't beautifully expressed, it isn't even readable. But it's in her mind.

Writers of every age and degree of proficiency may have a Great Idea behind their words. The fact that the mind's vision isn't easily transferred onto paper is a harsh truth. Even professionals have difficulty facing it. Because your child is very young, she needs lots of encouragement to keep on struggling for clarity. Tread softly. Don't trample heedlessly on her fledgling attempts to communicate with paper and pencil.

**3** *Ask her to read her story to you.* Your difficulty in deciphering the marks on her paper can all too readily communicate failure. Once she reads her story aloud, her meaning becomes clear.

**4** *Meaning is more important than mechanics.* The purpose of writing is to convey meaning. So the first job of writers is to get that meaning straight inside their heads. "One day a storm came to the town" isn't a collection of random words; it makes sense. So while "oendat a Som Kiam to the T" has mechanical flaws, it is fundamentally sound.

Concentrate on the meaning of what your child writes. Ask her to tell you more about the day the storm came to town before you mention her spelling or grammar or handwriting. Remember how you feel when you're trying to tell a story and someone corrects your pronunciation. Technical expertise in writing grows if you don't stifle the desire to write by too much attention on mechanics.

**5** *Accentuate the positive.* "Oendat a Som Kiam to the T" isn't as illiterate as it seems at first glance. Look carefully and you'll notice that:

- Three words are spelled correctly:
- Spaces are left between the words, except for *oendat*, which she mistakenly thinks is a compound word—a logical miscalculation.
- The first letters in her spelling of

*day, storm, and town* are correct.

- *Storm* and *came* end with *m*, which is the final sound in both words.
- She realizes that *one* begins with *o*. Obviously she remembers seeing the word in print, since she has all the right letters in it.

- The picture of the girl and the cloud and the slanting lines indicating rain helps explain the sentence, as a good illustration should.

After you have thoughtfully studied your child's paper, talk with her about what is *right* with it. Ignore its faults.

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**"...Ask her to tell you more about her story before you mention her spelling, grammar, or handwriting...."**

**6** *Show that you appreciate the paper.* Attach it to the refrigerator door with magnets, tack it to the bulletinboard, or place it in a box or drawer reserved for writing papers. This will demonstrate to your child that you value her writing. You may want to date the story as a way of charting her progress.

**7** *Reading helps writing.* Just as listening is the opposite of speaking, writing is the other side of reading. Your child learned to speak because she listened to people talking and tried to imitate them. A child hearing little conversation is handicapped in developing verbally. A child having limited access to books is handicapped in learning to read and write.

It's easy to spot the child who has a wide knowledge of books. Sentences like "Once there was a pig unlike others" will creep into her writing. That's not the way people talk, but it is the way stories are written.

Often the child will write a story which is a retelling of one she knows or it may be a composite of several. Don't shout, "Plagiarism!" and demand that she "think up her own sto-

ries" and not "copy from others." Using a familiar model helps her to understand the structure of a story the way a painter may copy a Rembrandt to analyze the master's art.

Your child needs lots of time to pore over books on her own. This not only helps her reading but improves her spelling as well. But this doesn't mean you have to discontinue her bedtime story.

You can introduce her to books within her understanding but too difficult for her to decode. Stretching her knowledge of books enlarges her vocabulary; helps her gain a sense of grammar, and demonstrates the wonderful, almost magical, power of words. The librarian of your local library will be delighted to help you pick out books too good to miss.

**8** *Encourage your child to write frequently.* It's good for her to write stories, but don't ignore the practical value of less literary tasks. Try letting her write grocery lists or "things to do today." Even if she has already talked to Grandma on the telephone, she can still write her a letter. We all receive so much junk mail that personal letters are especially welcome.

**9** *Don't judge your child's writing by professional standards.* Most of us will never become Shakespeares. We don't have the genes for it. But we can learn to communicate ideas clearly on paper. That's the goal to aim for.

**10** *Be patient and confident.* Learning to write is a process which evolves slowly as a child develops. It can't be speeded up by constant pressure to "be neater," "watch your spelling," "try harder." Neatness and spelling and effort have their place, but too much emphasis on them diverts the child's attention from what she wants to express.

Nurture your child's writing; don't try to whip it into shape. If you relax and allow it to mature at its natural pace, you'll be surprised at how it will flourish. ●

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