

On Your Marks!!

Encouraging mark making- developing writing

Children and
Learning



Role Play and mark making 1: Developmental phases

Developmental phases

Role-play and *experimentation* are key phases that children go through in mark making, before emerging into the 'transitional' and 'conventional' writing phases. Both phases help children to shape their knowledge and understanding about writing, as well as providing them with valuable practice. Crucially, children at these stages are linking language with mark making. We can best support children in these phases by providing them with good quality role-play experiences that incorporate mark making. The phases merge into each other, and as children get older they move from one phase to another, depending on their play.

The Role-play phase of mark making

Young children interpret what they see around them through their role-play. If they are role-playing writing; e.g. pretending to 'take the register', they will be focusing on what they say, how they sit (and all your other mannerisms!) and not specifically on what marks they are making in their 'register'. The register and pen are props at this stage. Marks they make are not likely to bear much resemblance to conventional writing. Similarly if they are role-playing taking an order in a café, they may scribble on their notepad. These marks and behaviours are entirely valid at this stage. What is crucial here is the language that children are developing, the fun they are having, and how they are playing with other children. Through this they will emerge into the *experimental* phase.

The Experimental phase of mark making

We will know that children are moving into the experimental phase by listening to what they say about their writing. Typically we will notice that children's play with writing starts to take on the patterns of writing: more lines, dots and shapes that seem to feature in their culture, possibly moving from left to right (if they are experimenting with English). Children also start to talk about what they are doing in the writing process, using words that we associate with writing; e.g. 'that says'/'name'/'letter'/'word'/'squiggle'/'shape'. So if they are 'taking the register' what they 'write' there may start to resemble conventional writing more: strings of letters from their name, lines, dots etc.) If they are writing in the waiter's notepad in the café there may be rows of zigzags interspersed with letters from their name, and in some cases, words that they have copied from the displays around them.

How we can support children through role-play

What we say to children is as important as anything else. If we are playing with them in the role-play area; e.g. a café, we need to decide when it is appropriate to focus on the marks children are making, and what we say. For example if we know that children are at the role-play stage, then we can model 'taking an order', and praise them for *how* they take the order. If they are in the experimental phase we may want to have a look at what they have written and point out some of the ways that they can copy down their order, (from menu cards or the 'specials' blackboard). The most important thing in the role-play area is for the adults to have fun modelling play behaviour, and not to kill it by focusing too much on the reading and writing process! (see 'Role-play and mark making 3: adult interaction')