

No mystery to marks

In this article, Michael Jones describes ways that settings can promote a better understanding of mark making and how this can then lead on to the development of drawing and handwriting skills.

PARENTS FREQUENTLY ask early years practitioners: 'When will you start to teach my son/daughter how to write their name?' When they ask this question, parents often assume that this skill can be taught in isolation and, once this milestone is achieved, it will lead automatically to their child discovering handwriting and how to write simple words.

'Mark making' is a term mainly used in early years, to describe the progress that children make from making random marks as babies, through noticing shapes around them and experimenting with making them, to eventually realising that certain shapes that we make represent 'letters', 'words', and 'numbers'.

This process is part of their growing understanding about reading and using writing to express meaning. Mark making through painting and drawing is generally described as 'art', while the formation of letters and numbers that follow an accepted pattern is known as 'handwriting'.

The process of developing mark making, so that it can be used in painting, drawing and writing is linked to children's growing physical development and coordination. They need well-coordinated gross motor and fine motor movements and strength in their upper body and hands, so that they can balance, sit comfortably and, eventually, be able to hold a paintbrush or pencil, and use it in a relaxed and coordinated way.

Part of this process involves the development of 'laterality', where the child's brain gradually favours the use of one side of the body over another. This leads to increased 'dominance', or strength in their legs and arms, and 'handedness', where the child favours using either their right or left hand for fine motor activities, including holding a pen.

Mark making is also related to language development; including children being able to talk about what they are doing with their hands, and being able to describe shapes and patterns. In the same way that very young children come to understand that speech sounds can make up spoken words that stand for real objects and ideas, older children realize that written marks are called 'letters' and 'words', and that they can be used to share meaning with other people.

For many children, the process of moving from making random marks to being able to write their name and simple words is natural and fun. However,

it can be problematic when children lack confidence and avoid the activities that help them develop the fine motor skills and understanding that they need. Some children actively avoid activities that are based around sitting at a table and prefer to be outside.

Children with speech and language difficulties and those who will later have a diagnosis of dyslexia can also avoid early writing activities and sharing books, because, at first, these activities do not make sense to them and are stressful. As a result, these children have less practice than others in the skills that they will need to be able to write and make sense of why they are being asked to do it. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop mark making as part of all of our activities, and particularly those outdoors.

Teachers with training and experience in early years will be aware of the importance of these processes. Other practitioners, including teachers not experienced in early years, may be less confident in their knowledge and understanding of what 'mark making' actually means in practice.

All practitioners need to be clear about mark making, and how the activities they involve children in will lead to drawing and handwriting. They also need to be confident enough in their knowledge to be able to explain to parents, in plain English, how activities in the setting have a direct impact on helping children become early writers.



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Reader offer

Lawrence Educational is offering **eye** readers free P&P on Michael Jones' latest book, *On Your Marks* (see our review of the book on page 46 of this issue).

You can also view more details about the title here: <https://www.lawrenceeducational.co.uk/products/on-your-marks/>

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Using plain English

Like many aspects of work in the early years, there is a jargon attached to mark making. What I call 'teacher-speak' or 'EYFS-speak' can be a real barrier towards explaining what practitioners are trying to achieve and when showing parents what progress their children are making.

For this reason, I prefer to talk and write about: 'developing early writing' rather than 'mark making'; 'art' rather than 'creativity'; 'big and small movements' rather than 'gross and fine motor'; 'which hand your child prefers to use', rather than 'handedness'; 'being able to do something without thinking' rather than 'automaticity'; and 'writing numbers' rather than 'mathematical graphics'.

It is also important to use plain English on displays about children's mark making and writing about children's progress.

A mark making policy

It is important for staff to develop a policy about mark making, which sets out what you are aiming to achieve. This helps parents to understand your

approach to early writing and to get involved in helping their children at home. Certain aspects of mark making can seem very controversial to parents, so having an agreed policy can help in discussions and reaching agreements. The areas that are most discussed between practitioners and parents are:

- Handedness.
- Adult handwriting.
- When and how to begin teaching children to write their name.

I advise settings that are not within schools, such as pre-schools and day nurseries, to contact the early years teachers in their local school, to ask for advice and support in drafting the policy. This helps parents understand that there is a continuity between the setting and local schools, and that decisions within the policy are part of locally and nationally agreed approaches.

Handedness

Many children take time to establish which hand they prefer to use, while some show a marked preference from as young as eight-months-old. Some



Gradually, children's drawing becomes more sophisticated, including shapes that look like 'writing' and words they copy from their surroundings

parents express concern when they notice that their children swap hands to draw and write, or when eating with a fork or spoon.

Some parents will object to their children using their left hand for eating and writing, and express negative views about children who are developing as left-handers. It is very important that practitioners can share the setting's policy on handedness, so that parents can be clear about what they can expect practitioners to do about monitoring their child's developing handedness, or to be clear about the setting's approach to children using their left hand for writing and eating.

Adult handwriting

It is important that all practitioners in a setting agree on a particular handwriting style that they intend to use when writing with children and the font they choose to feature on printed captions for displays. All primary schools in the UK have a handwriting policy that explains the style that children will be taught. Many begin with printing and then move towards joined-up writing, or 'cursive script'. Others begin by teaching cursive script.

Many schools advise parents about the school's handwriting style in the information pack that all parents receive when their children start school. Many primary school teachers use this style when they are writing with children – for example, on the board or when making comments on children's work. Teachers will often ask parents to help children at home by trying to use the school's style when they help their children with homework or teach them how to write.

Parents settling in the UK from other countries will often expect all children and adults to write in exactly the same style, or for children to be taught handwriting in a very formal way. Parents who come from countries outside Europe, whose language is not based on the Roman alphabet, will often write in English using capital letters only, so having an agreed policy and advice will be especially useful for them.

Teaching children to write their name

All parents will expect their children to learn how to write their name. However, some parents, and indeed some settings, start the process when children are not ready. This can lead a child to develop anxiety about writing.

A policy should explain clearly what you do to develop early writing and how you judge when a child is ready to begin focusing on writing their name. This will be an important starting point in discussions and when giving advice on how parents can help their children reach the point where writing is a meaningful activity. It also clarifies for new members of staff and students what the expectations are for supporting children with formal aspects of writing – for example, how to help children develop a comfortable pencil grasp. **eye**



Writing your name is an important milestone, but must be a meaningful activity

Useful resources

- *On Your Marks! A practical guide to mark making, early writing and language* by Michael Jones, is published by Yellow Door/Lawrence Educational – <http://www.yellow-door.net/on-your-marks>
- For more information about mark making, visit Michael Jones' website
- <http://www.talk4meaning.co.uk/every-child-a-talker/language-and-mark-making/>

Why you need a policy

A mark making policy is important because it shows parents that:

- Practitioners have experience of mark making and early writing.
- There is a uniform approach to adult handwriting in the setting, which parents can follow at home.
- There is an agreed approach to handedness.
- The approach in the setting links to what is taught in school.

The policy is a basis for positive discussions with parents about writing.

Key points

- Mark making is a term used in early years to define a process that forms part of their growing understanding about reading and using writing to express meaning
- The process is linked to children's growing physical development and coordination