

Get them. moving

What do gross motor skills have to do with early writing?

Michael Jones describes a mark making project with a difference...

Many young children get very excited about learning to write their names. They can gain a great deal of knowledge from this process, including about the strange shapes that adults and older children scratch on paper with pens and call 'writing'. However, many children can make very little sense of the writing process and may become put off or even fearful of making marks on paper. Part of the problem is that children can be introduced to the physical aspects of writing far too early: sometimes by parents, but also in some settings. From my practical experience, it is essential to make sure that children have developed all the foundations they need before adults set out to teach them how to write. These foundations include language and fine motor control. But one key element that is often overlooked is the need for children to have well-developed and coordinated 'gross motor' (large physical) movements.

Write Dance

One of the most exciting mark making and early writing projects I have been involved in, bringing together movement, language and music, is known as 'Write Dance'. I first became aware of this approach when I was asked to help develop children's mark-making skills in Reception classes in Luton schools. The original concept was developed by Ragnhild Oussoren, a Norwegian/Swedish graphologist based in the Netherlands. Her experience showed that children develop handwriting skills when they have well-developed gross motor movements, and particularly when they are able to make movements using both hands to cross what is known as the 'midline'. The midline is a vertical line that we can imagine passing just in front of our bodies, from the tops of our heads to the floor between our feet. Children with movement coordination difficulties, eg. dyspraxia, can find it very challenging to be able to move their hands from one side of their body to the other, across the midline. Children with well-developed coordination (who are likely to develop good handwriting skills) have learned to cross the midline with ease.

Introducing waves

Write Dance includes music, songs and suggested movements that develop gross motor coordination. It helps children work on their coordinated mark-making skills in a fun and imaginative way, using movement to help make the shapes they will eventually need to write in their given language. In one class we decided to explore 'waves' with the children. I brought in lots of fiction and non-fiction books with pictures of waves, as well as rhyming books such as Giles Andreae's *Commotion in the Ocean*, which the children were already familiar with. I sat the children down in front of me and asked everyone, "Show me what a 'wave' looks like." I shouldn't have been surprised, but was taken aback when all of the children waved at me, as if to say 'hello' or 'goodbye'! It took me a few seconds to realise the reason why many children are confused by the process of learning handwriting: we can't assume that what we say will make any sense!

I quickly explained, using *Little Boat* by Thomas Docherty, that waves are made in water, and come in all different shapes, including round whirlpools. However, the

shapes we would focus on could be either very big or 'rough' waves, or small waves. One little boy described how he liked to make waves in the bath, and his mummy had explained that these were called 'ripples'. At this point the children were all excitedly talking about waves, and from then on we all understood each other.

We emptied the sand out of the sand tray, filled it with water and added some small plastic boats and a submarine. This became our focus for exploring how to make waves and talking about what waves look like. Out of this play came the subject of the sea and, inevitably, pirates. Our next session was going to be based in the school hall, and we planned to use a parachute to make waves of different sizes, to music that the children could associate with fast and slow movements. I sat down with my colleagues to think about pieces of music that conjured up for us images of waves and the sea. In the end, we decided to use 'Albatross' by Fleetwood Mac to inspire slow wave-like movements. For quick movements we chose the theme music to the 1970s children's TV programme *Captain Pugwash* (otherwise known as 'The Trumpet Hornpipe').





Movements to music

Using ideas inspired by Write Dance, we moved around the hall, making our coordinated wave movements to the music. We used a parachute to make big and small waves to the music, imagining that we were being chased across the sea by a pirate ship. By this time, all of the children were clear about the concept of 'waves' and could make the movements across their 'midline'. Our next session involved us rolling out a large sheet of lining paper across the room, taping it down with masking tape, and asking the children to kneel down in a row on either side of the paper. We gave them two thick crayons each and asked them to make 'wave shapes' on the paper, in time to the fast and slow music, using the movements with both hands across the midline, which we had practised in earlier sessions. The children loved this activity and the end result was an eight-metre-long piece of paper covered in coloured wave shapes.

Using a mixture of powder paint and water, and thick paintbrushes, we painted over the entire paper, creating a 'wash' effect, which highlighted the colours and shapes made by the wax crayons. When this had dried, we trimmed our work of art and used it as backing paper for a display about waves, complete with drawings of fish, whales, sharks and, naturally, pirate ships! In this way, we had made sure that all of the children were not only familiar with the concept behind the word 'wave', but had developed their gross motor skills too. At a later stage, using various methods such as coloured chalks on the playground and large chalkboards, we were able to show children how waves appear in joined-up writing. Many of them had spontaneously made this connection, and in later topics involving, 'circles', 'zigzags' and 'straight lines', children were able to show us these shapes in their environment and in their names.

TRY IT YOURSELF

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO USE WRITE DANCE IN YOUR SETTING, READ ON...

■ *Write Dance in the Early Years: A Pre-Writing Programme for Children 3 to 5 (Second Edition)* by Ragnhild Oussoren is available at ow.ly/IFdqP

■ Write Dance Training offers training in methods developed in the Write Dance approach. Visit writedancetraining.com

■ To see Write Dance in action, in the British School in El Salvador, visit ow.ly/IFbDq

■ For more information on mark making and language development, including some of the ideas introduced in this article, visit ow.ly/IFbOa

■ Important point! Anyone who plays recorded music in public in the UK, including with children in early years settings, must have a licence to do so. This licence can be applied for, and purchased from PRS for Music - visit ow.ly/IFc8z

Other topics

During the topic on zigzags, children decided to focus on sharks, because of their teeth, which look like zigzags. They began to see these shapes everywhere and children like Marcel made spontaneous comments like, "My daddy parks his car on the yellow zigzag lines outside our school," and "I have a zigzag at the beginning of my name!" For this topic we chose the theme music from *Jaws* for slow movements and 'Popcorn' by Hot Butter, for the quick ones. Part of the fun in planning these sessions was to explore the music we would use. We downloaded the music from iTunes and used an iPod and speakers to play it when we introduced each session and before and after we shared a story related to a topic.



**about
the author**

Michael Jones provides practical training on language development in early years. For more information, visit talk4meaning.co.uk