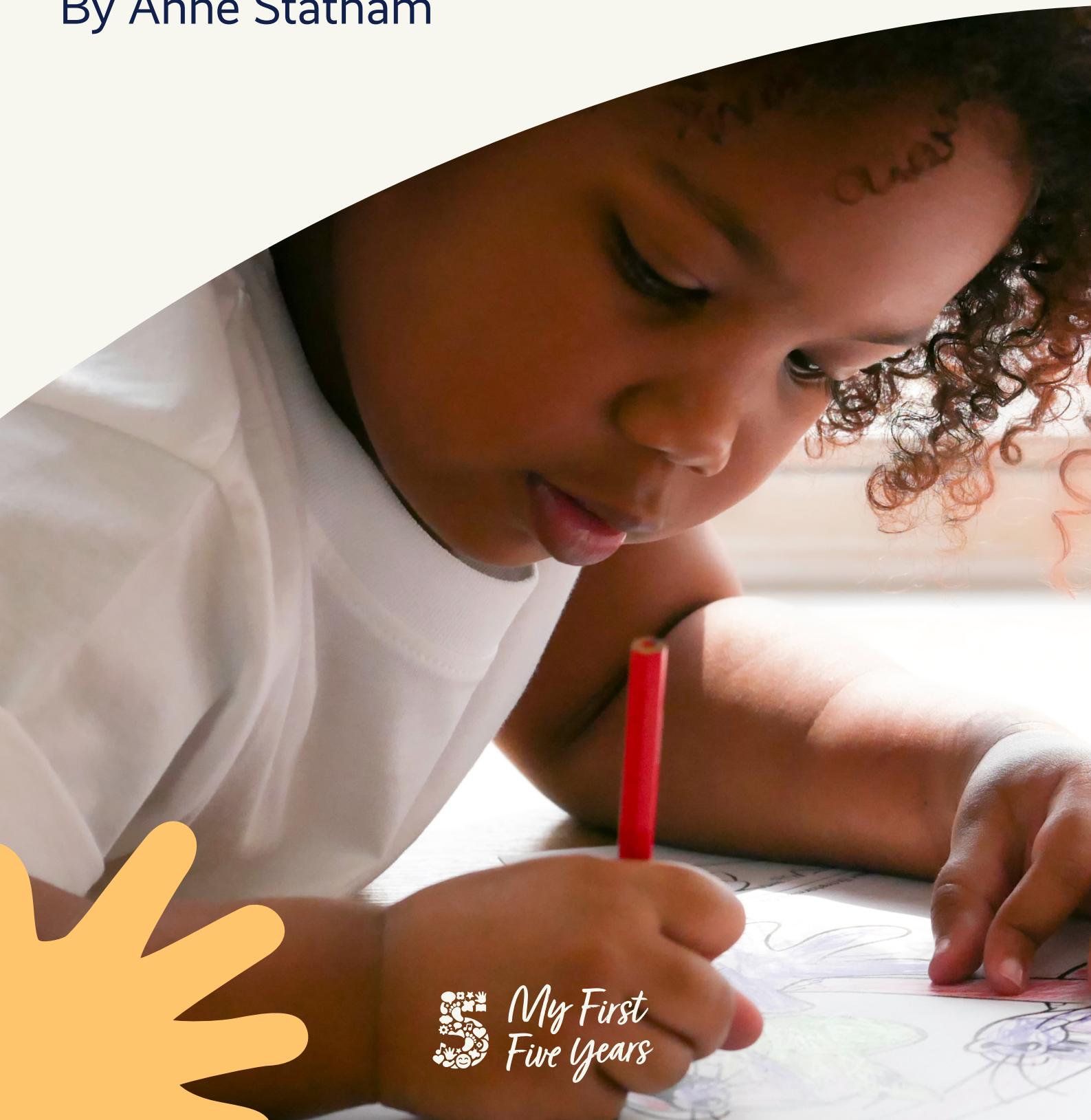


Becoming A Writer

By Anne Statham



*My First
Five Years*



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Pre-writing skills

From a very early age, children begin to explore making marks as part of their play. At first, these marks may be of a sensory nature, as children enjoy the feel of the chalk on a bumpy surface or trace their finger through some left-over food! Often, these marks are formed on a larger scale, as they are a record of your child's larger whole body, shoulder, or arm movements. Making these movements visible through the marks left behind often proves so satisfying and intriguing that your child wants to explore more.

Gradually, as control develops, these marks evolve to become pictures, shapes and symbols with meaning, and so become a tool to represent your child's thinking and to support their communication. It's exciting to see recognisable forms taking shape in your child's mark-making as these give you a window into their thinking and what they hold important.

Beginning to write goes hand in hand with beginning to read. Through experiences such as sharing books with you and watching you write for various purposes, your child will begin to understand that print carries meaning. They will realise that there are letters and words all around them in the world which they notice in everyday situations, such as road signs or street names, food packaging and even perhaps the destination of buses!

As your child develops their curiosity and interest in print, they will begin to explore even more symbolic mark-making, giving their marks their own meaning. A range of symbols or shapes which look a bit like letters may appear in their mark-making. These symbols or marks may not match the alphabet, but they are important to your child and should be valued.

Your child may also mimic the act of writing, through their posture and concentration and by making marks such as dots, lines or patterns or they may make strings of random familiar letters, such as letters from their name or the names of familiar people. Your child may 'read' their marks by telling you their meaning. They may also copy other symbols in the environment and incorporate them into their play.

Developing writing further requires your child to have an awareness of written letter formation (graphemes) and relate these to sounds (phonemes) and vice versa, along with the physical ability to form those letters with a pencil. It also requires an awareness of how to create words[1] and the foresight and cognition to plan those onto a blank piece of paper.

In this booklet we are going to investigate some of the skills underpinning your child's journey to become a writer in more detail.

Here at My First Five Years, our app will support you and your child on the journey to becoming a writer and thousands of other skills. To find out more, visit the App Store.



Gross motor development

This is the first step of the journey. As they lie on their tummy, lift their head, roll over and take weight through their arms your baby will begin to develop strength in their core, head and neck muscles. Shoulder stability will begin to develop, which is the ability of the surrounding muscles to support the shoulder, eventually allowing for accurate wrist and hand function. This core postural stability continues to develop as your baby begins to sit and reach out for toys and when they crawl or bottom-shuffle.

When toddlers start to make marks, they use their whole bodies. At this stage any marks made will be a reflection of the large-scale movements your child is making, and it's helpful to encourage them to work on a range of large surfaces, including vertical surfaces and even with paper on the underside of tables to build their shoulder strength.

As they progress developmentally, you may notice your child begin to rest their forearm on the table or floor, helping them to start using their hand and fingers (instead of their shoulder and arm) to control their mark-making tool.

It is useful for children (and adults!) to continue to develop and strengthen their gross motor skills. Don't be tempted to undervalue activities such as climbing, hanging from bars, sweeping leaves and lifting heavy loads to focus on finer motor skills too quickly. Your child will gain the most benefit from plenty of time 'wallowing' in these activities, as in fact finer muscles are not fully developed in the hand until around the age of seven.



Fine motor development

As your baby develops an interest in objects and a desire to hold them, you may notice them begin to pick up and hold small objects in a 'pincer grasp'. A pincer grasp uses the pads, and then tips, of the index finger and thumb to pick up and grasp smaller objects. You may spot this as your baby begins to feed themselves and is able to pick up smaller pieces of food. This is an important skill, as the pincer grasp represents the coordination of the brain and muscles to achieve a desired result. This grasp will develop further to allow your child to begin to manipulate a writing tool.

The large marks your child initially explored will gradually become more controlled as the muscles in the hands and fingers develop.

At this stage, your child may be producing lots of experimental marks or 'scribbles'. The word 'scribble' often has negative connotations as it's associated with the idea of messy, hasty, haphazard or even careless mark-making. At My First Five Years, we want to celebrate the scribble or perhaps rebrand it as free flow mark-making, redefining it as the result of a child's systematic investigations! Scribbles are the result of your child's early experiments; sometimes these marks are made for pure physical enjoyment with your child having no interest in an 'end product', rather the physical activity is an end in itself, an opportunity to explore with all the senses.



Drawing by Tom, age one and a half

Your child's early marks may develop to have characteristics such as straight and diagonal lines, circles and arcs, ways of connecting marks together and explorations of placing marks inside and outside enclosing marks, and this forms a foundation to writing all the letters in the English alphabet. As your child's mark-making develops so does their understanding of writing, and they gradually develop increased control and the ability to repeatedly produce letters, symbols and words.

This is often quite tiring for your child's muscles at first, so lots of practice using these small muscles in different situations is helpful, such as doing up buttons, manipulating smaller construction toys and helping with daily tasks such as food preparation.

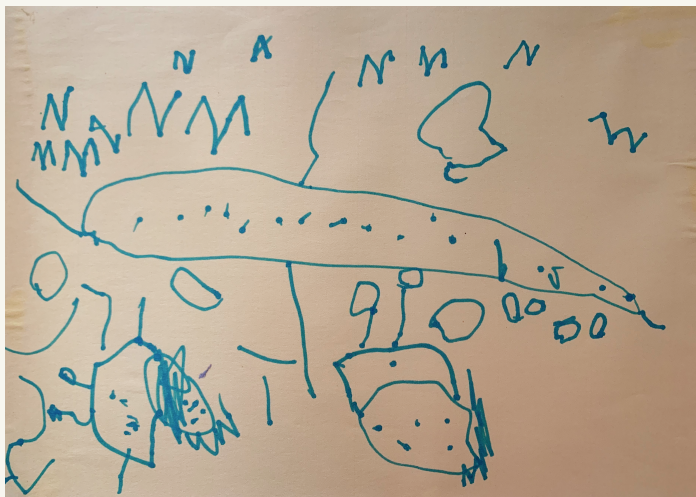


Cognitive development

Intertwined with a good gross and fine motor skill base there are cognitive skills involved in becoming a writer. There are so many links between the content of your child's mark-making and writing and other threads of their thought and actions.

There is so much going on in the brain! When your child realises that marks can be used symbolically to carry meaning, in much the same way as the spoken word, they begin to use marks as tools to support their thinking. Your child's marks and writing may help them to make sense of important experiences, places or people in their world, and they may use them to help them to solve problems. They are developing their understanding of the world, as well as improving their physical coordination.

Early writing will often combine pictures, words, and symbols. Your child may talk to themselves as they make these marks or will tell you and others the meaning of their early writing, so it is important to ask your child about their writing and respect its meaning.



Drawing and writing by Tom, age two and a half -
'Tom and Nellie standing under Concorde'.

This early writing often occurs spontaneously in play contexts, such as your child writing a list during role play or creating a sign, label or a menu for their restaurant. Your child may reproduce graphic representations which carry meaning for them, sometimes these will be symbolic such as hearts and kisses in a card, or represent familiar logos and brand names.

Your child may begin to represent words or parts of words that they see regularly, and they learn that there is a special mark or a series of marks which represents them, so the first letter, and other letters of their name – what a discovery! These marks will then appear all over the place! When children recreate words and symbols in this way, they are recognising the meaning attached to that particular graphic.

As understanding of writing develops, your child will progress to experiment with forming a wider range of letters and then link this developing grapheme (written representations) knowledge with phoneme (sound) correspondence and vice versa. This involves skills of visual and auditory processing along with memory, attention and concentration.

At first, when your child is learning to write, forming each letter can take great concentration and effort, as they plan and carry out the combination of movements, but over time, with continual practice, writing and other similar actions which are just as complicated, such as knitting, or even playing a tune on a musical instrument, can be performed almost automatically and without thought.

Sensory development

We have described how many early marks are of a sensory nature and are often made for the pure physical enjoyment of the activity. Engaging all the senses allows your child to focus their attention and immerse themselves in experiences. Although it is tempting to think about early mark-making as using a pencil, crayon, or paints, there are lots of different materials your child can use to make marks. This could include mark-making in natural materials such as mud, sand or steam, and using different tools to make their marks, including natural materials such as grasses, sticks and feathers.

The important thing is that your child is exploring the media in a way that is engaging and creative to them. You may have noticed your child banging a crayon up and down listening to the sound as it makes dots, or enjoying the tactile sensation of sliding their finger through the steam on a window to make lines or zig zags, or the vibrations felt when dragging a piece of chalk over a bumpy surface. The more playful practice children have to experiment with making marks, the better equipped they will be for putting these skills together to form letters and also to develop the confidence to make their own mark. Sensory explorations like this allow children to explore freely, they can't go wrong as there is no required 'end product' and often marks may be temporary and can be wiped away and remade.



Language development

Writing can be likened to speech that comes out of a pen or pencil. It is another method of communicating and so before your child learns to write, they need to understand language.

Language is the child's first encounter with symbolic representation as they gradually learn that the spoken word carries meaning, and some parallels can be drawn between the development of early language and mark-making. In the earliest months, babies babble for the sheer physical pleasure of hearing the sounds that they can make and they enjoy imitating and experimenting, with increasing control over the many combinations of muscles in their lips and tongue.

Babies' scribbles develop in much the same way, initially they take delight in the pure physicality of the activity, and then gradually realise that they can control the marks they make with increasing dexterity. In the same way that, through interactions with interested adults, babies learn that spoken words carry meaning, they discover that the marks that they make can also communicate their feelings, thoughts and ideas. Mark-making and speech provide children with powerful tools for thinking, reasoning and problem-solving.

Some children will grow speaking one language (monolingual), while other children may speak two (bilingual) or three or more languages (multilingual). Research tells us that it is possible to acquire two different language systems simultaneously and successfully. The writing system of the languages familiar to children may be very different, for example, the alphabetic language system of English is very different to Japanese. Research has shown that there are advantages to 'switching between the code' both in spoken and written language, and rather than generating confusion this involves the child (or adult) employing a sophisticated strategy which promotes a wealth of linguistic knowledge. This means that code-switching is a sophisticated strategy that requires a wealth of linguistic knowledge, the exact opposite of linguistic confusion. [3]



Social and emotional development

It is thought that children who have the foundations of healthy social and emotional development, in turn, become more able learners. [4]

Children are born with a natural exploratory drive and a desire to communicate their thoughts and feelings. By providing an emotionally secure environment, where their voice is valued and respected, your child will become a prolific mark-maker. This is particularly true when the purpose and the means of representation are within their control.

Your children's earliest marks, symbols, shapes, and letters will often involve their name or their age, as these are of particular significance to them, then as they widen their understanding of how writing works, they will continue to share the things that are important to them.

The content of your child's writing in terms of its meaning and focus is important. What children choose to say in their writing, why they write, and for whom they write are important elements in the journey of becoming a writer. This content will be based on the unique experiences they have and what is meaningful to them. [5]

Understanding and mastering the writing system takes perseverance and concentration, and a lack of meaningful reasons to write or a narrow focus on the 'form' of the writing can easily mean the importance of the message of the writing gets lost.

Self-regulation is required as writing develops. Self-regulation skills mean that children are more socially compatible and become less frustrated when it comes to learning and acquiring knowledge, [6] meaning that they will have more positive interactions with learning experiences such as writing. [7] Self-regulation, therefore, provides our children with the ability to persevere with acquiring skills and to be resilient when things do not go to plan. Writing is a lot of trial and error, and a child who is resilient is more likely to become a competent writer.



Things to do with my baby

- Respond to your baby's gestures with language and interaction. This is their first physical representation of what they are thinking and feeling, whether it's an expression of emotion, such as kicking their legs, or pointing to an object of interest. These gestures often support children's early vocalisations and speech and can also be extended into mark-making.
- Play with toys that your baby can follow with their eyes, such as cars or trains, as this is great for the visual tracking part of sensory development. Rolling these toys and encouraging your baby to follow the motion can support them in using eye-tracking which supports them later as they track print when they read and write.
- Offer lots of opportunities for sensory mark-making with different body parts such as fingers, hand and foot painting, exploring creative media such as trays of shaving foam, mud or large chinks on the ground outside.
- Offer opportunities, space and time for movement play such as tummy time, rolling and crawling to develop that important postural control.
- Share lots of picture books and rhymes together.

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Things to do with my toddler

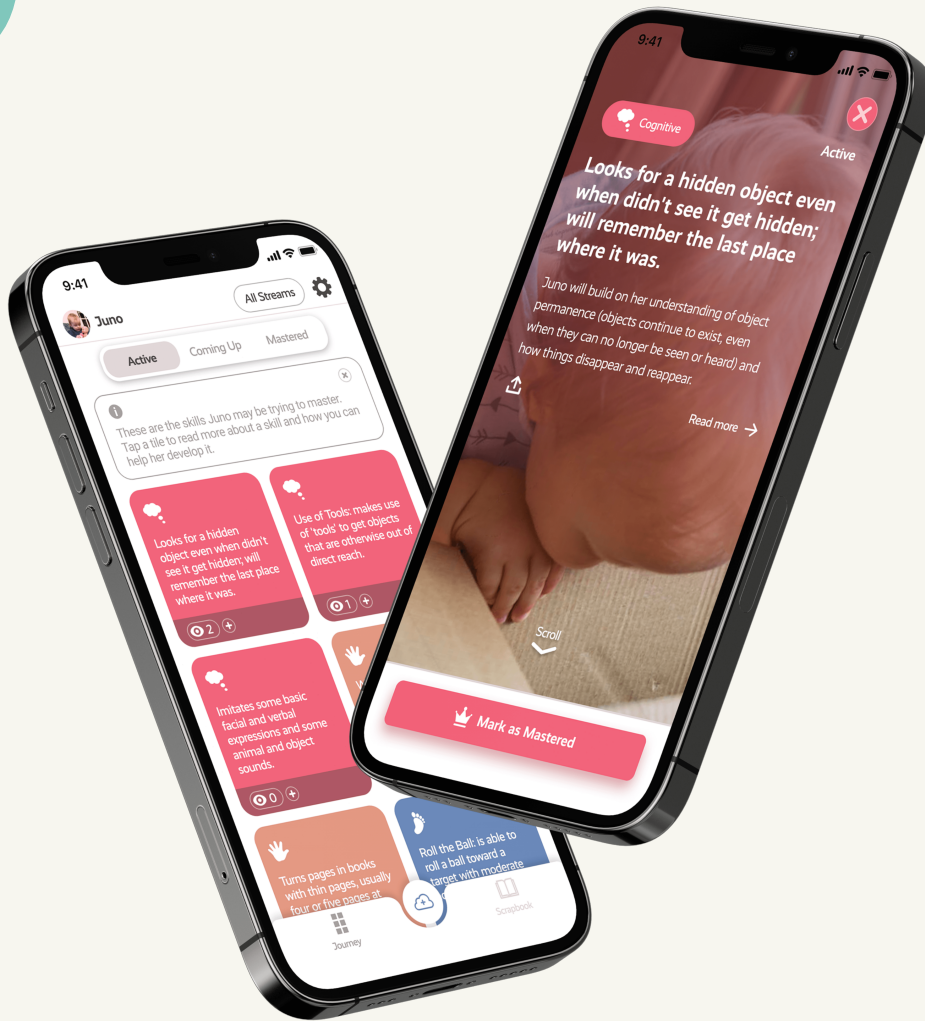
- Have fun making marks using lots of alternatives to crayons and pens such as sponges, spatulas, feathers, toothbrushes, sticks of different shapes and sizes, leaves, string dipped in paint etcetera. Talk about the different marks, lines and shapes you have made.
- Explore music and whole-body movements together such as up and down movements, circles and arcs, making wavy, zig zag and diagonal lines in the air. These movements can be emphasised with ribbons, streamers or scarves and you can use language to describe the movements.
- Create opportunities for your toddler to make temporary marks on a large scale on vertical surfaces such as outdoors with chalk or water and brushes on the wall.
- Enable your child to explore a wide range of those important gross motor movements, using equipment that they can climb on, jump from and swing from, along with opportunities for heavy work such as sweeping and lifting heavy objects.
- Share lots of picture books and rhymes together.

Our app contains thousands of ideas and activities to help your toddler learn and develop. Check out our app!



Things to do with my pre-school child

- Let your child see you using writing as part of everyday tasks, such as making shopping lists or writing cards. Talk aloud, saying the words as you write.
- Offer meaningful opportunities for your child to write themselves, such as labels, cards or invitations or writing out favourite recipes and ingredients together.
- Add writing opportunities to a range of play situations, for example post-it notes or stickers to label Lego models or for the names of stations on the train track.
- Point out signs, symbols and print when out and about. Tailor this to your child's interests, it might be car badges and restaurant names.
- Look at the labels on favourite cereals, biscuits, tins and other packaging. Make links to familiar letters, for example, from your child's name.
- Look at lots of books and magazines and point out pictures and print.
- Have an alphabet poster and begin to identify familiar letters, perhaps making links to other objects that begin with the same letter and sound.
- Give your child independent access to writing tools and 'real' items such as notebooks, envelopes, sticky notes, diaries, calendars and clip boards.



Do you want more guidance on supporting your child on their journey to write? Our app can guide you every step of the way.

For more information, check out our app!



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