

Six ways to inspire children to write

Writing forms a vital part of communication, but in an increasingly technology-driven world, opportunities to write can sometimes be hard to find.

Here are six tips to inspire your child to write.

1. Nurture a love of reading

Regular reading is an integral stepping stone to developing and improving writing skills. It helps to develop a child's language by equipping them with a rich written and oral vocabulary. Through regular reading, children see the characteristics of writing come to life; things such as structure, sequence, characters, setting and plot. Reading also provides children with an opportunity to learn about people, places and events, outside of their own experiences. Famed author Dr Seuss once wisely wrote: "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Through books, children can be transported to exotic places and different times, taken on adventures, perhaps to another world, or a fantasy land even. They can be captivated by interesting characters and riveting storylines. It is through these opportunities to escape to anywhere and everywhere, that children gather inspiration to generate ideas for their own writing.

2. Putting pen to paper

For young children, parents can offer their child a variety of tools to practise their handwriting skills other than the traditional pen or crayon to paper. Get creative with what you invite your child to explore. Perhaps they can draw letters in the sand with their finger or a stick. Tracing letters in shaving cream is always fun, as is finger painting. Chalk is another great alternative. Forming letters with playdough is also great for little hands. These fun activities provide opportunities for children to develop the fine motor skills required for handwriting development.

3. Encourage writing around the home

Inspire your child to write through authentic opportunities around the home. Get their assistance in writing shopping lists or making a list of things they need to do. They could write a friend an invitation to play or a thank you note. Even writing emails or text messages, providing they use correct spelling, are opportunities to practise their writing. For younger children, parents can role model writing in front of their child and discuss the value of what they are writing.

4. Establish a writing routine

For older children, establishing a regular block of time designated to writing provides helpful practise opportunities.

Students at St Margaret's Primary School routinely participate in a weekly dedicated 'Big Write' session where they are encouraged to write at length, in addition to regular shorter writing activities throughout the week. An approach to teaching writing developed by British educator Ros Wilson, the Big Write methodology incorporates the teaching of VCOP (vocabulary, connectives, openers and punctuation). Each week, students are engaged in learning these fundamental aspects of grammar, providing them with the essentials to help them continually improve and up the level of their writing. Classrooms feature a colourful display prompting students with examples of words, punctuation, opening phrases and conjunctions appropriate to their learning goals. Students are encouraged to revise and improve their vocabulary as they go. For example, the sentence 'She entered the room' might be improved with the use of a "wow word" to lead the sentence to say 'Cautiously, she entered the room'.

Parents can adopt a similar approach at home, encouraging their children to write regularly and often. Starting a journal is a great way to encourage regular writing that can be slotted into the daily routine. A holiday diary is another simple yet effective way to establish regular writing and is a memento they will have for life.

5. Talk about writing

Writer's block can be a huge stumbling block so to speak. Children need a strong command of oral language to be a good reader and writer. When parents engage in active discussions about a writing task they are helping their child with idea generation and planning, building vocabulary and modelling the way language is structured. It also provides critical opportunities for their child to verbally plan and organise their story structure before putting pen to paper.

St Margaret's Head of Primary Mrs Angela Drysdale says quite often children will have an idea but won't know what they are going to do with that idea.

"Each week we set our students "talk homework" in which they are encouraged to discuss and share a writing stimulus with family members at home, mentally preparing themselves for their weekly Big Write," she said.

Mrs Drysdale says parents can mimic similar opportunities at home by creating a story box.

“Start a story box of old calendar pictures, pictures of animals and pictures cut from magazines and use them for discuss about how to structure a story, what might happen at the beginning and at the end,” she said.

The story box can be a source of inspiration for story ideas as well.

6. Literacy enriched play

Young children love dramatic role play. Creating a dramatic play space or prop box at home is a great way to encourage inspire children to explore and experiment with writing. An office themed setup, for example, might include materials such as desk, pens, stamps, envelopes, paper, scissors, glue, a stapler, a telephone, a computer or keyboard and folders to spark imaginations.

Mrs Drysdale says for these opportunities to be worthwhile it's important to “be responsive to the interests and emerging abilities of your child”.

“Quite often they might be stimulated by a certain occupation and you can build upon that.”

So, if an office setup does not ignite your child's interest, then perhaps try a police station, veterinarian, hair salon or post office, depending on where your child's passions lie.

Article originally prepared for and published in Families Magazine.