

The crucial role of the Early Years practitioner in supporting young writers within a literacy-rich environment

The *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* reminds us of the important part the learning environment plays in supporting and extending children's development and learning. To this end, Early Years environments, both indoors and out, should display many links to literacy, reflecting its status and importance across all areas of learning, and reflecting the interdependent nature of the four aspects of language development: speaking, listening, reading and writing. As a starting point, the audits contained within the Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) materials include a very useful checklist for guidance in creating a literacy-rich environment covering the following elements:

- environmental print: letters and words
- opportunities for children to read independently and for adults to read with children
- books and literacy areas
- early writing
- resources for phonics teaching.

CLLD materials for consultants

CLLD audit for Reception

The practitioner's role in fostering boys' and girls' willingness to write

However, even if a high-quality literate environment has been created, which reflects children's interests and ignites their desire to write, this in itself will not be enough to support all children in becoming enthusiastic and confident writers. Practitioners have a crucial role to play in finding ways of engaging and collaborating with children in writing, of creating interesting and purposeful opportunities to write both indoors and outdoors, and planning higher levels of adult-child interaction that support children's thinking. It is important that adults develop an ethos where risk-taking is actively encouraged, so that even the most reluctant child will be happy to have a go at writing without fear of 'getting it wrong'.

Writing makes many demands: the complexity of writing

The complexity of writing can seem overwhelming because it draws upon a mix of knowledge, skills and attitudes all at once: knowledge of the purpose of writing and the different ways writing can be represented, a range of skills, and a willingness and interest in 'having a go' at writing.

A writer needs to:

- understand what the writing is for, its purpose, which could be to make someone feel happy, to give information, to explain something, to be able to make something
- have some sense of who the writing is for, the audience, which could be the practitioner, a friend, Mum, Dad, brother, sister, a character in a book
- gather ideas, thinking about what they want to write
- draw upon a store of words and ideas

- have sufficiently well developed motor control of their arm, wrist, hand and fingers to hold a pencil effectively, controlling its movement and forming letters, or be able to use a keyboard
- know about the purpose and organisation of print, the alphabetic code and words as units of meaning
- know about and use letter-sound relationships for writing
- write a few, then an increasing number of those tricky words which are essential for fluent writing, e.g. is, was, the
- be able to place an idea, action, or statement within a sentence
- use the conventional features of different genres: list, label, letter, caption.

The *Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* highlights the range of skills that children need to orchestrate at the point of writing: language for thinking, linking sounds and letters, writing and handwriting.

30-50 Months

40-60+ Months

The importance of developing language skills

The thinking that needs to take place before writing, and the quality of the writing, will be affected by the child's ability to express their thoughts and ideas orally, and then to redirect these oral skills into producing written text. The quality and richness of the child's expressive language reveals how well they can structure a sentence, and this forms the basis of written sentence construction.

Children's abilities to express their ideas fluently, drawing upon a rich store of words, expressions, sentences and different types of language, have been created by many, many conversations with interested adults – most likely to have been their mothers and fathers, other family members and practitioners.

Being listened to at home, taking part in conversations regularly and playing with an adult builds up children's listening stamina, and helps them listen closely to what they hear in the setting.

These experiences form a rich store of language, which can be drawn upon as children engage in talk, understand what they hear, have read to them in books, and begin to engage in the processes of writing.

Some children however, may enter a setting with impoverished language and will need extra support. How to nurture and extend their language is a big challenge for practitioners. The aim is to close the gap between their language experience and that of their peers, and make up for the many thousands of missed language opportunities that have already occurred.

Just to hear children with few or no books at home, joining in joyfully with the words from quality picture books, is proof of the difference we can make to children's lives.

It is particularly important to involve these children in daily conversations to show them that adults are genuinely interested in them and their lives. Conversations about something that has interested the child or something that they were involved in, signals to them that this adult is interested in them; whether it was the way they built a tall tower yesterday, created a car out of junk, or wrote their name for the first time. Reference to family events such as the birth of a new baby, visit from Granny or the child's own birthday are important, as the child feels they matter as an individual in their own right.

And all the time adults are modelling for children the sort of language they will need when they marshal their ideas, at the point of writing.

Facilitating children's creative development, for example, exploring colour, textures and shape through a range of materials stimulates talking, and offers many opportunities for an adult to model language structures and vocabulary in context, for example making homes for small world characters, using boxes for fantasy role-play, curling, fringing, tearing different types of card and paper for different purposes.

These kinds of activities encourage experimentation, risk taking, and the experience of success – all elements that have a direct link to the process of writing – and will foster higher self-esteem that will in turn lead to children being prepared to take risks in their writing.

Underpinning ethos

The underpinning ethos for children in the Early Years is to reassure them that anything they create will be valued, whatever their level of skill. If children are going to be willing to take risks with their writing, practitioners need to encourage them to 'have a go'. 'Getting it right', i.e. correct spelling, handwriting, the construction of a sentence and most appropriate presentation, is not something which should deter them from writing. These skills will be learned and will improve with focused adult-led activities.

The practitioner working with children writing at the emergent or mark making stage

Many examples of this stage on the writing journey can be found in *Mark Making Matters: Young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development* (00767-2008BKT-EN). Positive attitudes to writing should be fostered throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), with the Reception year being a continuation of best practice.

Writing may show random marks, squiggles, wavy lines across the page, and contain print, often but not always from the child's name. It may appear in lines across the page, as blocks of writing to represent different sections, groups of words or individual words. Or it may be arranged in other ways, as the child desires – they are the authors and have the right to make choices!

It may be influenced by the conventions of print in the child's home language, which the child may have noticed at home, in books and newspapers, or by the writing they have engaged in with a mother or father for example, when sending a greetings card.

Positive attitudes to mark making

Young children have very positive attitudes to their mark making, and are thinking about and creating text which as yet cannot be read by the adult. The child can 'read' their text and tell you what it means and why they wrote it – they are composing and have started their writing journey. The adult has to be sure to celebrate their achievements without an over-emphasis on moving on to 'correctness'.

Your writing looks really interesting. I wonder what it says...

Lots of writing, Jamie. It looks like an interesting story. Is it all about Ben Ten? I can see him in your picture.

The early stages of writing

When children are at the early stages of moving into conventional writing, it can be some time before they move to the next stage. Knowing the children, the practitioner will judge whether to wait a while, monitor progress and when to begin to teach necessary skills.

Practitioner scribing for writers one-to-one

An easy way into writing at the early stages is for the practitioner to ask children for their ideas and scribe for them, to show that their ideas can be written down in sentences, in 'book writing'. If they know the child well and what interests them, their discussion will offer interesting things to write about, and the child may need very little prompting to come up with a sentence.

This practitioner is interested in the child's oral sentence making and repeats it aloud, responding to the meaning:

Child: 'My best team in the world is Liverpool.'

Practitioner: 'Yes – Liverpool is a very good team.'

Then she scribes it, checking that this is exactly what the child wants to say. She rereads it, moving the child's finger along their words for a one-to-one match of the written words to what he has said. The child may wish to illustrate this writing, and this could be stuck into his own book.

Some children find the composition of a sentence very hard, and the practitioner may have to prompt some ideas and agree it with the child, then follow the same procedure as described above.

Creating purposeful contexts for writing

In order to encourage in children the willingness and desire to write, they need to be interested and motivated by opportunities for purposeful writing in all areas of learning in the EYFS. What to write can be negotiated with the children linked to a specific 'need to write' as part of play.

The playful practitioner: writing as a spontaneous event in play

Look out! There's a monster about!

Imagine this scenario: a group of Reception age children are playing in a role-play area, outdoors.

This is currently a garage, with opportunities for filling up cars, car cleaning and a small office. Before long, the garage has another purpose, changed by the children's play into a mysterious and thrilling place that was prompted by two boys and a girl making a bridge from large wooden blocks, in order to be safe from any lurking monsters!

A monster appears, ridden by a girl, and a group of children run to the bridge. The watching adult joins in the fun, and gets on the bridge too. The children tell her about the monsters and the adult says 'Look out! Look out! There's a monster about! Perhaps we should make a sign and put it on the door, to tell everyone there is a monster about.'

One of the boys jumps off the bridge, runs to the office, takes a piece of paper, a thick pen and writes the sign, gets some reusable sticky pads and puts it up on the door:

Look owt look owt a monsu abowt

So the playful practitioner stimulated this piece of writing, and there was no doubt that the boy was ready, willing and felt impelled to write it – for a real purpose.

More examples of the listening, interested practitioner suggesting real purposes for writing

A 'Don't touch' sign

A child wanted to leave out the racetrack he'd made and was worried someone would tidy it up:

Practitioner: 'How can we let people know not to tidy it?'

Child 'I could make a big sign.'

He wrote:

doant tuch. I am going to plai with the track latr – and his name.

Writing car stories

A child brought in a book about 'Lightening McQueen' (a TV car character), which stimulated much discussion with a group of children through which the practitioner realised that they hadn't got any car stories in their book boxes. As a result, the children went to the writing table and wrote some themselves.

Writing a shopping list

Children wanted to make sandwiches for their teddy bears' picnic.

Practitioner: 'How will I know what to buy at the supermarket?'

Child: 'We could write you a list.'

(The practitioner later received ten lists from the children!)

Writing an apology to the cleaner

Children had had great fun splatter painting, with paint all over the floor (and everything else!). After discussion they decided they needed to write a message to their cleaner, as they don't see her because she arrives after they have gone home.

They wrote:

soree we got paint on the flor. we trighd to cleen it up but we maid a bigr mess soree

Surprises: letters or emails from a character in books the children know well

Write letters to arrive unexpectedly and cause ripples of interest in the children.

The letter or email will make a request of some kind:

The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle): Please can you make me a shopping list as I have lost mine?

Mr Gumpy (John Burningham): Write and tell me who I should invite to my next tea party.

Elmer (David McKee): Please can you change the colours of my patchwork skin and send me a picture?

Mog (Helen Nicoll and Jan Pienkowski) Please can you send Meg a birthday card? – She is 20 today.

Letter from an old toy

Write letters for the children to find in a bag with an old toy inside:

- 'I have forgotten my name – can you think of one and write it down in a letter and send it to me?'
- 'Thank you for giving me my name – but I have forgotten how old I am – can you write it down in a letter and send it to me?'
- 'Thank you for telling me my age – but I have forgotten how to laugh – can you draw a funny picture and send it to me?'

Responding to these requests is optional for the children, not an expectation that they will write. But these enticing requests are interesting and infectious and will often fire up those least inclined to write, especially boys!

Having collections of things to write about will inspire and motivate children. Scary toys, characters from fairy tales and popular culture, dinosaur collections, toy minibeasts or any other resources from within the setting or brought from home can stimulate children's desire to write.

The following example shows how imaginary play based around television characters led to an opportunity for a practitioner to engage a group of children in a conversation which in turn led to a sustained writing activity.

Several boys who were less than eager to write independently were switched on to writing when the practitioner observed them playing fantasy games outdoors, with television characters as the central theme. She asked them about the powers these characters had and was amazed at their knowledge and enthusiasm. Other boys soon joined the group, keen to talk as well. The practitioner asked the children to draw pictures and write about them, because she needed to learn more, and within days had enough pages to cover a large area of wall. This group gave a presentation to the whole class. The pages were then made into a book and became a very popular asset in the book corner.

Turning to writing in their play can become as natural to children as drawing pictures. Such attitudes need to be fostered by active encouragement and praise from the practitioner.

Creating a community of writers in the Reception class

By creating enduring and positive attitudes to writing, practitioners will be helping to create a 'community of writers' which all children in the class feel part of.

All children, whatever their starting points, need close adult-child interaction to support them as writers and to give positive and frequent feedback on their achievements. Phrases like: 'That's interesting! I like your writing. Tell me about your writing – it looks very interesting! Wow! Look at your writing – I'd love to know what it's all about! What a lovely picture – can support children's enthusiasm for writing, and creates the aspiration in children that they can **all** become writers!

The designated writing area may be very limited in some Early Years environments because of lack of space, but this should not mean that children lack opportunities to write.

The adults should encourage children to select resources for writing whenever these are needed, which may be from a designated writing area, a clearly labelled set of drawers of resources for writing, or by the practitioner providing additional writing resources in the continuous provision areas.

The practitioner's job is to be proactive and dynamic, re-stocking, changing and adapting the resources as he or she observes their use, responding to children's interests and requests and encouraging them to make their own books, letters, envelopes, notices and labels.

Instantly accessible resources for writing are extremely important if writing is to become an integral part of children's play, whichever area they are in, be it indoors or out. Resources that children may select in a writing-friendly environment include:

- sticky labels, e.g. for their letters, parcels, for labelling things they have made, labelling things for the role-play area
- paper in different shapes and sizes for any of their needs.

These resources can be used to produce:

- books about their current passions, e.g. football, cartoon characters, magic stories, their pets, fairytales
- notices and signs about important things in their play e.g. The Cave – Keep Out!; Shoe Shop – Open; Don't walk on the seeds we have planted!; shopping lists for baby food
- writing cards and messages to friends
- their own pieces of writing to display in their own designated wall space
- captions to add to photos they or the adults have taken.

Children enjoy stocking a mobile writing trolley with resources to meet their writing needs of the moment, and they can be encouraged to push this outside when needed. Other resources to place outside in different areas can include:

- an easel
- clipboards and pens for drawing and writing
- a bag of puppets, monsters and other soft toys
- an easily erected tent or a sheet for an office, cave or den.

<p>In a children’s centre, the practitioner uses the information gathered from an audit to develop writing opportunities across the different areas both inside and outdoors</p>	<p>Practitioner behaviour that supports children to become writers</p>
<p>Having spent time observing which particular areas the boys in his class frequented in their child-initiated play, Jamie, the Reception teacher recognised that although boys would often choose to use the writing area to draw pictures, they very rarely chose to write in any area. As a result of this, he undertook an audit of all writing opportunities within the classroom, including the writing area that had recently been redesigned. He planned to add a range of writing media to the different areas more frequently used by the boys, to see if this would encourage them to write as well as draw.</p> <p>Jamie provided paper and a range of writing mediums such as felt pens, crayons, pencils, etc in various areas of the classroom, for example near the construction blocks, role-play area, computer area and creative area –the areas which he had noticed the boys were more drawn to. He noticed that one boy who had a fascination with spiders started to draw spiders then make marks with the felt pens, and that the marks eventually started to form letters. Keen to foster this child’s interests and those of the rest of the children in his class, Jamie began to plan for opportunities to model writing each day with the whole class, and also with small groups and individual children. He used these opportunities to talk about letter shapes and sounds. As he observed many of the boys preferring to spend time in the outdoor environment, he also planned more opportunities to support early writing in the outside role-play areas, and specific activities such as print walks where he was able to reinforce concepts about print, and draw attention to the different forms of writing.</p>	<p>Recognises the reluctance of some children to write and undertakes an audit to identify the barriers.</p> <p>Provides materials to encourage the children to begin trying out writing as a means of recording and communicating.</p> <p>Plans adult-led sessions that give opportunities to model skills of transcription and composition, and encourage the application of developing skills including letter formation and letter-sound correspondence.</p> <p>Draws children’s attention to the conventions of print, and different forms of writing.</p> <p>Provides meaningful opportunities to write.</p>
<p>What does the practitioner do to support boys’ writing, and what is the impact?</p> <p>As a result of reviewing the learning environment, making writing resources more widely accessible and planning regular opportunities to model writing, more boys were seen to write around the room in various areas. Boys were making links between their drawing and writing, and more boys were talking about their writing.</p>	<p>The practitioner identified the barriers to writing, and provided opportunities, to write in a variety of areas building on children’s interests. He introduced different forms of writing and pointed out print in the setting, and the wider environment. He planned adult-led sessions where he was able to model writing and encourage the children to apply and secure their developing phonic knowledge and skills.</p>

Sustaining children’s interest in writing

Once children are motivated to write it is important to sustain and build on that interest so that their learning develops as they acquire and are able to apply their new skills and knowledge and become confident writers. How to do this will vary according to the diverse needs of the children in each setting, but by being aware of those needs, practitioners will be able to identify what actions they have to take and the strategies they need to employ.

Own special writing books

These can be arranged alphabetically with the children's names listed on each box. Each book will have the child's name and will have been decorated as they wish, for example with stickers of favourite things or their own drawings, and the books can then be stacked in boxes.

Children can have access to these books throughout much of the day – they draw and write as they wish, but practitioners do not collect the books in. Children can give permission for the practitioner to look at what they have been doing, or may invite them to look inside their books.

One boy insisted on writing words alternately in red and black. The practitioner who observed him writing wondered aloud why he was using red and black pencils. He told her that his favourite football team was Manchester United, and as he was writing about them he chose to write in the team colours!

Resources drawn from popular culture

To be in tune with children's interests it is worth asking what they watch on television, have on DVD, or which comics they take. For those children who have limited opportunities to get out and about at weekends, popular culture is of particular importance as it fires up their imaginations, transports them to different worlds and takes them into the world of stories.

Both boys and girls appear to be interested in Dr Who, and a little girl that joined a practitioner who was supporting book making insisted on telling her the storyline of the Dr Who DVD she enjoyed watching at home, and then started to make her own Dr Who book.

There are lots of free web-based resources available to download linked to TV programmes, including video material to watch. Children love these and they form a rich bank of ideas for talking and writing about.

Easy access to a digital camera

Children can be encouraged to use a simple digital camera which they have access to during the day, making their own decisions about what pictures they want to take. Children may choose which of the images they want to print, and these can be a great source of interest for them.

A box of photographs can be placed in the writing area, or stuck on the outside writing easel, or selected as needed by children. Photographs taken in the class by children can also be displayed on the outside easel, and will become popular as sources for discussion and writing captions.

Access to an interactive whiteboard (IWB)

Access to an IWB where children can make words from a 'rainbow alphabet', write their names, select a picture and write about it, will encourage many children to experiment with their writing.

Access to a visualiser, with or without an adult

Access to a visualiser helps children to create situations on the IWB which catch their imagination and are a powerful source of talk for writing e.g. Dr Who faces a dinosaur on landing on earth: the visualiser enhances this moment in a hugely dramatic way, on screen.

Access to a magnetic board

The 'A' frame type magnetic board is particularly useful. If the adult composes a few words or a phrase on the board using magnetic letters, it's surprising how this attracts children to respond in a like manner, and compose some words of their own.

The role-play area: the playful adult modelling writing for a purpose

The role-play area presents ideal opportunities for children to witness an adult modelling writing for a purpose within a play situation. As in modelled and shared writing, they have a chance to hear an adult thinking aloud about what to write, to see words and sentences appearing before their eyes, and to understand the purpose of the writing.

The adult can model writing through joining in with the play on regular occasions, not dominating the play but taking part frequently enough for different groups of children to see writing modelled for a real purpose, which will encourage them to do the same, independently.

The vets: adult in role as a vet writes out a prescription with children observing, talking about what their pet needs to get better:

'He's not very well so I'll write down the name of some pills that will make him better.'

The garden centre: adult in role as a shopkeeper, models the writing needed on a packet of seeds with a picture and the name of the seeds:

'Now, I'll need to draw some sunflowers, then write the word 'Sunflowers'.

Small world play shop: adult in role as a manager who wants children to buy more toys and designs a 'Buy one get one free' card and 'Special offer' posters:

'We need to sell more toys so I'll write this on a card "Buy one get one free". We'll need lots of these cards.'

The post office: adult in role as a customer filling in a form and posting it – name and age needed:

'I must write my name here ...and my age here.'

The weather station in the outdoor area of learning: adult in role as a scientist filling in a weather chart for that day:

'We'll have to draw a picture of the weather this morning and say what's happening.'

'I'll draw a picture of some rain in this box and write the word 'Rainy' under it.'

The DIY store: adult in role as a customer ordering paints from a chart – copy the number, write the colour and hand it in to Customer Services:

'I'll write the number in this box and the colour under it – red – that will do.'

A home corner: adult in role as a mum or dad models writing a shopping list linked to another role-play area outside e.g. the garden centre:

'Now what will I need when we plant these vegetable seeds? Well, carrot seeds, a garden fork ...'

Practitioners used favourite books to help plan different role-play areas that stimulated children’s desire to write	Practitioner behaviour that supports children in becoming writers
<p>Having noted that boys in the setting were reluctant to write, the practitioner decided to evaluate existing practice and develop strategies for engaging boys in writing in the role-play area.</p> <p>In recognition of the children’s current interests, two role-play areas were set up, with resources to encourage writing. The teacher observed boys in the role-play areas, and noted their understanding of the purposes and forms of writing.</p> <p>A post office role-play area was established in response to the children’s interest in Janet and Allan Ahlberg’s book <i>The Jolly Postman</i>, a visit from the school postman to the class and a visit to the local post office. The post office role-play area was saturated with print forms and provided the children with models of print – for example, post office forms, posters advertising goods at the post office, signs and labels. Four boys showed a considerable interest in the post office and started to ‘make marks’.</p> <p>For example, one boy wrote on a post office form while talking to another child who was taking on the role of customer. On another occasion the child showed two other boys his name, written in a diary left within the post office. Another boy also wrote his name within the post office role-play.</p> <p>The practitioner also developed a ‘Caterpillar Café’ as part of an interest the children had in the story of <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> by Eric Carle. She discovered that one boy, in role as the café assistant, often took orders from customers, writing up the order as a list on a notepad. He demonstrated that he understood the form, the context, the purpose and the nature of his written marks.</p>	<p>Communicating that the child’s interests are important.</p> <p>Building on children’s interests, making the links between reading and writing.</p> <p>Taking opportunities to draw children’s attention to the different forms and conventions of print.</p> <p>Providing meaningful opportunities that encourage writing.</p> <p>Encouraging children to use writing as a way of communicating with others.</p> <p>Using books to stimulate oral language and promote dialogue around texts.</p> <p>Creating opportunities for children to apply their developing skills.</p> <p>Providing good models of writing and opportunities to create texts in the role-play area.</p>
<p>What does the practitioner do to support boys’ writing, and what is the impact?</p> <p>Boys began to show a keen interest in functional forms of writing, and took a clear role within the role-play areas as writers when the inclusion of literacy props in the areas supported their interest in writing.</p>	<p>The practitioner used books to develop children’s interests further – making clear links between reading and writing. Through the original stimulus of two favourite stories, she introduced the children to a range of text types that included labels, lists and orders. She encouraged the children to begin to think about writing as a way of communicating, giving them purposeful opportunities to do this.</p>

The Reception practitioner has a number of strategies that will allow children to understand the act of writing

Modelled and shared writing

Modelled writing is when the practitioner has planned what to write, tells the children the purpose of the writing, and models aloud how to do it.

Labels for a market stall

The children created a market stall in their outside play area and the practitioner demonstrated how to write labels for the fruit and vegetables:

'You will need some labels for your market stall to tell customers what sorts of fruit and vegetables you have.'

'I must think what you have outside: I have seen bananas, garlic, cucumbers and beans.'

'I will write a label on this piece of card – my writing needs to be big so that the customers will see it.'

'Bananas – ba/na/nas. Let's clap it together – I know how to write these phonemes: ba b a na n a nas n a s bananas – that's the first word for my label – I've written it nice and big so customers can see it ...'

Shared writing is when the children know what needs to be written, and why, and make suggestions about what the practitioner might write.

An example of shared writing

'Last week your mums and dads came to see our market stall and they bought some fruit. You took lots of photos and you can write about what they bought and did at the market.'

'We thought it would be a good idea to tell the other classes about it, so you're going to stick your photos in this Big Book with your writing and then you can take it to the other classes and show them.'

'Let's look at some photos and think about what to write.'

(Shows a photograph on the whiteboard with a mum buying some beans.)

'This is Tara's mum – what do you want to tell everyone about what your mum did, Tara?'

Tara: 'My mum bought some beans.'

'Yes, I can see the beans. So I will write your sentence: My mum bought some beans. Can you all say the sentence together and tap your heads for every word.'

Practitioner taps her head for every word.

'Yes – five taps so there are five words.'

The first word has a capital letter and it's a tricky word: My

Mum is an easy word to segment – let's all segment it together – mum is m/u/m

Good – thank you for helping me.

Now I must remember to put a space between my first and second words.

Let's read what I have written: My mum

Bought is the next word – it's easy to segment b-ough-t

I'll show you how to spell it b/ough/t bought

Let's reread the sentence:

My mum bought ...'

Brief sessions of modelled or shared writing can be planned for or may arise spontaneously from activities linked to any area of learning. Ideally children will see adults writing for a purpose in this way every day, even if it is only a short message such as 'Please leave the jelly so it can set'. Frequent demonstrations of the act of writing will help children to continue their development as writers.

Not only will they see ideas and words crafted into sentences and in a range of different genres, but the practitioner will also show them how to apply their growing spelling knowledge gained from the daily phonics session.

The writing processes will be transparent and will help children greatly in their independent writing as they experiment and write spontaneously.

Modelled and shared writing and talk

Talk is a powerful strategy because it lets children into the secret of what will be considered before, during and after composition is started. It reveals the craft of writing: the thinking about, shaping, and decision-making that is involved in writing.

The skilful practitioner will talk about the purpose of the writing and whom it is for. She will demonstrate how it is written, thinking aloud to explain the writing process:

'We need to put up some writing about our day out at the zoo, so that everyone will learn about which animals we saw.'

She will consciously be modelling the language structures and vocabulary necessary for writing:

'We saw lots of hunting dogs.'

She will stop, reread and think again about what has been written and, where the children have contributed to the sentence, will ask them if they are happy with it.

She may delete all or bits of it and start again if it is her own sentence, and by doing this the children are getting the idea that writing is not just a one-off product but a creative act:

'Mmmm – you all thought they were a bit scary! I'm going to write my sentence again. We saw lots of scary hunting dogs.'

Or she will ask the children to tell her how to change it if they are not happy with the sentence they have suggested as part of shared writing.

Alongside this, children will learn about the 'working language of writing' – capital letter, full stop, punctuation, commas, question marks, speech marks, list, caption, sentence, title, blurb etc:'

'I need to start my sentence with a capital letter for the first word: 'We'.

'I will finish my sentence by putting a full stop.'

Establishing the concept of a word

There are likely to be a number of children in the group who have not established the concept of a word being one unit of meaning.

Writing his or her name in the Reception class establishes the concept of a word – it may be the first word, written down, that has any meaning for the child – and one that they can recognise and read from a list.

Reminding a child to write their name on finished work, or sticking a sticky note on a completed model or artwork, helps them to get the idea that the purpose of this writing is to inform others that it is their work – they created it.

Pointing out words – again and again

Shopping lists, menus, recipes, instructions, all contain lists of words of what is needed, and these can be pointed out and talked about again and again in order to establish the concept of the meaning and purpose of single words. When learning new words, children need to hear and use the word multiple times in different contexts before they understand the meaning and can use it themselves. They need to think about the different ways that the word can be used, and get used to saying it, and the practitioner therefore needs to plan opportunities that will allow children time to encounter, experiment and play with words in different ways.

Making lists in small groups with the adult

The practitioner can devise interesting activities and negotiate with the child the justification for making a list, for example. a list of things to pack on a bear hunt; the hungry ladybird needs to go shopping; Bob the Builder needs a shopping list for tools; the car needs some spare parts so the children will need to make a shopping list.

The way that adults talk about these lists is important:

'May I see your shopping list? I can see lots of words – I wonder what you are going to buy? Let me see: spanner, pump, wheels – I can see that you have thought carefully about what we need to buy.'

'Our butternut squash soup was delicious, don't you think? Let's make a list of what we put in it.

Butternut squash – that's two words – Butternut squash.

Nutmeg – we had to grate that – butter, and an onion.

This is our list – I'll point to the words and we can read them together:

Butternut squash

Nutmeg

Butter

Onion

Lots of very important words. It's important to write those words in a list so we can remember what to put in our soup next time we make it.'

A menu

A child writing a menu for the class café listed the food she would offer customers. She was willing to 'take risks' with her writing, producing a list of words that were not correctly spelt but close enough to standard spelling to be 'plausible', and demonstrating her segmenting skills. She has adopted the appropriate linguistic structure for the purpose:

Menyou

chips

chickignugoots (chicken nuggets)

byfbug (burger)

iscrem (ice cream)

misig (milk shake)

A word wall: creating and maintaining a display of words

Children learn new words and their meanings by hearing and seeing them in contexts that make sense, such as investigations as part of play, and listening to books or stories which have been read or told many times. Creating a word wall from words they have heard in books, stories and poems is a very useful strategy to complement and extend the concept of 'words'.

Talking about these words, including them in conversations, referring to them on a regular basis, reading these together, using them in modelled writing, modelling their use in shared play, encouraging children to use them in their own talk, understanding what they mean, drawing upon them for their writing, will all lead to the ownership of these words by children.

The practitioner creating and displaying a rich bank of words from books and play linked to the five senses

Sound: howl, yowl, squeal, squeak, whoosh, plop!

Sight: dark, dull, gloomy, murky, dim, shadowy

Touch: slimy, slushy, mushy, watery, greasy

Taste: sour, bitter, sharp, vinegary, sweet, sugary, salty

Smell: smelly, stinky, pongy

Characters in books

Good, kind, gentle, affectionate, warm, nasty, cheeky, rude, mean, bad-tempered

Changing environmental print frequently with the children observing

These displays can be regularly changed and new words added. This can be done with the children as another modelling opportunity.

The concept of the sentence

Words can function in lists and are the building blocks for sentence making.

Different types of sentences

Support for writing sentences, from simple to extended to complex, will need to be a focus for all children as they develop as writers, using different genres e.g. Instructions, Recounts, Stories. Children need to begin to move from writing as they speak to a more 'writerly' style of writing:

I saw a tree. (simple sentence)

I saw a large tree. (develop the sentence by adding adjectives or extra detail)

I saw a large tree and a huge puddle in the park. (provide two simple sentences and join them with connectives – e.g. 'and')

There are some useful suggestions for helping children's oral sentence development in **learning about sentences**

Talk for Writing

The National Strategies' **Talk for Writing** materials include a section specifically created for practitioners in Reception classes, with video clips of real examples. There are many practical ideas for activities to develop children's spoken language and vocabulary so that their ability to compose is enhanced. The materials explore ways to get children writing starting with the linguistic patterns of a story the children know well.

Guided writing – helping children in a focused way

Children can take off very quickly with their writing, when they get the chance to see a writer at work through modelled and shared writing, and when they:

- have good visual memory
- have excellent oral skills
- can say what they want to write without any hesitation
- are linking sounds to letters
- can segment and blend words
- are willing to attempt any word
- have good fine motor control skills.

These things together will often be enough to get them started on independent writing, as the samples below show.

This Reception class had visited a local 'Birds of prey' park, and was very keen to write about it:

'Alls can eat a hol mas on oun go and they are hunters. They can tan theag heds.'

(Owls can eat a whole mouse in one go and they are hunters. They can turn their heads.)

This Reception class loved a story about a dragon and this child wrote her own version – part of which is printed below:

'The baby dragon popd owt of the egg. It was a baby dragon. He felt sced because he is in a scery castle but his mummy and daddy they wer niese and he had big wings...'

The child writing about the dragon has made a very good start but he would still benefit from a response to his writing from the teacher, either in small guided groups, or one-to-one. She could ask him to read his writing aloud and ask him about the content and how the story might develop, and in her response model a consistent past tense as she rereads what he has written.

Other children have far greater needs in all aspects of writing and would benefit too from one-to-one or small group support matched to their needs. They need to secure these skills so that independently they can transfer this knowledge to any of their writing.

<p>Reading well-known stories to the children, and ensuring that there are opportunities for them to develop their fine and gross motor skills, helps practitioners to support both the transcriptional and compositional aspects of writing</p>	<p>Practitioner behaviour that supports children in becoming writers</p>
<p>Practitioners in an EYFS unit had noted through their observations that although boys were active learners in the construction, small world play areas and in the outside environment, a significant number of them were reluctant to use the writing area, or indeed to write outdoors. Following a whole-team discussion, it was agreed to develop further opportunities to write outdoors, building on the interests of boys already noted. Structured observations were made in order to evaluate the impact that the new resources had on engaging boys in writing.</p> <p>New resources were introduced into the areas outside. These included paintbrushes, water and watered-down paint; chalks, stones, chocolate powder and coloured sand to mark make on the floor and walls. Having modelled how to use the resources, the practitioners left clipboards and mark making tools in various outdoor areas; for example, the 'sand quarry' workshop.</p> <p>Outside role-play areas were developed, which linked to boys' interests; for example the builders' yard with opportunities to take telephone messages and make up orders, write receipts etc, and practitioners modelling these roles and actions.</p> <p>Boys began to use writing to communicate especially in the outdoor environment. They were observed writing finger trails and letter shapes in the outdoor sand area, writing 'Keep Out' signs for the wolf after listening to the story of 'The three little pigs' outdoors, and writing tickets for an outdoor railway station.</p>	<p>Identifying barriers to writing, providing accessible materials in children's favourite areas, to encourage the children to experiment with writing to communicate.</p> <p>Opportunities to develop both gross and fine motor skills.</p> <p>Building on the interests of children, providing purposeful opportunities to write, and modelling language structures and vocabulary in a context that is meaningful to the child.</p> <p>Sharing stories to reinforce book language.</p> <p>Supporting the development of positive dispositions and attitudes to learning.</p> <p>Communicating that the child's interests are important.</p>
<p>What does the practitioner do to support boys' writing, and what is the impact?</p> <p>More boys are now engaged in writing outdoors. Practitioners have become more knowledgeable about how to encourage and support boys into meaningful writing experiences, and now understand the importance of following the boys' interests as a way into supporting them into writing and to think about ways that their interest could be sustained, and their learning developed.</p>	<p>Having identified some of the barriers to writing, the practitioners provide opportunities to develop gross and fine motor skills, in order to support the transcriptional elements of writing. They use stories to familiarise children with book language and therefore help to develop an understanding of the structural elements of writing that will support with composition as they move from the spoken to written word. They provide opportunities for talking, and model writing in a purposeful context.</p>

Teaching transcriptional skills to an ‘automatic level’

The most effective way is to work with small groups of children according to individual needs at the time, as assessed from independent writing samples.

By working with one group of children in this way every day the practitioner will, over the course of a week, be able to help all children develop the ability to compose sentences, add punctuation, segment words as they spell, and leave spaces between words.

Children beginning to apply phonic skills in writing

The practitioner will have noted from independent examples of writing from their play how the children's writing is shaping up, and will work on the next steps with them in a guided session. This must be done sensitively, praising their current knowledge but supporting them in their next steps. Here is an example of Tobias choosing to write a thank you letter to Mr Price.

It shows a well-written letter, fit for purpose, with growing control over spelling. He had copied the word BIRDS from a display on the wall without being asked to, showing his initiative:

Dr Mr Prys

Thc u fo the BIRDS tuabl we hf pt sm nts on we hf sn lts OF BIRDS on the tbl

Love Tobias

(Dear Mr Price,

Thank you for the BIRDS table we have put some nuts on we have seen lots of BIRDS on the table)

Working on a sentence together to teach necessary skills

The focus for the group may be making little information books to share with their friends linked to an interest such as football. The practitioner can talk about, then demonstrate a simple sentence for the first page, choosing words which the group can attempt to segment and write, so that they experience success; for example, ‘I can kick it.’

These children are at the early stages of segmenting words and need help to write down the corresponding graphemes as they work through words. The practitioner will say the sentence aloud and ask the children to repeat it and count the words. She will then work through the sentence word by word, asking them to segment the words *can*, *kick* and *it* and write these independently.

She is noting their ability to spell, whether they are adding spaces between words, how their letter formation is shaping up, and whether they punctuate it at the end.

She talks about their efforts to them individually, praises their attempts at spelling, moving around the group as she talks and supports. They now illustrate their first page, and then the session is over.

For some of these children just a few sessions like these give them a clear idea of what to do, whereas others will benefit from more time with the practitioner.

The practitioner will see from observing independent writing that these children will begin to take off in their composition and spelling skills. Children will be writing many words accurately and attempting any other words they wish to write, demonstrating 'plausible phonetic spelling'.

Spelling high frequency and tricky words

High frequency words are important in writing because of their grammatical use within the sentence, which allows it to 'make sense', e.g. *I, to, and, go, we, me, was, are, have*.

Many of these words cannot be fully segmented, e.g. *was, are, what* and need to be practised as part of guided writing as part of the construction of a sentence. These should also be practised as part of the discrete daily phonics session.

It is important that these words are secure, habitual and fluent, rather than children having to stop and think about how to spell them. Just knowing how to spell these key words supports young writers with their composition. They are not distracted by these words since they know how to spell them so they can get on with thinking about what they want to say.

In the Reception class these words will begin to be secured as the children move through the year, with the practitioner modelling and demonstrating their use within sentences, and with the class having plenty of practice at writing them. This is most effective as part of a guided writing session.

How spelling supports reading

Lots of practice at applying segmenting skills helps reading too, because of the close analysis of the word in order to segment it and then rereading the word.

When children come to unknown words in their reading, these too require a close analysis using their phonic knowledge as they scan through the word from left to right. Jim Rose's *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* points out that an effective phonics programme teaches children that blending for reading and segmenting for writing are reversible processes, so that learning about one reinforces learning about the other.

Involving parents

We know from research that the involvement of parents in their children's learning and the subsequent impact on the home learning environment is vital in improving outcomes for children: this is particularly so in writing.

The **Phonics information booklet** will give parents and carers further information about the Letters and Sounds programme, and the best way to support their child at home. It can be personalised by the setting or school prior to being shared with parents and carers of children in the Reception year.

It is vital that practitioners include strategies to include parents in their children's learning – in particular, working with fathers to motivate and inspire boys to write.

A day in the life of....

Children are naturally curious about other people's lives, and would be interested in hearing about other parents' daily lives. This could take the form of a brief letter or email telling the children about a typical day in their lives; for example, a mother tells them about a day spent with her new baby, including a visit to the clinic; a local fruit and vegetable shop owner tells the children what

he has to do before the shop opens; a lorry driver tells the children about what he carries in his lorry and where he has travelled to that day.

These contributions could be read by an adult and shared with the group and then placed on their message board. This would be even better as an experience if the parent who wrote about their day could be persuaded to come in to speak to the children.

Some examples that worked really well in a Reception class were from three different dads, who not only wrote about a day in their own lives but also came into school:

Dad A shared his passion for motocross by driving his bike to school and bringing it into the car park where children took digital photographs, sat on it, asked lots of questions about it, painted pictures and wrote captions about it.

Dad B brought in photographs of the different stops he made in his journey as a lorry driver, and his arrival at a flour mill. The photographs and captions had been stuck on a long piece of wallpaper which he unrolled as he talked. He even gave each child a small bag of flour!

Dad C worked for the local electricity board and often had to fly by helicopter to sort out problems – he managed to bring some video clips which stimulated lots of talking and enthralled the class!

We start the story...you finish it!

One practitioner found a very successful idea to involve parents, by starting off a story in a shared writing session on an interactive whiteboard with the whole class contributing ideas. The practitioner then saved this, printed it off sent copies home with the children, asking Mum, Dad, brother, sister, grandparents and cousin to finish it with the child and then send it back to school.

Some parents really went to town and drew illustrations to go with the story; others wrote sad or happy endings. One parent wrote the ending in Hindi, and came in and read it to the children first in Hindi, then in English. The group was very interested to see writing in another language!

Making sure that parents know about what writing takes place in the setting

Early Years practitioners have an important role to play in making strong links with parents and carers. One of the most effective ways is to show their children busy as writers, with examples of what they are achieving through photos and captions. This may take the form of:

- an **eye-catching display** in the entrance to the setting
- a **Big Book** entitled *Our young writers* which can be updated through the year
- a **plasma screen** with a rotating display of children busy writing, both indoors and outdoors.

Colourful handouts freely available for parents and carers

These should show examples of children's development as writers through all the different stages, from early mark making, to beginning to apply phonic knowledge and then into 'readable' writing in many different forms: labels, lists, letters, recounts, stories. This handout could also contain ideas for talking about writing both inside and outside home using the ideas below.

Out and about: talk to your children about the purpose of writing

- read food signs in the supermarket together: these tell us where things are
- read the list of when the store is open or closed: these tell us when to go shopping
- read road signs: STOP, SLOW, NO PARKING: these tell drivers what to do, or not to do!
- read advertising in shop windows and on buses and lorries: these try to get us to buy something!
- talk about words on boxes and other packaging while putting away the shopping after a visit to a supermarket: these tell us what is inside,

Talk about why you write at home

Suggest parents add messages to the board or calendar on the kitchen wall and talk about them with their children, explain that the messages remind us what to do; for example, buy a present for someone's birthday, arrange a babysitter to go out.

Writing together at home:

- write a reply to a letter or an invitation together
- write a birthday card or send a card online, working out the message together
- write a shopping list together
- read the instructions together for a new toy and tell them that this helps to get the toy working!

Fun activities to do at home:

- write a message to a child on the steamed up mirror in the bathroom
- float the letters that make up the child's name in the bath and catch them in a net
- make a message out of magnetic letters on the fridge
- play 'I Spy', using the initial letter sound of the object. 'I Spy with my little eye something beginning with p' Try to make the 'p' sound short and 'unvoiced' rather than 'puh' – ask your child's practitioner for help with this if you are unsure.
- take it in turns to fill in missing words in comics.

The creative practitioner– linking home and setting via a message board

A message board that is easily accessible for young children instantly forms a link with mums, dads and carers. Children (and their parents/carers) can be encouraged to start a two-way flow of little snippets of information that might interest the class, for example, the birth of a baby, arrival of a new pet, death of a pet, grandparents visiting, a special day out, an achievement by a child linked to an out of school interest such as football or dancing, a football match on television which saw dads and sons equally excited by a winning goal! These messages are for sharing with the class and adults, so the sense of an audience is there from the beginning.

To begin with, these might be written by a mother or father or the practitioner and placed on the board, but increasingly the active role of the practitioner is to encourage children to write their

own message. This could be orally relayed by the parent, or the practitioner can scribe a new message that the child wants to share.

It is also important that the practitioners in the class add a message of their own, so that children can see the adult writing for a real purpose. Just one birthday wish on the board from one child to another will encourage many more!

A message board is instantly accessible if it has a laminated surface and an attached pen; reusable sticky pads available on the board will allow a child to attach a picture to go with the message.

Message boards can be placed outside; nothing galvanises children's interest more than seeing an adult writing on the board, as they want to find out what the message is and ask questions. Some children may choose to come to write when no adult is present; it's their choice to write arising from a specific desire to communicate something they feel is important to share with others.

The use of ICT can greatly enhance messaging opportunities; setting up a screen that can be used to display different messages each day, and giving parents the opportunity to respond could engage a wider set of parents and may be especially appealing to dads and younger parents, giving them opportunities to talk to children about what and how to write. Emailing is a good way to develop links with the home learning environment; supporting children to email from the setting and then encouraging their parents to help them respond from home opens up all sorts of exciting opportunities for children, and may also be an effective way of involving parents who are not able to come into the setting on a regular basis.

Increasing 'readability' of the message during the Reception year

The readability of the message will develop alongside children's increasing ability to write the sounds they hear as they segment words, to write automatically many high frequency and 'tricky words', and their growing skills in the formation of graphemes and spacing between words. They will apply these skills across all of the purposeful and engaging writing activities described, supported by discrete phonics sessions from the practitioner on a daily basis.

Children are interested in other children's writing, and the practitioner can facilitate this by providing a blank Big Book that children can stick their writing in to share with others, whenever they want to.

The practitioner can make good use of their skills by requesting pairs of children to make and photograph particular things they are good at doing to share with others, for example showing how to make a simple cone shape into a hat.

Supporting parents who are less confident about their own literacy skills

For some parents who are not confident readers and writers themselves, some of the above activities could add to their feelings of vulnerability, and as a result they could understandably be less willing to engage. The skilful, sensitive practitioner will be aware of the potential for this in any setting, and will therefore ensure that there are various ways in which they can encourage and support parents to help their children, that don't always involve reading and writing in public. Regular workshops are an excellent way of welcoming parents into the setting, where they can play alongside their own and other children and parents, and also have the opportunity to see practitioners modelling speaking, listening, reading and writing activities through playful interaction with children.

Technology in the setting can be used to good effect when it is made possible for parents to see some of the activities that their children were involved in from the previous day(s), and again observe effective practitioners encouraging and developing children's learning. There is further information on involving parents in the [Early Reading Connects family involvement toolkit](#).

<p>A child's interest in dinosaurs not only provides opportunities for the practitioner to share with parents and develop links with the home learning environment, but also to introduce different forms of writing through experiences that are exciting and meaningful for the children</p>	<p>Practitioner behaviour that supports children in becoming writers</p>
<p>On a 'welcome day' and subsequent home visits for children starting nursery, practitioners noticed that some children were particularly interested in dinosaurs. Thomas in particular had made a connection between his visit to the nursery, and his own collection of dinosaurs, and his parent told his new key worker how excited he was about starting nursery now that he knew there were dinosaurs there. His key worker, Jane, ensured that there were plenty of dinosaur models available, and set aside a small area of the nursery to display and organise them, with some non-fiction texts and pictures.</p> <p>During his first days at nursery, Thomas is seen to begin transporting the dinosaur models to the walk-in sand area. He sits on the side of the sand, and puts the dinosaur models in, arranging them in the sand or on the tiles at the side. Jane is sitting near him, quietly observing in an unobtrusive way. Thomas picks up a dinosaur and turns it over in his hands, fingering its features and looking at it very closely. He looks at Jane, and points to the spines on one model saying 'Look – it's got these spikes on its back...' Sitting next to Thomas and touching the dinosaur as he is doing, Jane replies 'Yes – just look at those spines', feeling them as she talks, using a quiet, reflective voice as though thinking to herself. 'They're really sharp.' Thomas picks up another: 'This one's bigger. Look, it's got a tail!' 'You're right,' says Jane – 'it's longer than that one, and it's got a long tail...' She looks over at other models and picks one up, using her facial expressions and slow, deliberate movements to model her curiosity about its features. Thomas getting very excited, puts his finger into the open mouth of a dinosaur, and touches its teeth. 'Look at the teeth!' 'My goodness. Can I touch them too?' says Jane, as she runs her finger along the teeth, using her face to express her shock to the child at their sharpness. Thomas manipulates the dinosaur model: 'if I move this like this, it makes a trunk. That's the word for the dinosaur, you know...I'm going to make a dinosaur house.' And looking around him pulls a nearby tray over to the sand area and places it in the sand. 'I can use that for my house. Dinosaurs need rocks – they have to have them.' Having picked up on Thomas's interest in volcanic rocks, during a home visit, Jane says: 'I think I know where there are some rocks. Would you like me to get them?' She gets up, and walks to the large cupboard while Thomas watches, and re-appears a few moments later with an armful of volcanic rocks and puts them down next to the child who becomes excited, smiling with satisfaction. 'These rocks are volcanic,' she says, 'they're from volcanoes!'</p> <p>Jane and Thomas have a talk about volcanoes. Thomas obviously already knows something about them – he talks about fire, using his hands to show fire coming out of the top. They handle the pieces of rock as they talk, looking closely at them and picking each up in turn. Jane suggests that they try and find out more about volcanoes and asks Thomas where they could look. At this point, they are joined by Michael who has been playing nearby. Michael says: 'I've got a book about volcanoes! Some volcanoes are covered in grass! And...some are in the sea.'</p> <p>Jane walks away and leaves the boys playing, while she sources some picture books with volcanoes. She returns a few moments later, opens a</p>	<p>Building on children's interests, and providing books to support understanding of how books work, and the different forms of writing</p> <p>Supporting the development of positive dispositions and attitudes to learning</p> <p>Modelling language structures and vocabulary in a context that is meaningful to the child</p> <p>Developing learning based on children's interests</p> <p>Providing opportunities to talk, and promoting the use of books – helping to make links between reading and writing</p>

book at a volcano picture, and places it on the floor. Michael picks it up enthusiastically, finds pictures and shows Jane and Thomas a picture of a volcano coming out from the sea.

Another adult joins in the conversation, noticing the dinosaur play. 'I think I have some dinosaurs at home which swim in the sea! I could bring them in!'

Over the next few days, Jane developed the sand area to include several books on dinosaurs, some large pictures of volcanoes and some more information books about volcanoes. Rocks, driftwood, leaves and branches were provided nearby, with 'builder's' trays' containing bark chippings, pebbles and other natural materials. The interest attracted a small group of boys, who came to this area first each day, on arrival at nursery. Michael and Thomas frequently transported their dinosaur models to other areas of the nursery, as they explored their new surroundings. This included the mark-making area, and resulted in some drawings by both boys of their dinosaur models, which became the subject of a 'learning story' display. The communication of this interest to the boys' parents resulted in a trip to the museum for one, to look at dinosaur remains and fossils, and formed the basis for regular exchange of information between practitioners and his parent as his interests developed.

The practitioner continued to follow the boys' interests in dinosaurs. She observed the boys did engage in writing as part of their interest in dinosaurs. To support this further she introduced a dinosaur soft toy called 'Steggy' that wrote to the children. Three boys showed a clear interest in letter writing initially as well as other writing genres. They displayed these different genres of writing such as letters, notes, lists, messages and posters through their interactions with Steggy the dinosaur. The practitioner was keen to teach the different aspects of writing forms through both modelling in a shared writing activity and in small groups. She was able to teach the layouts of the genres to the children, which the three boys acknowledged in their writing. They demonstrated that they were aware of 'Dear' when writing a letter to Steggy and 'Love from' when they concluded their letters. They understood directionality and wrote from left to right and conveyed meaning in their letter writing. The three boys were very enthusiastic about what response they would receive from Steggy, which they often shared with their parents. The 'Steggy letters' were the catalyst for encouraging the boys to write in meaningful contexts, which in turn supported a continued interest in writing, which evolved from the boys' interest in dinosaurs.

Communicating that the child's interests are important, and providing materials to encourage writing

Involving parents so that learning can be consolidated and extended at home

Providing purposeful and meaningful experiences that encourage writing

Using shared writing to model, explore and discuss some of the choices that writers have to make that are based on purpose, audience and content

Introducing different forms and conventions of writing

What does the practitioner do to support boys writing, and what is the impact?

Boys have become more interested in writing, when the purpose for it is made clear and understandable. Links with the home learning environment are now stronger, with parents sharing information with key workers about children's interests, and further supporting and developing those interests outside nursery.

The practitioner responded to the boys' interest in dinosaurs, providing a range of opportunities for the children to engage in a variety of writing genres. She was able to use this interest to plan adult-led sessions which gave children the opportunity to apply their developing skills, giving them a meaningful purpose for writing, and also to make links with the home learning environment through involving parents.