

See, Scribble, Print: Encouraging Young Children to Make their Mark

As a caregiver, you probably have noticed how most young children have a natural interest in drawing and writing. Even the very youngest child seems magnetically drawn to anything that makes a mark. How do children learn how to draw? Why are drawing and writing opportunities so important?

Important First Marks: Scribbles

Imagine you are in another country where the writing and language is different from your own: All the symbols, letters, and numbers look different. Now imagine you are asked to write in that particular way. Your attempts may be wobbly and at first you would not know what items, letters, or numbers you are representing. You would need to learn all the symbols, languages, and representations of that country. Now imagine a very young child who is learning to speak, draw, and write. Wow!

Have you ever noticed a very young child playing with her food and realizing that by dragging her finger through her applesauce she makes a mark? This might be a first attempt at drawing. There is no purpose or idea behind the action, but she has stumbled on an action that leaves a result. We often see this on paper (and walls!) and refer to these uncontrolled marks as scribbling.



Hooray for Scribbling!

For young children, drawing is an opportunity for self expression and conveying ideas. Scribbling can represent both drawing and writing for children. They may not be able to write words yet, but they can attempt to make marks that show something. All forms of scribbling are important to the development of drawing, writing, reading, and communicating.

Very young children don't know what they should use for writing; hence the marker drawn directly on their belly (instead of paper). As children grow, they begin to make marks with more shape on proper surfaces (paper!) and they want us to see it and to be able to "read" it. You may have heard children say after drawing or scribbling, "What did I make?" or "What does it say?" This is when we know the child understands that drawing means something and has a connection to literacy (reading, writing, drawing, and communicating).

Early stages of scribbling are very enjoyable to a child and provide support for other drawing/writing stages.

See the chart below for some early stages of drawing:

Observe writing and drawings by others	3 mos. - 1 years (ongoing)	Develops ideas of how to make marks with tools
Uncontrolled scribbling	1 ½ - 2 years	Uses tools to mark with, has little control, often looks unfocused
Controlled scribbling	18 mos. - 3 years	Repeats certain lines, patterns, simple geometric shapes (circles) begin to appear, looks focused
Pre-schematic stage	3 - 4 years	Shows symbols, attempts at people and representation, pictures that tell stories, more complexity, great variation in abilities
Schematic stage	5 - 6 years	Begins to write and draw on the same page, tells stories, portrays objects, includes letters and numbers, order in spatial relationships, such as tree coming out of the ground

Provide encouragement

While most children enjoy drawing, others might need more convincing. Encourage the many stages of drawing and writing:

- Place drawing and writing materials in various areas and make them easily accessible (such as paper near the block area or paper and pencils in outside areas)
- Listen to children's comments; look for opportunities to reflect together
- Encourage drawing as a resource and an expression: "You are really missing Daddy. Let's get some paper so you can write to him or draw him a picture"; "You've built a wonderful road out of blocks. Would you like some paper so you can make a map to go with it?"

