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Seven Sparkling Ways to Encourage Kids' Writing

It's natural for young children to bubble over with ideas, schemes, and jokes. Unfortunately, capturing those ideas on paper is not so natural for many kids with learning disabilities (LD). They may freeze up, forget their ideas, or fight the pencil.

Help Your Reluctant Writer at Home

Your struggling writer needs practice at home, but you don't want to make it seem like another school chore. The answer is to sneak writing into play — and vice versa.

As Joseph Pearce says in *The Magical Child*, "The child can never learn to play without the parent playing with the child. Play ... is a huge creative potential built within the child, which never develops unless it is stimulated by the adult model, the parent."

Remember that your role as a home writing coach is to have fun and to honor your child's imagination. You don't have to be the drill sergeant in charge of spelling. In fact, research shows us that in the long run, it's far more important to encourage the communication of ideas than to hamper a child's style for the sake of correct spelling.

The root of the word "communication" is "to commune" — in other words, to coax the ideas in your child's brain down through the paper and up into your brain. You can help by:

- Saying, "Let's play a game." There's no need to mention "writing game" if your child is a reluctant writer.
- Choosing subjects your child loves, like brontosaurus or monster movies or soccer or shoes.
- Talking through ideas, asking questions, and listening carefully to answers.
- Making drawings, notes, and story maps together, if your child can't remember ideas.
- Taking dictation or having your child use a computer.
- Praising honestly and liberally.
- Keeping games short.
- Posting written work on the wall or refrigerator, or sending it to family members and friends. Writing is meant to be shared.
- Quitting if it isn't fun for your child or for you.

Try These Games for Grades K-2

• Eat Your Words

The reluctant writer of any age often needs to return to the word level. Make it fun by baking dinner rolls or cookies in the shape of words that mean something to your child. For example, if she loves comic books, bend purchased dough into "Pow!" or "Shazam!" If it's her birthday, bake her wish, like "Gameboy II." (And if all this is too messy, use PlayDough or craft clay for words — but don't eat it.)

• Survival

Pretend you are stranded on an island somewhere in your apartment, house, garage, or local park. You need to write "Help!" so you will be rescued by planes that are searching for you. You don't have a pencil or paper (and if you did, the writing would be too tiny to be read from the air).

Tie towels around your head and take water (it's hot on the island). You and your child must survey your surroundings and invent non-pencil ways to write HELP! If you're in the bathroom, you might make giant letters out of toilet paper (and hope there's no wind). If you're in the garage, you might find paint and brushes. If you're in the park, you can always write with your toe in the playbox sand.

Suggest as little as possible, unless your child needs prompting. This game allows the child who balks at writing to experience the power of a single word when it is used for a reason. And if your child's imagination is fertile, don't stop at the first idea. Find as many ways as possible in each room or location.

• Flying Messages

You'll need a ball or Frisbee, some tape, and paper cut into six 1-1/2 - 2"- wide strips the long way. Both you and your child should write three commands, one on each strip of paper, that tell the other person to do something physical. For example, you might write, "Hop on your left foot six times" or "Squeak like a mouse." Try not to see each other's commands. Go outside and stand as far apart as your child can toss the ball or Frisbee. You start the game by taping your first strip to the ball or Frisbee. Toss it to your child. He reads the message and follows the instructions. Then he tapes his first strip to the ball or Frisbee and returns a flying message. If you don't have a place to play outside or the weather won't cooperate, you can stuff the message in a sock, ball it up, and toss it inside. (Hint: Don't play this game on a day when you're pooped.) In school, a child with learning problems may not connect why ideas in his head need to land on paper and be read. But when messages fly through the air, affect the other person's behavior (and especially make her look silly), writing makes sense to the child.

Try These Games for Grades 3-5

• Fortunately/Unfortunately

The writer Remy Charlip wrote a classic children's book called *Fortunately*, in which one good event happens, followed by its unfortunate opposite. The book opens with,

"Fortunately one day, Ned got a letter that said, 'Please Come to a Surprise Party.' But unfortunately the party was in Florida and he was in New York."

You do not need the book to play this game, but it's more fun if you first read it together. (If your local public library doesn't have the book, they can find it for you through interlibrary loan.)

Each person playing the game receives one sheet of paper. Write in large letters at the top of a sheet of paper "Fortunately." On the reverse side, write "Unfortunately."

Talk with your child about a trip he or she has always wanted to take. To Disney World? Across the United States by bicycle? To the moon? Help your child think of a first sentence about the trip, starting with something like "Fortunately, we won the lottery. Our whole family decided to buy bicycles and ride across the United States. Mother quit her job."

Write the "Fortunately" sentences. Then pass each paper to the other player. Turn it over and write the "Unfortunately" part. For example, "Unfortunately, it rained every day, and our bicycles rusted."

If your child wants to play more, you can either make new Fortunately/Unfortunately sheets or you can draw a line under the first part and continue the story. Number each part on the front and back, so you can read the finished stories out loud more easily.

Remember, this is not the time to fuss about spelling. If it's easier for your child with LD, let her dictate to you. Your role is to help your reluctant writer communicate her ideas to the world.

• A Day in the Life

Photographer Rick Smolan has published a series of books called *A Day in the Life...* showing 24 hours in the life of an astronaut, a country, a state. Now it's your child's turn to create a similar book.

Buy your child a disposable camera. Show her one of the Smolan books and explain the concept. Then talk about documenting one day in your child's life (or her pet's or sister's or friend's or whomever she wants).

Start the day by photographing your child asleep just before you wake her. Then let her take a photo every hour of the entire day. (Mom, a timer set to an hour will help you remember.) Finish by taking a last shot of her, asleep.

When the photos come back from the developer, paste each one on construction paper. Help your child write the details that explain each picture — why she picked the subject, why it is important to her day, and who was nearby but not shown.

Make a title page by writing "A Day in the Life of [your child]," with the date she photographed. Punch three holes in the left margin and tie the pages together with yarn or dental floss. Keep the book forever, and show it to everyone.

Talking about your child's ideas is a crucial part of writing. It helps your reluctant writer capture those elusive details that sometimes scramble in his brain.

• Family Time Capsule

Start by gathering a shoebox, paper and writing tools, and an envelope for each person in the family. Tell the family that you will be making a Family Time Capsule, to be opened in one or five or ten years (or for whatever length of time you and the family vote). It is to be a record of who you were, who you are today, and who you want to be.

Have each member of the family write a private letter, telling the world about his or her life. Where were you born? How old are you today? What do you look like? What are your favorite activities? Foods? Books? Movies? Colors? Vacations? What's going on in the world today? Where do you want to be in one or five or ten years? If you have pets in the family, have the children write letters for the pets and take pawprints.

When each person is finished, seal the letter in the envelope and write the person's name and date on it. Then add more items to the Family Time Capsule, like baby and current photos, tapes of children singing and talking, postcards from vacations, and drawings. Also include the front page of today's newspaper.

Have everyone help seal the box with tape. Then write on the outside "Do NOT open until [date]!" Stash the box somewhere and forget it until Opening Day.

• If I Ruled the World

Your child has been elected to rule the world. He will need to give an acceptance speech on TV to his adoring subjects, but must supply the text of his speech to the person (you) who types it for the TelePrompter. Other members of the campaign (i.e., the family) can also help with all steps leading to the final speech — proper costumes for his Sibling Subjects, setting up the TV studio, and typing the speech.

First, choose the props. What hat or crown should the Ruler of the World wear? What outfit? Does he have a personal symbol of greatness, such as a favorite stuffed toy, blanket, item of clothing, or sports equipment?

Set up the TV studio. You will need something to function as a camera (it can be pretend), lights turned on the Ruler, a microphone-like object, and something to serve as a podium. If you actually have a camcorder, use it. Otherwise, have your child invent the rest of the props.

Now plan the speech. If your child has trouble with handwriting or sequencing, talk first about his ideas for ruling the world. What needs to be changed in the world? What would make it fun for his subjects to live in his world? Is there anybody he wants to thank for helping him reach this important position? What are his plans for the future?

If his learning difficulties prevent him from handwriting comfortably, you can audiotape his brainstorming, jot down the key ideas, or take dictation. Then enter it into a computer or print by hand, using

large type

(that was 48 point). Tape the papers together so that they form one long sheet. Have another child or friend hold up the paper next to the "camera" and let the Ruler deliver his speech. If you are able to videotape the speech, show it at all family gatherings for the rest of your kid's life.

Make Writing a Game, Not a Chore

Writing has many stages before it reaches paper — generating ideas, noticing likenesses, deciding on one main idea, eliminating others, choosing appropriate words, and putting them in an order that readers can follow — not to mention problems with the physical act of writing.

Your child with LD may struggle anywhere along the path. But if he or she writes for a reason and an audience, half the battle is won. Incorporate writing naturally into play and it need not be a chore for your child or for you. Let those ideas flow into print and sparkle.

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Other Resources

Books

Magical Child

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0452267897/schwabfoundation/

By Joseph Chilton Pearce

[Video]

Developing Minds/Getting Thoughts on Paper

By Dr. Mel Levine

[Other]

Essay Express

By Lynn J. Meltzer, Bethany N. Roditi, et al.