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The Writing Center: A place just for writing!

RAELYNN CAMERON

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RESEARCH ON THE VALUE OF THE WRITING CENTER

“Literacy is one of the greatest gifts a person could receive.” As early childhood educators, we know this to be true. When we experience children developing literacy skills it is one of the greatest joys of our work. Seeing the change in an 18-month-old’s vocabulary growth or watching the pride of a four-year-old who just learned to spell his name is almost magical. There is a shift in understanding and it opens up the whole world to a child, and the truly wonderful part about it is that we play a very active role in this development. Reading and writing acquisition is a developmental continuum that begins at birth (IRA/NEAYC, 1998, p.5). A well-developed literacy center should foster children’s skills so they can become effective speakers, listeners, readers, and writers. The skills can be broken down into these categories; writing skills, oral language development, listening skills, print awareness, alphabetical awareness, and phonological awareness (Bullard, 2010). There are many significant findings that highlight the importance of teaching each of these skills fully, to truly enhance a child’s literacy skills. Some of these findings are listed below.

- The language acquisition and growth that we see in the early years is an important predictor of later reading success (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).
- Research suggests that the ability to write letters and one’s name in the preschool years is predictive of later literacy (National Early Literacy Panel, National Institute for literacy, & National Center for Family Literacy, 2008).
- Through oral language children experience language sounds that lead to phonological awareness, learn new vocabulary, and learn about language conventions (Bullard, 2010, p. 202).
- It has been found that although children spend a large majority of their time listening when in school settings, listening skills are very rarely taught (Bullard, 2010, p.202).
- Print awareness allows children to understand the organization of print and that print carries meaning, it helps children understand print direction, and that print can be used for a variety of purposes (Searfoss et al., 2001).
- Phonological awareness is strongly linked to later literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel, National Institute for literacy, & National Center for Family Literacy, 2008).

INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITING CENTER

Dandelion Wishes Childcare is a family childcare facility in Missoula, Montana, serving 8 children ranging in ages from 2-6 years old in an in-home setting. The challenge of developing an appropriate writing center within the constraints of my space has always been something that I have struggled with. For a time, I had used our main activity table to promote writing, this table is used for any focused activities including art, math, science, and sensory projects. A specified writing activity would take place at the table once a week. This worked for us, but I felt that we were missing something. The children lacked the opportunity or space to simply write at will. When an opportunity for writing presented itself in play we had to make space for the children to write. Sometimes this meant clearing a space at the activity table, sometimes this meant floor writing but usually it meant that the children lost interest due to the process that was necessary for them to carry out their writing plan.

When analyzing my space, I realized that this dilemma was not unique to my in-home program. Many centers, preschools and childcare programs that I have observed or worked in struggle with this same over-

planning and lack of space for free, child-initiated writing. Most writing centers have a planned activity for the day, these are beneficial, but through this process I have discovered the importance of allowing children to have a continuous writing outlet. It was a child enrolled in my program that put it so perfectly, one day after going through the usual struggle to find a spot to create a card for his grandma he stated, “We need a place that is just for writing!” In this realization, I chose to make major changes to our writing center. These changes were put in place to enhance development in all facets of writing and literacy development.

The first and biggest change implemented was the addition of a two-person space available at all times with a variety of writing materials for the children to access. Writing and letter manipulatives were added to the space in order to encourage letter identification and name recognition. This was highly useful for my children who are resistant to using traditional writing materials. These children were drawn in and able to enhance literacy skills in a way that was relevant and meaningful to them. The addition of laminated models such as a word dictionary, name book, and alphabet strips enhanced confidence in writing abilities, spelling abilities and independence. Personal journals and writing folders encouraged children to think deeply and return to work at later times. One of the most intriguing additions was to enhance oral language skills; the story telling dice. These dice set the stage for many fantastical stories and even led into an investigation of podcasts. Mailboxes were used to encourage writing letters and sticky notes for making lists; we focused on the purpose of writing and the children’s skills and knowledge flourished.

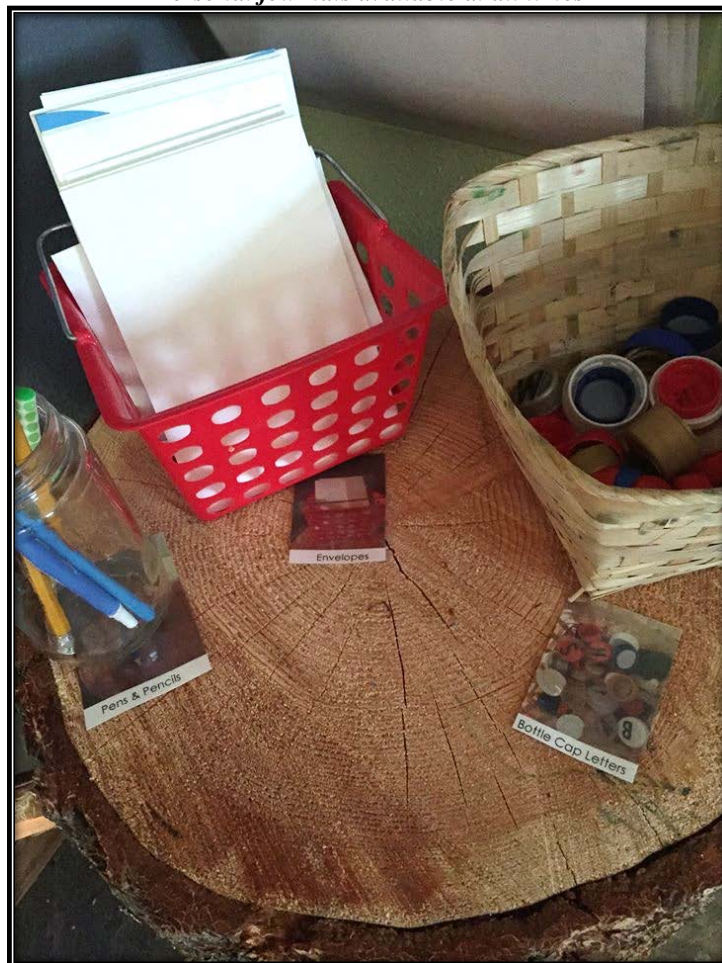
CENTER PHOTOS



Two person writing space, with magnet board and many writing materials



Personal journals available at all times



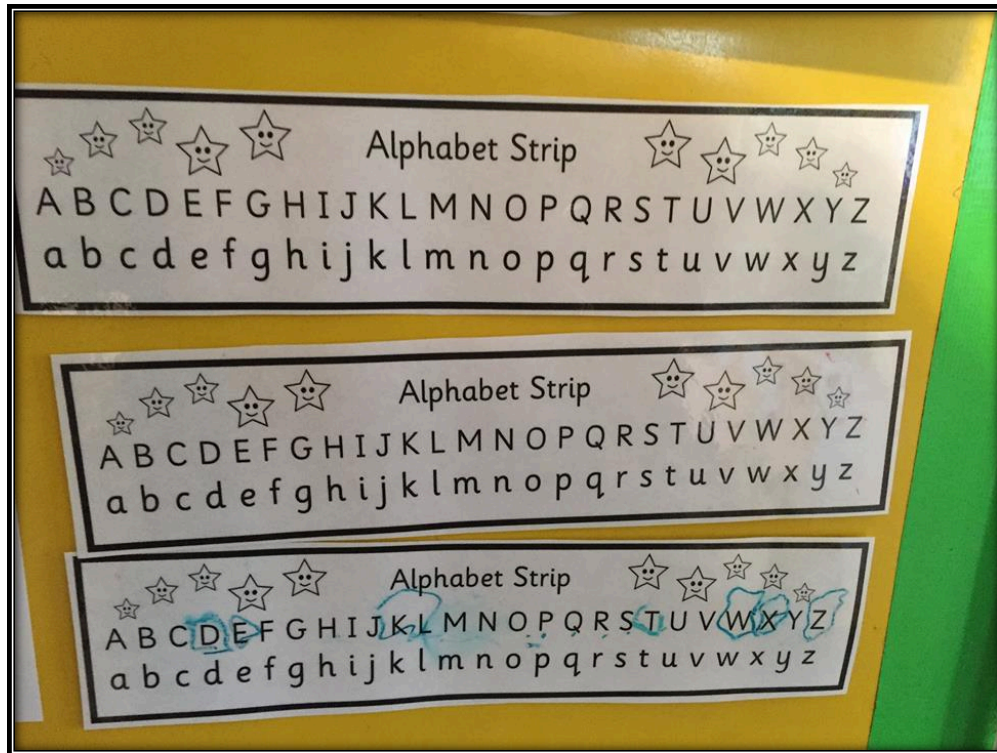
Writing manipulatives, envelopes and pens and pencils



Writing shelf with color-coded writing utensils, letter stamps, gems, story telling dice, chalkboard place cards, sticky notes, picture/word dictionary, and name book



Our magnet board is an excellent place for children to display their work, it is also home to writing samples like an addressed letter, our alphabet strips and our calendar that the children are free to take down to cross off dates and anticipate upcoming activities.



These laminated alphabet strips have magnetic tape on the backs, the children use them often, taking them down to further understand a letter. They can circle the letter that they are working on and make note of the capital or lower-case counterpart.



The story telling dice encourage the children to enhance their oral language skills. They roll the dice and tell a story based on the pictures that they rolled. I often have a recording device available for them to record their oral stories. We have been focusing on clear concise stories with a beginning, middle and end.



Letter Manipulatives encourage the children to spell and create words without writing.

CONCLUSION

The change to the writing center has increased involvement in ways that I could not have predicted. This center was popular when first introduced and continues to be a place for children to write all of the important things that they have to write. Young children use the area to draw pictures to represent ideas; my older children are writing stories and using inventive spelling. Whether its scribbles or novels learning is occurring. Large group writing activities are still highlighted at our activity table but the bulk of our writing is taking place in the intimate area created for focused work with a peer. While it is not always feasible to provide a separate writing area in every program I highly recommend creating space that is “just for writing!” because there are so many moments in a day that children just need to write, if we provide the space they will provide the work!

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