

Boys and writing

Introduction

Concerns about the gap between boys' and girls' achievement in writing are not new. At all key stages, the gap is wider than that in reading and has persisted over a number of years.

As early as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), practitioners are often aware that boys appear less interested in writing and that by the end of the Reception year their attainment is already falling behind that of girls. How can practitioners support boys in the early stages of learning to write?

Taking stock

The first step is to look carefully at what is happening in the setting.

- Audit the provision using the **writing provision for boys audit**. Are meaningful opportunities for writing built into all the areas of provision, both indoors and outdoors?
- The **CLLD Literacy Learning Environment** checklists are also useful documents to refer to.
- Observe the children. Do they make use of the opportunities for writing which are provided? Which children? Do boys and girls participate equally? Do some boys enjoy writing, but not others? Do adults support children who are writing within freely-chosen activities, or only children participating in adult-initiated writing tasks? A tracking exercise, following individual boys to observe how they are spending their time in the setting, can provide valuable information for practitioners.
- What pattern of boys' and girls' attainment does EYFS Profile data give?
- From the picture derived from all the evidence, what appears to be the main strengths of the provision, and what are the main barriers to boys' writing development?

If most writing is adult led, whether with girls or boys, the first step is to develop the writing environment to encourage and support children's independent writing. There is guidance on this in:

- **The crucial role of the Early Years practitioner in supporting young writers within a literacy-rich environment**
- **CLLEK Module 5: Writing for pleasure and information**
- For further information and guidance on adult directed and child initiated learning, including definitions, see the new publication, **Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage** (DCSF ref: 00775-2009BKT-EN)

If the writing environment motivates and supports girls (and perhaps some boys) effectively, the next step is to consider how to engage *reluctant boys*. *Reluctance to engage* in writing may be a result of:

- Lack of motivation. The boys do not see writing as purposeful, pleasurable and relevant to their concerns and interests.

- Anxiety about writing. Boys may feel they do not have mastery of the skills of writing – for example, phonics and handwriting, but it is important that through listening to boys, practitioners identify anything that may contribute to anxiety in this area and address appropriately. For example, there can sometimes be an assumption made that boys won't be as interested as girls in drawing and mark making. This in turn can result in limited access to resources such as paper, crayons, paint, etc. and insufficient opportunities or encouragement for boys to write. If that is the case, lack of experience could be adding to boys' anxiety. Boys' attitudes to writing will be influenced greatly by the practitioners' attitudes and responses to what they produce from the earliest stages of mark making. See below for 'Feedback on writing'.

Phonics for writing

In order to write down what they want to say, children need to be able to segment words (hear the separate phonemes or sounds in them), and to know at least one way of representing each phoneme in the word. With a systematic, well-paced phonics teaching programme many children reach this point very quickly. For guidance on teaching phonics go to:

- *Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics* (DCSF, 2007)
- *CLLEK Module 3: Word recognition and phonics teaching*

Handwriting guidance

For guidance on developing handwriting skills (pencil control and letter formation) see [Developing handwriting](#).

Engaging boys in writing

While it is important that boys have the necessary skills to write, it is also very important that they see writing as a purposeful and pleasurable activity. To see an example of how a small group of boys in a nursery setting were encouraged to write, read the case study '[Supporting boys' achievements: Developing action research with practitioners in a nursery class in Gateshead](#)'.

Notice how:

- The consultant and staff began by observing the boys and recognising their preferred activities, relationships and interests.
- Adults supported the boys' play and talk.
- Opportunities for writing were meaningful for the boys because they were embedded in their self-initiated activities.

There are many helpful suggestions for engaging boys in writing in the [Boys' Writing Flyers](#) (DfES, 2005)

In particular, as the case study shows, it is important to:

- Observe children carefully and use that information to plan for next steps in their learning.

- Talk to children about what they are doing and listen carefully to their views about what interests them, what they do well and where they need support.

Role-play and opportunities for writing

Role-play may often be an area where boys can be encouraged to see writing as purposeful, as this case study from the *Boys' Writing Flyers* shows:

The practitioner had observed that a group of boys were reluctant to write. She set up a garage service bay outside with MOT certificates and pads to note what repairs were needed. The practitioner then took a series of digital photographs that the children then used for sequencing a bike being serviced. She encouraged the children to talk about what they had done and together they wrote a bike service manual. She reminded the children of what they had done during subsequent days and encouraged them to describe and record the work they did on other bikes.

To see boys engaged in writing in role-play areas, watch the following sequences:

- [Early Reading Curriculum CPD Resource DVD](#) (00053-2008DVD-EN) – Opportunities for independent reading through role play.
- [Letters and Sounds DVD, phase 4, Writing simple captions.](#)

Commentary

The boy writing in the vet's surgery appointments book has a good understanding of the purpose of his writing: '*This somebody's name. This is my dog's name.*'

The boys involved in the police station role-play make notices to pin up:

missing Lost cat

ca yoo help

In the pirate role-play, one boy has written a message in a bottle.

Catherine: Right, we've found the island. You'd better go and see if you can... Is that...
Oh, what's in there?

Boy: A message.

Catherine: It's a message? What does it say?

Boy: I don't know.

Catherine: 'We are going to steal your treasure.'

The practitioner helps him to give meaning to his message.

Visual texts

Boys are likely to be interested in visual texts, such as maps, charts, comic strips, advertisements, logs and so on, and the visual aspects of writing, as the following example suggests.

Emile sequenced a set of photographs taken on a trip to a fire station. He discussed it with the practitioner and she helped him write on a sticky note a short phrase or word for each photograph. They then worked together to add his phrases to the images on the computer. These screens were then added to others made by the children as a scrolling PowerPoint for parents/carers to view in the setting.

Boys' Writing Flyers (DfES 2005)

Feedback on writing

Think carefully about the feedback boys receive on their writing, both oral and written. Adult comments can have a powerful impact on motivation and confidence. Children need to see writing as something they do because they enjoy it and it has a purpose, not in order to win praise and approval.

- If feedback is mainly concerned with content this reinforces for boys that writing is a means of communication and if the reader can read and understand it then it has been successful.
- Avoid evaluative feedback; even positive judgements can make the writer feel anxious about continuing to earn praise, and also suggest to them that they are writing to please adults and not for themselves and for a real purpose.
- If the feedback is vague in its response to content ('a lovely story') but specific about other aspects ('try to remember your finger spaces and full stops') boys are likely to feel that this is what really matters to adults.

Try to make comments such as:

- 'I thought the monkey in your story was really clever.'
- 'I wish I had gone to the funfair – it sounded exciting.'
- 'Your book told me lots of interesting things about lions.'
- 'Now you've put the sign up everyone will know what to do.'

Try not to emphasise punctuation. Until children are writing several sentences, and have a sense of what a sentence is, marking sentence boundaries with capital letters and full stops does not mean very much. Boys will respond better to encouragement to be adventurous with punctuation, using marks they have seen and talked about when reading such as exclamation marks and question marks.

For guidance on teaching punctuation, read [Learning about sentences](#)

Involving parents

It is important that practitioners share information with parents and talk about how they can support their children's learning at home. It is particularly valuable for fathers to become involved in reading and writing with boys.

When Rofu's dad came to collect him he showed him his record of the bike he had serviced. When they went home his dad helped him write a list of all the things they needed to mend together and they stuck it on the kitchen door to remind them.

Boys' Writing Flyers (DfES 2005)

Writing development in the Reception year

Boys can make rapid progress in the Reception year with:

- high quality phonics teaching
- short regular sessions of handwriting teaching
- regular shared writing sessions in which adults model for children how to bring together compositional aspects of writing (what to say and how to say it) with transcriptional aspects (phonics for spelling, letter formation, punctuation)
- motivation and interest in writing.

The writing samples which follow show boys' writing development in the Reception year, and can be related to the EYFSP assessment scale for writing.

Scale point	Writing
1	<i>Experiments with mark making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks.</i>
2	<i>Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning.</i>
3	<i>Represents some sounds correctly in writing.</i>
4	<i>Writes own name and other words from memory.</i>
5	<i>Holds a pencil and uses it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.</i>
6	<i>Attempts writing for a variety of purposes, using features of different forms.</i>
7	<i>Uses phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.</i>
8	<i>Begins to form captions and simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation.</i>
9	<i>Communicates meaning through phrases and simple sentences with some consistency in punctuating sentences.</i>

Lewis sample 1 (autumn term 1)

The National Strategies | Primary
Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



Lewis sample 1

Detail

Male: Lewis
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 5 years 0 months
Term: autumn 1
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose

Lewis chose to write about his mother.

Child's voice

'Mum, oh no! That's my Mum.'

Interpretation

Mum no.

Application of phonic knowledge and skills

In this independent activity Lewis is showing that he knows some words. At this stage he is not yet secure with the majority of phonemes within Phase 2.

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Mumno

Lewis said, 'Mum, oh no! That's my mum.' The letters 'm', 'n', 'u' and 'o' are recognisable – Lewis knew how to write 'mum' and 'no'.

Lewis sample 2 (autumn term 2)

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Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



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Lewis sample 2

Detail
Male: Lewis
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 5 years 3 months
Term: autumn 2
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose
Lewis recounts his chosen part of 'The Farm Concert' story.

Child's voice
'All the animals went quiet and the farmer went to sleep.'

Interpretation
The farmer went to sleep. He said 'I can sleep.'

Application of phonic knowledge and skills
This writing contains the CVC word 'can', and tricky words 'the' and 'to'.
Lewis is not tuning into all sounds within words yet, for example s-l-ee-p represented as s-i-p and w-e-n-t as w-e-t.

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the farm wet to sip

hiy sit I can sip

(The farmer went to sleep. He said I can sleep.)

Lewis uses 15 different letters. He hears most of the phonemes in words; he does not hear both adjacent consonants in 'went' and 'sleep', and he does not hear (or represent) the unstressed syllable in 'farmer'. He represents most phonemes in the words he has written with phonemically plausible graphemes, but the long /ee/ phoneme in both 'he' and 'sleep' is represented by 'i'. Lewis knows how to write 'the' and 'to', and may also have remembered 'farm'. While some letters ('e', 't', 'w', 's', 'c') appear to be correctly formed, others clearly are not ('y', 'm', 'n'). Lewis would need to be observed while writing to make a secure judgement. He is retelling part of a story he knows. His writing shows some features of stories; it is in the past tense, and uses direct speech.

Lewis sample 3 (summer term 1)

The National Strategies | Primary
Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



Lewis sample 3

Detail

Male: Lewis
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 5 years 9 months
Term: summer 1
Evidence of Phase Three application

Purpose

Lewis recounts his chosen part of the story.

Child's voice

'The plane came to help him 'cos he'd broken his leg.'

Interpretation

Skip was a plane. He was a rescue plane. A boy had broken his leg. 'Come on Skip' said Jess. They helped the boy. Skip landed on the sea and helped the boy.

Application of phonic knowledge and skills

At this stage, Lewis knows the majority of Phase Three phonemes most of the time. The tricky words 'was', 'the' and 'he' are evident as are the CVC words 'had', 'his' and 'leg'. VC word 'on' is also shown. Beyond this Lewis also demonstrates an awareness of alternative graphemes for a phoneme (e.g. split vowel diagraph 'a-e' in 'plane'), which is beyond his 'secure' phase. Also note how he has spelt the word 'boy' as 'b-ory'; while application is incorrect it does, however, incorporate 'or' phoneme taught that week.

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Skip hlpt the bory

Skip was a plane he was a resc plane. A bory has brocn his leg. cum on Skip sed Jes. They hlpt the bory. Skip landt on the sea and hlpt the bory.

Lewis knows how to write the high frequency words 'was', 'they' and 'the'. He has made significant progress with handwriting. His letters are generally correctly formed and appropriately sized and positioned, and he is using entry strokes and even joining some letters. Lewis is retelling part of a story he knows. His writing shows features of stories; he uses tenses appropriately, and he uses direct speech.

Lewis can now represent words with adjacent consonants ('Skip', 'plane', 'brocn', 'land', 'hlpt'). However, he does not always represent vowel phonemes ('resc', 'hlpt'). He does make phonemically plausible attempts at more complex words such as 'brocn' and 'bory', where he uses the grapheme 'or' which he has just learned. The writing consists of six sentences. To demarcate them, Lewis uses capital letters at the beginning of four (though in two cases the first word was also a name) and full stops at the end of five. (Five of the sentences are simple sentences but one is compound, using the connective 'and'.)

By the summer term Lewis is writing with confidence. His handwriting is good and he punctuates sentences with some accuracy. He produces plausible phonemic representations of most words, and has learned to spell some high frequency words. We are not aware of whether he is able to attempt writing for a variety of purposes, or whether he is able to use the features of forms other than stories.

Matty sample 1 (autumn term 1)

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Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



Matty sample 1

Detail

Male: Matty
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 4 years 8 months
Term: autumn 1
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose

Matty recounts his favourite animal from a story called 'The Farm Concert'.

Child's voice

'The frog went quiet.'

Interpretation

Writing requires mediation to be understood

Application of phonic knowledge and skills

Matty has used the tricky word 'the' in his writing. He is also aware of some Phase Two phonemes, for example the word 'farmer' is represented as 'fmre'.

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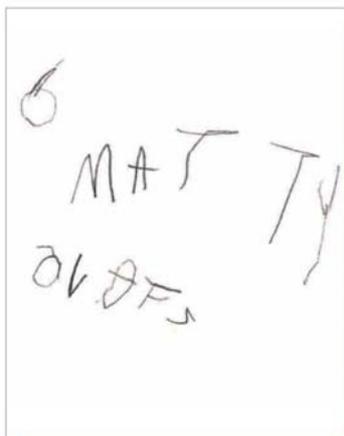
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Thefmre (the farmer)

Matty ascribes meaning to his writing, and knows how to write 'the'. He has represented significant phonemes in 'farmer'.

Matty sample 2 (spring term 1)

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Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



Matty sample 2

Detail

Male: Matty
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 4 years 10 months
Term: spring 1
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose

Matty estimated the number of elephants in a jar in the challenge area.

Child's voice

'I thought there were seven but then I thought there were six.'

Interpretation

Matty 6 elephants.

Application of phonic knowledge and skills

Matty shows in his independent writing that he has applied his knowledge of sounds in words into another area of learning. Matty has represented some of the sounds he can hear in the word 'elephants', which is shown as 'elafs'.

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(Context: Matty was estimating how many elephants were in a jar.)

6 MATTY elafs (6 Matty elephants)

Matty can write his name and represents some of the phonemes in 'elephants'.

Matty sample 3 (spring term 2)

The National Strategies | Primary
Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing

Matty sample 3

Detail
Male: Matty
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 5 years 1 month
Term: spring 2
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose
From a dramatised story told by the practitioner, this child recounted the known story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'.

Child's voice
'She etted the bears' porridge'.

Interpretation
Once upon a time there was three bears and Goldilocks. She went into the house. She had been naughty.

Application of phonic knowledge and skills
The tricky words 'was', 'to' and 'the' are shown, as is the VC word 'in'. Phonemically plausible attempts made at several other words, for example 'tim' for 'time', 'Godlox' for 'Goldilocks', 'haws' for 'house' and 'noo ee' for 'naughty'.



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Wons A pon tim the wAs 3 thEBs And godLox shE ed into the Haws [She] ad bin nooEE

(Once upon a time there was 3 bears and Goldilocks. She went into the house. She had been naughty.)

Matty's story is a simple retelling of part of a well-known traditional tale, which uses some story language ('Once upon a time...'). Matty represents all the phonemes in most of the words he writes. It is not possible to say whether some of his attempts are accurate representations of the way he says the words (Goldilocks, naughty) or whether he has omitted some of the phonemes. Although most of Matty's letters are recognisable, some are not correctly formed (e.g. 'n', 'p', 'h', 'e') and he uses capital letters within words. A few symbols are not recognisable as letters at all. At this stage, he still has difficulties with pencil control. Matty has written three simple sentences, but there is no evidence of any punctuation.

Matty sample 4 (spring term 2)

The National Strategies | Primary
Application of phonic skills and knowledge in writing



Matty sample 4

Detail

Male: Matty
Year group: Reception Year
Age: 5 years 1 month
Term: spring 2
Evidence of Phase Two application

Purpose

Child independently chose to use an art/wordprocessing program in the computer area.

Child's voice

'I watched it at the cinema.'

Interpretation

I am Matty. I watched Star Wars the Clone Wars.

Application of phonic knowledge and skills

Writing shows tricky word 'the'. Matty has represented all the sounds in each word. These are mainly phonemically plausible, for example 'woched' for 'watched' and 'wors' for 'wars'.

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I am Matty

I woched starerwors the clomwors

(I am Matty. I watched Star Wars the Clone Wars.)

Matty has written a simple recount here.

Kai's whale tale (summer term of Reception)



I saw a whalse
tale when I wen to na
boat and it splashd
me so the boat wen
to side t side. I lookd
out to the see. I saw
a whels tail. The
whals tail said halo.
to me so I said halo to
him

I saw a whale tale when I went on a boat and it splashd me so the boat went to side t side. I lookd out to the see. I saw a whels tail. The whals tail said halo. to me so I said halo to him.

Kai's narrative shows features such as consistent use of the past tense, and the use of indirect speech. He is able to use his phonic knowledge to write simple regular words such as 'see' and 'him', and he makes plausible phonemic attempts at words such as 'hello'. Indeed, he is already beginning to use a visual approach rather than a purely phonic one; he represents the final phoneme of 'looked' and 'splashed' with a 'd' rather than a 't', and he knows how to spell 'when', 'side' and 'said'. His story consists of four sentences, mainly correctly punctuated. Note that while two of his sentences are simple sentences, in the other two he uses the connectives 'when', 'and' and 'so'.

Mikey's farm story (summer term of Reception)

Wons upon a tim Erasmus
went to a farm. Hea sctx
a pig if he has seen enee
eggs.



Yes I have sed the pig.

Jump on my bac and

I will taic you.

It was veee - muddy

and they found his famalee

They lvd hapilee ever after

Wons upon a tim Erasmus went to a farm. Hea sctx [asked] a pig if he has seen enee eggs. Yes I have said the pig. Jump on my bac and I will taic you. It was very muddee and they found his famalee. They livd hapilee ever after.

Mikey's story is a well constructed story with a problem and resolution. Erasmus is an imaginary character who has been the focus of much story telling and writing in the class over several weeks. He had hatched from a mysterious egg which had appeared in the classroom one day. Mikey's story uses the language of traditional story openings and endings, and also direct speech. Mikey uses his phonic knowledge to produce plausible attempts at words such as 'once', 'take' and 'he', and also more complex words such as 'family' and 'happily' He has learned to spell words such as 'said', 'you', 'was' and 'they'. His story consists of six sentences, almost all of which are correctly demarcated.