

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

“I write! I write!”: The Spontaneous Development of Writing in the Young Child

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About 3000 years ago a group of people living in Sumer discovered that the words in their language were made up of a limited number of sounds. If we have a symbol for these sounds, they thought, we can make our words visible. And so, they invented the first alphabet. After thousands of years of using pictures and symbols to represent objects and ideas, humans had made the discovery that, “it is not ideas that have to be represented by pictures, but the language in its component sounds.” (Montessori, *The Formation of Man*). Today, most of the languages of the world use alphabetic symbols.

For children, learning to write is part of their work of adaptation to their time and place. If we understand the process of writing, we can help the development of written expression in the child evolve organically from their spoken language.

Thoughts emerge from experiences, feelings and reflections which we express in words. Each word is analysed into its sounds and these sounds associated with their symbols. Scribing is the last step in a process that begins in the mind. The work of the hand in writing involves two main aspects – holding the writing instrument and forming the letters on a writing surface to make the thought visible.

So, we begin by offering the child a variety of experiences with the natural and human world. These experiences stimulate the need for communication. We attach vocabulary to each of these experiences through the three-period lesson and help children to communicate their experiences using spoken language techniques such as the question game. The development of spoken language expression lays the foundations for written expression.

We offer activities that help the child to make key discoveries for writing. My language is made of sounds – sound games stimulate this discovery and help the child to analyse a word into its component sounds. There are symbols for each sound: the sandpaper letters offer the gift of the alphabet, and the child creates a multi-sensory association of sound and symbol. I can make my thoughts visible – with the moveable alphabet the child sets out the symbols for the sounds in a word that expresses what they have in mind.

The use of a writing instrument requires development of the muscles of the hand and arm, and letter formation requires flexibility of wrists and muscular memory for the shapes of letters.

The control over the writing instrument requires a dynamic tripod grasp where the thumb, index and middle fingers grasp the pencil. The ring and little fingers offer stability as they rest on the paper. This division of labor is called the motoric separation of the hand, with the thumb, index and middle finger being the precision side and the ring and little fingers being the power side. Sufficient grip strength is needed to hold a pencil with necessary firmness. Web separation allows the pencil to rest on the web between thumb and fingers and space for the digits to manoeuvre the pencil. Daily life activities such as holding a spoon, buttoning, manipulating a zipper or picking up small objects support the development of motoric separation and web separation. The use of materials such as the knobbed cylinders support the development of grip strength. Writing also requires vertical and horizontal control as the pencil moves over and across the writing surface, as well as a lightness of touch that allows the pencil to press lightly on the paper. The use of the touch boards and touch tablets as well the tracing of the geometric insets and the sandpaper letters, are critical in the development of these skills. The stability of the upper body is also essential for writing – the exercises of practical life and sensorial exercises, support the strengthening of the core, shoulder girdle, elbow, and wrist as well as the development of the flexibility of wrists.

The muscular memory for the letter shapes develops through the tracing of the sandpaper letters and is critical for letter formation.

“And now, when everything is ready, the hand can write effectively. If the mind has already gone through the exercises on word-building, the writing can ‘explode’ all of a sudden and immediately complete words, even whole sentences are written as if by magic, as by a new gift of nature.” (Montessori, *The Formation of Man*). By applying the Montessori principles of isolation of difficulties and indirect preparation and by offering activities that appeal to the young child’s sensitive periods, we can support the natural evolution of spoken language to written expression.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Uma Ramani is Director of Training (3–6 Blended) at the Montessori Institute of North Texas (MINT), Dallas, Texas. She is passionate about the rights of children and the application of Montessori education in diverse settings. She spearheaded the design of AMI blended training and piloted the first AMI 3–6 blended course at MINT in 2019. She coordinated the design of the Montessori Core Principles course and has directed this course at MINT since 2019. She is deeply involved in AMI EsF and designed the EsF Community Rooted Education (EsF CoRE) approach for grassroots level Early Childhood Education providers. She works closely with communities around the world to implement Community Rooted Education (CoRE).

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