

# Interactive Writing With Young Children

**Y**oung children rarely have a voice in their own education. Beginning with the legal stipulation that children attend school, the education process controls and determines what children can say, do, and write. Furthermore, the mechanism for most teaching is the exercise—something that is constructed, set, and marked by teachers. For many of the world's children, education is a seemingly endless set of such exercises. Consequently, the life of a student is all about doing exercises to learn skills, rather than exercising those skills to do things in the world.

It should be possible for children's voices to be heard, right from the start, not only through what they say, but also through what they write. The problem is finding a way to allow children the space and time to really use their own words, and then getting teachers to listen to them. This article explores one type of writing—interactive writing—that has proved spectacularly successful in achieving this goal.

## What Exactly Is Interactive Writing?

While interactive writing is easier to demonstrate than explain, the following quote is a good starting point: "Interactive writing is writing involving the participation of two or more friendly correspondents who exchange meaningful and purposeful texts across an extended period of time" (Hall, 1994, p. 1). When it works, mutuality is achieved. The dialogue takes on an additional dimension, because the combined contributions are so much greater than any individual's text.

Interactive writing has many forms. At its most fundamental, it is a variant of letter writing. As a medium, letter writing is amazingly flexible. It is not a genre—rather, it is a vehicle for carrying genres; in letters, one can argue, reflect, inform, instruct, relate, report, etc. The flexibility of interactive writing is a real bonus for children, because it allows them to explore so many different ways of using written language. It is difficult to think of any other single writing experience for children within which so many different types of text can occur.

## How Does It Work?

While interactive writing is flexible, some principles are very important, especially for teachers:

- *Adult correspondents must hide or diminish their power and experience; specifically, they must respond as equal partners in the exchanges, and accord equality to their child correspondents.* Teachers and children are bound

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together in an inverse power relationship. Teachers have a lot of it; children have little. For mutuality to occur in interactive writing, teachers have to suppress their power and treat children as partners. Children who feel that interactive writing is just another teacher-generated exercise will not write with passion and conviction. It is the possibility of a special, personal relationship with the teacher (or other adult) that appeals to children.

- *Adults must respond to the meanings of their correspondents and never correct errors.* In some societies (given parental expectations, for example), it might seem risky not to correct errors. To correct errors, however, is to reclaim power and deny it to children. Children whose interactive writing is marked and corrected will either avoid writing in the future or will play by rules that negate its whole point. Friends simply do not correct each other's letters; that is the way to lose friends. Mark and correct all other writing in the classroom, but leave this activity to function wholly as genuine communication. On the other hand, do use it as a way of monitoring children's writing; learn all you can from it. You might be surprised at what you find.

- *Adults must be honest, authentic, and respect the trust invested in them by the children.* Personal relationships are based upon trust. Interactive writing exchanges are private until the participants agree to reveal them to other people. Never consciously humiliate, ridicule, or treat with contempt anything children write.

Adults should, as far as possible, avoid using questions to begin an interactive writing exercise, especially during the early stages. While it may be difficult for some teachers to break this habit, questions set agendas—yet another reflection of teacher status and power. Research shows that teachers who ask questions tend to simply get replies; teachers who avoid questions, on the other hand, tend to get asked questions.

As interactive writing proceeds over time, writers develop a special kind of relationship and a deeper understanding of each other. Sustaining such a relationship across time presents both problems and joys, as these examples from Robinson, Crawford, and Hall (1990) reveal:

Dear Nigel,  
Will you get a move on with your letter. I have been waiting ages and ages for you to rite me a letter. I wish you would hurry up. If you don't rite soon I will never rite to you again. Wot is holding you up.

Dear Nigel,  
Thank you for all the letters you have written to me.

I will keep on ritting to you and I hope you will keep on ritting to me and I like ritting letters to you because you can draw pictures and find out things.

### Starting With the Message Sheet

One dreary winter morning, one of my colleagues showed me a message that he had found on a piece of paper written by his 5-year-old daughter (see Figure 1). By using writing, she had made her voice heard.

If teachers want to introduce their children to interactive writing, a very effective way to start, somewhat paradoxically, is with an activity that is hardly interactive at all—the daily message sheet. Messages have some important characteristics that are helpful for young children. They are almost always short, can be added in any order, and are usually related to people's everyday lives. In many classrooms where young children are making their first forays into authorship, the message sheet offers children the chance to make a point while not having to write very much. As we have seen, children do see a point in writing messages.

The message sheet needs to be accessible, potentially permanent, and close to appropriate resources. While it can take various forms, the one I have most often seen, and used, is a large piece of paper pinned or clipped to a board or easel that is at an appropriate height for the children. Before the children arrive in the class, the teacher writes a brief message at the top of the sheet.

The composition of this short piece is quite critical. It must be a comment and not a question. A simple statement forces the children to come up with contributions, rather than answers. One teacher's first attempt at a message sheet to her 5-year-olds began with this query: "I had a lovely bike ride to school. How did you get to school?" The children replied with such comments as, "I get a bus." "In my daddy's car." "I came in a car." The responses were very brief, added little to the teacher's comment, and did not move the

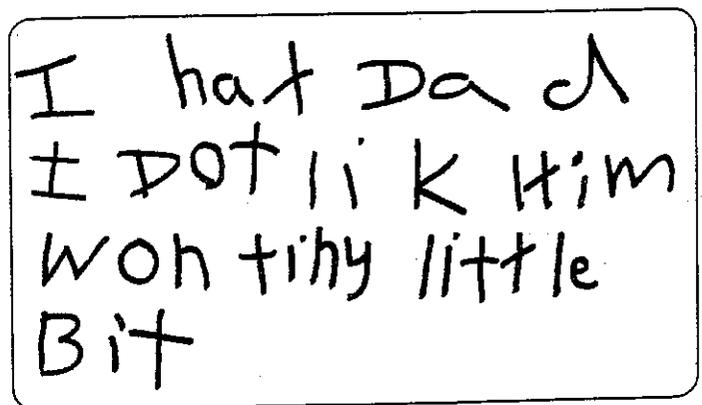


Figure 1

topic forward. To try and generate some more interesting responses, the teacher later dropped the question at the top and simply made this comment: "I did not want to get out of bed this morning. It was too warm in bed." Now the responses became much more interesting, vigorous, and varied:

"I didnt want to get out of bed today ither  
but I made myself get up"  
"I like biying in bed"  
"My mum woken me up I dont like it. it was  
to warm"  
"at first I hird the postman and I thut I will  
get the lettre but it was to cosey"

Before long, all the teacher needed to write was the date. The children would start the daily sheet themselves! Thus, the children held complete responsibility for initiating topics. At this point, the sheet *did* become interactive, as students replied to what other children had written.

It may take a little while for the children to understand what they have to do, as it may be quite a novel experience for them. It helps if 5 to 10 minutes each day can be found for the messages to be read and discussed with the whole class. By providing different colored pens and encouraging decoration, these message sheets can become very interesting visual objects. It is always a good idea to date the sheets, as then they can be collected, in sequence, in a larger book that represents a class history.

### Written Conversation

When children are just beginning their writing careers, or for some reason have limited experience of writing, being able to write for a genuine communicative purpose can make all the difference to their perception of writing as a meaningful activity. At the same time, inexperience means that writing can be a burden as they orchestrate handwriting, spelling, and composition. For such children, written conversation is an ideal activity.

The problem with starting written conversation with young children is that on one level, the object is well known to them; on another, it is not known at all. Even very young children are no strangers to conversation. At age 4 or 5 they have much to learn; nevertheless, they are skilled oral communicators, and so written conversa-

tion makes very effective use of this existing power. Recording oral language on a page is something new, however, and children may need help understanding what is involved. There are two very effective ways of doing this.

I wanted to stay in bed today.

I W E L O S P O Y  
B A R O = W V M Y

E Y Z A (I wanted to stay in bed with my Teddy.)  
Good idea.

F K Y M Z W O A  
(Thank you Miss Wood.)

I don't think Mr. Kirk would like it though.

W Y W O Y (Why wouldn't Mr Kirk like it?)  
M Z O K A R R O  
There wouldn't be anyone at school.

I - W L G E O - U Q (I would get up then.) C 9 A  
Yes I think we have to kally.

B - E W Y W C G E L A W K B A T E h e  
(But we could get up and go on the trip.)

Which one?  
E h e  
P R Z A (The forest where we collected the leaves.)  
M = W K L L E h e L Z A  
Yes, I remember.

Figure 2

The first method is to use the message sheets, as detailed in the previous section. Once the message sheet is established, it is very easy to suggest to the children that they keep books in which they can practice writing personal messages to the teacher.

The second strategy is to draw upon children's books that feature some kind of letter writing. There are quite a lot of these, and one always can be found that would be effective in introducing interactive writing to any age or ability level (see Hall & Robinson, 1994). After reading such books, it is easy to suggest that the teacher write to the children.

Written conversation is probably easiest with a group of five or six children, each of whom has a special writing book. The teacher simply writes a short sentence at the top of a page in each book, and the children then write back. Because the response times will vary, the whole process becomes a revolving one, with the teacher easily moving from child to child. With very young children (and I have done this activity with 4-year-olds, who simply drew their responses), the writing may not be readable. If that is the case, simply ask the children to tell you what they have written. If they are not able to read what you have written, simply read it to them. While it may seem strange to use writing when everything is read aloud, it really does work and the children soon get the hang of what is needed.

What actually happens in written conversation? The easiest way to find out is to look at some examples. The first was a written conversation between a teacher and a child who had only been in school for a few weeks (see Figure 2).

Clearly, this child can reproduce some letter shapes, but has only just begun to represent some of the sounds with the appropriate letters. This does not stop the child from saying what he wants to say, however. Limited knowledge of sound/symbol relationships is not an obstacle to authorship. Each time the child wrote, he engaged in a process of synthesizing sounds to represent a word. The activity engaged the child, and gave him a clear reason to write; very soon he was writing 40 words. The result is an energetic and dynamic piece of written dialogue.

In the process of such dialogue, children can learn many things about writing for an audience. One very important lesson can be that writers need to be explicit and not assume that readers can follow everything they say (see Figure 3). A dialogue about Snowy's kittens went on for several weeks, covering their birth and the opening of their eyes. It even included an attempt to persuade the teacher to take home one of the kittens!

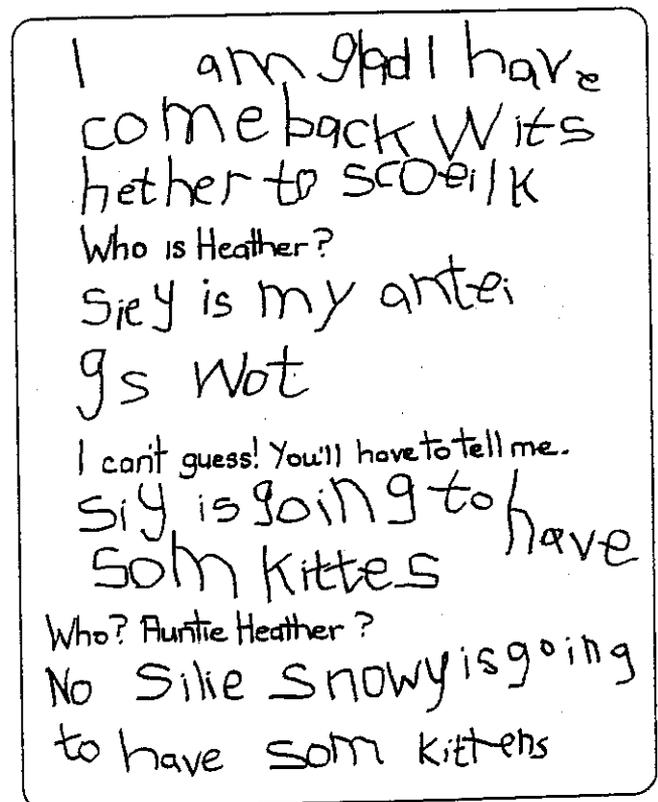
The above examples clearly show that children engaging in interactive writing not only write, they also read. Indeed, all interactive writing is a fusion of

reading and writing experiences. Sometimes, children read much more than they write. For example, children frequently share what is written to them, sometimes with a whole range of class members. There is great motivation to read what someone writes specifically to you. Even when a teacher has to read aloud what has been written, the child will be gaining experience.

While the above examples show teachers conversing with children, the correspondent does not have to be the teacher; a classroom assistant or a parent could carry out the role quite easily. The important thing for adults to remember is to avoid unduly influencing what the children write. The whole point of interactive writing is to allow the children to experience and learn from being a real communicator with written language.

### Writing to a Make-Believe Character

One of the most entertaining forms of interactive writing is when the teacher (or caregiver) writes to a class in the guise of a make-believe character. While this writing can be carried out on a one-to-one basis, it works extremely well when each child writes to the character and the character writes back one letter to the entire class. Thus, it is not only fun, but also an economical use of adult writer time.



I am glad I have  
come back with  
Heather to school  
Who is Heather?  
She is my antei  
gs wot  
I can't guess! You'll have to tell me.  
She is going to  
have  
some kittens  
Who? Auntie Heather?  
No Silie Snowy is going  
to have some kittens

Figure 3

This activity usually is carried out with younger children; it certainly helps if they believe, even partially, in the reality of the character. However, even those who do not believe can still enjoy the experience. In one class of 6-year-olds who were writing to a tiger, one child, Njadia, commented openly to the teacher, "It isn't real. There isn't a tiger; it was you. And, how could it eat the food, because it was all plastic?" Barry's response was immediate: "We all know that, Njadia. We know it's not for real, but don't spoil it for the rest of us." The next day,

Njadia wrote to Tig the tiger just as enthusiastically as anyone else. Those who do not believe in the character still can play a role in creating believability. For example, another child in this class arrived at school one morning stating that Tig Tiger had visited his house last night and left a note thanking him for two cookies. He showed the letter to the class and it was very "authentic"—it even had a paw print on it, like the other letters from Tig.

Rather than have letters arrive that are unconnected to anything else, it helps to create a context, as well as motivation, by linking to a prior experience. For example, it is very easy to link an opening letter to a book that a class has been reading. One class of 5-year-olds read a story about a lighthouse keeper's cat. In this story, the cat goes missing for some time. The class read and re-read this book several times. Therefore, they understood it fully, knew the characters, and became involved in caring about them. Then, a letter arrived in the classroom. It was a bit scruffy, and had some paw prints all over it. It told the children how the cat, the author of the letter, had been on another journey and had happened to wander through their classroom the previous night. The letter invited the children to write back. Of course, the children were amazed, examined the letter carefully, discussed how it had arrived, and were very keen to write back with many questions:

ideas  
 Be hostile.  
 Jump out at them.  
 Smack them.  
 Be cross.  
 wave your arms.  
 Chase them.  
 Howl

Figure 4

Were it really you on Animal Hospital?  
 Tell me if it really were.  
 Did you stay in a cage?  
 Did you have some fish pie?  
 What did you eat?  
 Did you eat some fish pie, or did you eat cake?

Such exchanges do not have to derive from a book. I have seen many wonderful exchanges that originated in association with a sociodramatic play area. One class set aside an area as a castle. One morning, the children found a letter from a dragon who had flown into their room during the night. They believed it was from a dragon because the edges of the letter were burnt, and the writing was done in charcoal. Even the principal joined in with this exchange, writing to the children about the health and safety implications of having a fire-blowing dragon in a classroom. Teachers can be as creative as they like in finding a character to whom the children can respond meaningfully.

Teacher/adult writers need to remember the following:

- If the children are to believe in a character, then the letter has to be an expression of that character, rather than sounding like a teacher pretending to be a character. It is too easy for a character to ask the children a whole set of typical

"teacher questions." In one example, the children were writing to a stuffed toy hippopotamus who lived in a cupboard in the classroom. The letters from the "hippopotamus" were full of questions: "What did you do at the weekend?" "Where did you go?" "Did you like it there?" "What is your favourite subject at school?" and so on. Once the teacher understood the importance of staying in character, the letters changed. They arrived damp and smudged. The writing was very rough, for as the hippo commented, "It is very difficult to write when you don't have hands." That little bit of effort on the part of the teacher made all the difference in terms of how the children responded.

• *When a character is writing one letter to all the children, it is very important to acknowledge each child.* While it does not have to happen in every response, over a series of exchanges each child should know that the character has read his or her letters. The simplest way to do this is to have simple sentences that pick up on the points the children raise. Scuffybags the Scarecrow's response to a class of 6-year-olds illustrates:

Muckyoggles and I had a lovely holiday. You were right, Anna, we couldn't swim, but we put on our armbands and went paddling. We didn't forget to put on our trunks first! You were so sensible, Vicky, we did need to take a lot of drinks. I'll let you into a secret, Sarah, I took my teddy, too, because I didn't want to be scared at night.

On the whole, children are so intrigued by writing to a make-believe character that they respond eagerly to the task. To make the activity last longer and turn it into something more challenging, some simple prob-

lems can be generated. As an example, the children who were writing to Scuffybags were asked to help him solve problems. The first letter commented: "I am having problems keeping all the birds away. Cheeky animals seem to know I am new. How can I keep everyone from the fruit and vegetables?" The children responded eagerly. Some made explicit lists (see Figure 4), while others wrote in a more relaxed style (see Figure 5).

Even very young children love this type of writing, as can be seen in the work of Price (1989), whose nursery school children wrote eagerly for a long time to "The Bad Tempered Ladybird." It is, of course, possible for someone other than the teacher to be writing to the children; even older children can act as character correspondents (Pearson, 1989).

### Conclusion

The major problem with covering interactive writing in a relatively short article is that the most wonderful aspect gets lost. As exchanges progress across time, strong relationships develop between the writers, especially with the older children, as their letters get longer and more complex. This growth is what interactive writing is all about. The whole point is that two human beings of whatever age, in whatever relationship, can write to each other as ordinary people. Adults, including teachers, who do not relate well to children will not be successful with interactive writing. Those who are prepared to relax, set aside correctness, and be open in what they write about, will have a good time.

Interactive writing involves more than having a good time, however. Children and teachers can derive a rich range of benefits from it:

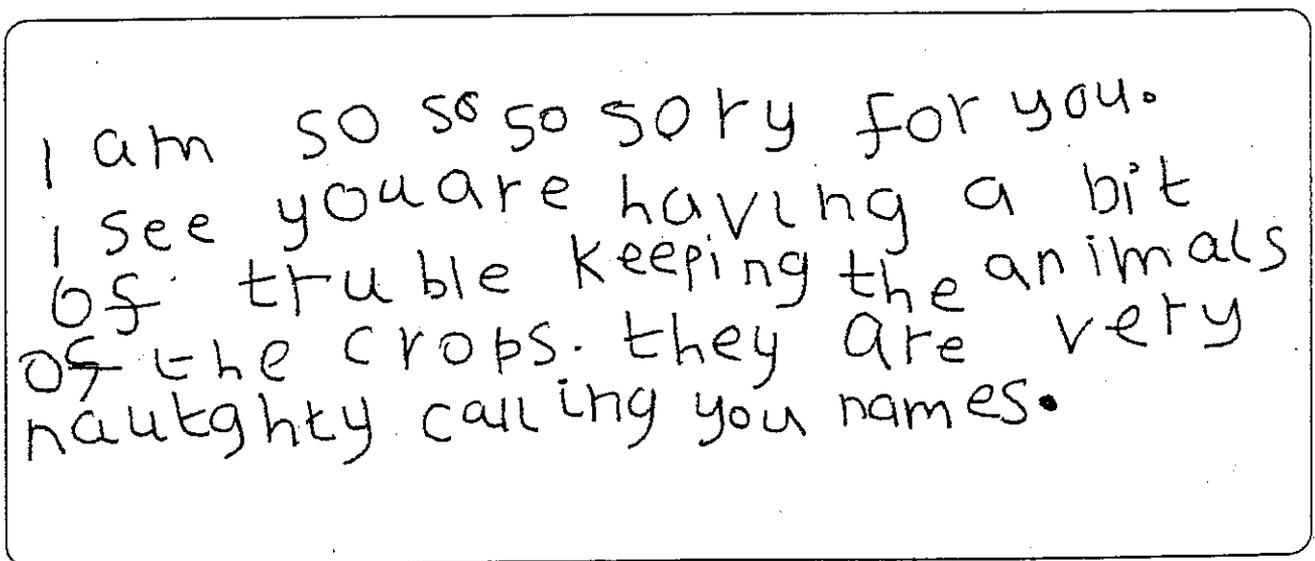


Figure 5

- *It encourages children to write.* It is not a child writing a letter or entry that makes interactive writing so meaningful, it is the respondent's reply. At that moment, it becomes real; someone is truly interested in the child as a person. That is what hooks the child.

- *It provides opportunities to practice the skills of authorship.* A writing relationship across time involves many different demands at many different times. There are no set responses or patterns. Children have to think all the time about what to write; every response demands a new text with new authorial problems.

- *It provides an introduction to understanding the needs of a reader and developing a text that meets those needs.* A lot of writing in school is directed to writing for more and more distanced audiences. A better way to learn how to address the needs of a reader is to write to a real audience.

- *It provides rich, varied, and meaningful reading experiences.* The reading element of interactive writing never should be forgotten; it can be a considerable part of a child's reading experience.

- *It provides wonderful opportunities for learning about the world through reading what people write about their lives.* When adult correspondents write about their lives, they are informing children about how the world works. It is a living and dynamic lesson about life in a modern world.

- *It provides an almost magical opportunity to develop quality personal relations inside a classroom.* When people write to each other, they get to know each other much better. Teachers learn more about children and children learn more about teachers as real people. This "knowing" then influences all manifestations of personal relationships.

In the world of education, the curriculum is almost totally dominated by controlled instruction. Perhaps there should be room somewhere inside the experience of schooling for children to use literacy for a more basic human need: that of expressing their thoughts, and communicating them to other people.

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