

# Make a mark

Ensuring enjoyment, challenge and meaning in children's mark-making.

By **Penny Tassoni**

**M**ark-making is one activity that can help children develop a love of both drawing, but also writing. The link between mark-making and learning to write is an important one as it supports children's literacy. But being able to make your mark is empowering for children, as well as an outlet for emotions and creativity. In the past, a few lonely felt-tip pens with some scraps of paper would have passed off for a mark-making area. Today, we need to be far more sensitive to changing times and the need for children to become inspired writers.

### SATISFYING AND SUCCESSFUL

Whatever the age of children, it is always worth thinking about how the mark-making opportunity will be both satisfying and successful for children. If children do not enjoy the sensation of marking, be it with water, paint or felt-tips, they will quickly move onto something else.

The way children engage with mark-making changes with a child's age and stage. Planning for different ages and stages is one way to ensure that mark-making remains challenging, enjoyable and relevant as children progress within an early years setting.

### AGES AND STAGES Babies and toddlers

Children under two years are likely to explore what their hands can do with different materials. Babies often start early by smearing food or tapping spilt liquid with their hands. They may enjoy smearing

gloop or paint with their whole hand onto another surface or simply splashing coloured water.

In this phase, tools such as markers and brushes are not the priority unless they are easy to make a mark with. Instead, focus on the tactile feel of the materials that you put out.

Big is also best as hand-eye co-ordination is still developing. Look out for large sheets of paper with easy-to-grip markers and brushes for paints. You could also combine large trays with a little rice, gloop or foam, so that children can make their marks using their hands or tools including toy cars.

### Two to three years old

In this year, children often enjoy experimenting with the feel of mark-making, especially when they can make their mark without too much effort or control. They may enjoy making rotational or vertical marks over and over again. They are likely to enjoy using tools such as brushes, stampers and sponges. Markers that are easy to use can also work well. Young two-year-olds are



**There are many different resources for mark-making**

particularly focused on exploration and also sensation. Large-scale opportunities tend to work best as two-year-olds are often using their whole arms to make movements.

Depending on how often adults draw their attention to print in books and the environment, some children in this age group may be interested in watching adults write and may even attempt to write in their own way.

**Younger children like to experiment with mark-making that requires little effort or control**

### Three to four years old

This is the year when mark-making takes off for many children. If children have seen plenty of print and have shared stories with adults, the link between words, letters and print is often made. Their early writing may take the form of a series of repeated shapes with some recognisable letters.

Although children will continue to enjoy exploring making marks in sensory materials such as sand, for many children, mark-making is often linked to their imaginative play. They may pretend to write lists, instructions or letters, and this is made easier if letters and words are next to the writing opportunity.

During this year, some children become interested in writing some or all of the letters in their names. While children will still prefer to







use materials that allow them to mark easily such as whiteboards or markers, real props are often a significant motivator for this age. Items such as calendars, diaries, clipboards and stickers give mark-making a sense of real purpose and importance. Adult shared activities such as writing and posting letters or signing cards are often enjoyed, provided that children do not feel pressurised to produce an end product.

### Four to five years old

This can be a tricky year. While some children carry on enjoying mark-making and spend time attempting to write, other children may lose confidence or interest. They may avoid mark-making opportunities unless they are particularly appealing and adults show a relaxed attitude.

During this year, many children will want to write their name and parents may also raise concerns if they are not seeing their child doing so. The focus on writing names can lead some children to write only their names and to cut down on mark-making and experimenting with letter shapes.

Writing for a purpose, especially if it is integrated with play, is often the reason why children choose to

mark-make. This age group tend to really enjoy using mark-making props that link to the adult world, including pens rather than pencils and clipboards combined with tick sheets for 'jobs'. Writing can also become part of the routine with some children enjoying signing in and also adding their words onto displays or photographs.

### A RANGE OF OPTIONS

A single area for mark-making is unlikely to be sufficient for child-initiated opportunities. Different materials will also appeal to different children, and so a range of options in and out of doors is important. It is also worth planning a range of mark-making opportunities that link to role play or different play areas, so that older

**Children often enjoy 'writing for a purpose', such as within role play**



children can enjoy some variety – for example, a menu, pad and pen for orders at the dough table. Here are some examples of the many options that can appeal to children.

### For early mark-making

- Gloop for marking with fingers, washing-up brushes, sticks or objects that leave a temporary mark.
- Dough with pastry cutters.
- Coloured dried rice or pasta in a roasting tin with make-up brushes.
- Couscous or sawdust on dark paper or trays with a range of brushes.
- Sponges or clothes with soapy water on windows.
- Spray bottles with paint or coloured water.
- A painting wall – a large strip of paper on a door or corridor and paint or large markers.
- Aquadoodle mat and pen.
- Magnetic writing pads.
- Tray with a thin layer of paint on it. The children make marks, then paper is put on top and peeled back to create a print.
- Chalk to use on the ground, but also on blackboards.
- Large whiteboards with markers and a whiteboard eraser.

### Role-play options for children keen to try writing

For children who are keen to try writing, you could provide:

- an office, complete with envelopes, a post box, pens and a whiteboard
- a reception area, complete with telephone, diary, appointment cards and leaflets
- a library, with library cards, tick charts to check which books have been returned and signing out register
- a card factory, with orders coming in to create or write in different cards
- a construction office, with plans of buildings, job sheets and order books.

### SHARED LEARNING

Mark-making and early writing is one of those areas where children will need some input from adults. In the early stages with babies and toddlers, adults may set up opportunities and then role model using fingers, hands or sponges. Later, children need to see adults making marks, writing with

# around the nursery, part 2

pens and joining in mark-making opportunities.

The role-modelling of writing encourages children to take an interest in it and is often a significant factor as to whether or not children engage in mark-making activities. Ideally, where adults are modelling writing, it is useful if children can have access to the same or similar materials – for example, forms, registers, Post-it notes and calendars. It is important for adults to take opportunities to role model writing outdoors otherwise it can be seen as an indoor opportunity.

As part of planning adult-shared activities such as cooking, spider hunting or planting bulbs, it is important to consider how adults might role model, but also encourage children to try out their own way of recording. This might include working with children to create simple ‘what happened’ books or displays where adults act as scribes for children.

## DEVELOPING HAND-WRITING MOVEMENTS

While parents and some settings focus on children's names, it is important to check that children have the foundation movements in place. These include anti-clockwise rotational movements, vertical strokes starting from the top, and also bouncing movements, over- and under-arm. Without these, children are likely to develop their own style of making a letter shape.

As writing their names is important to children, they tend to repeat the same limited number of movements, making it hard later on for Reception teachers to extend children's writing skills. The foundation movements can be role-modelled, but playing games works better – for example, where children see how many downward strokes they can make by the time you count to 20, or whether they can make an anticlockwise circle that is larger than the one you have drawn.

By providing input on these in a fun way, children are more likely to use them in their own free mark-making. Handwriting sheets, on the other hand, can stifle children's interest and creativity, so it could be argued that they are not really mark-making opportunities at all.

## MARK-MAKING FOR ALL

Some early years practitioners find that not all children choose to access



mark-making opportunities. This can be due to children feeling under pressure by adults or simply because the materials have not been presented in interesting ways.

In addition, from around three years of age, it is worth noticing whether some boys have decided that writing is not a ‘male’ activity. If so, it can be worth thinking about increasing opportunities for boys to see male role models. This could include putting up photographs of sports people autographing items or even children's own parents with a pen in their hands.

Many settings find that if there are some mark-making opportunities that have a masculine feel to them, some boys who have self-excluded start to become interested. This might include creating a pirates' den, an astronomers' night shelter or a dinosaur hunters' hideout.

Simple props such as briefcases complete with pens and pads can also be helpful for those children whose parents seem to attend ‘important meetings’!

## EVALUATING

There are three key terms within the new ‘Quality of education’ judgement in Ofsted's inspection framework. These are Intention, Implementation and Impact. Here are some questions that might help you to reflect on mark-making opportunities in your setting.

### Intention

- What are you hoping that children will gain from the mark-making opportunities that are available to them?
- Why have you organised the mark-making opportunities in this way?
- Do you have a plan to ensure that

### Whiteboards allow for easy mark-making



### ABOUT THIS SERIES

The ‘Quality of education’ judgement in the new Ofsted framework aims to encourage settings to reduce their focus on outcomes data and prioritise the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of children's learning.

This series ‘walks’ practitioners through the main areas of continuous provision to help them reflect on:

- what they want children to learn (Intention)
- how to support that learning (Implementation)
- the impact of that support (Impact), and how, come inspection day, they will articulate to inspectors what they are doing and why.

mark-making opportunities stay challenging and enjoyable?

- How do you ensure that the mark-making opportunities are of interest to all the children?
- What are your strategies to ensure that all children over the course of their time in your setting engage in mark-making?
- What strategies are used to help children who are developmentally ready and interested to form some letter shapes correctly?

## Implementation

- Are the materials, space and tools that have been set up for mark-making allowing children to access and enjoy mark-making? For example, do the pens work? Is the sand damp and deep enough to leave a strong mark? Are there examples of print?
- Are adults interacting with children in a way that will encourage confidence and enjoyment in mark-making?
- What strategies are adults using to draw children's attention to the skills of mark-making? For example, are they role-modelling using different tools or talking about the shapes that children have drawn?
- Are the length and quality of interactions sufficient to allow children time to think, respond and comment?
- How do adults promote mark-making opportunities for children who are less confident or who do not usually engage with it?
- How do adults ensure that children who are ready and interested to form letters are making accurate movements?

## Impact

- Do children appear to enjoy and find challenge within their mark-making?
- Are children making marks and using tools that are appropriate to their stage of development?
- Are children making progress? For example, are older children starting to form letter shapes? ■

*With thanks to practitioners and children at N London Fields, [www.nfamilyclub.com/n-london-fields](http://www.nfamilyclub.com/n-london-fields)*

*Part 3, on role play, will be published on 11 November*