

HOME-BASED EARLY WRITING ACTIVITIES: THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS IN A LATVIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract. *Students entering school with underdeveloped writing skills often face academic challenges. Addressing and improving these skills at the preschool level is a critical instructional goal. Early engagement in writing activities with parents and adults at home, beginning at a young age, is crucial in shaping children's writing identities and methods. While student motivation is vital in developing writing abilities, the role of parents in encouraging and nurturing these skills is equally important. This study aims to explore how parental involvement aids in developing early children's writing skills. Data were collected through surveys conducted with parents of 3-6-year-old preschoolers, focusing on their writing support and parenting practices. This research seeks to understand the role of parents in facilitating early writing activities at home. The study's primary objective is to examine parents' perspectives on enhancing their children's early writing skills within a home environment. Active participation by parents in their children's writing activities, including practices like reading together, encouraging daily writing, and providing constructive feedback, has shown positive outcomes. However, some parents reported challenges such as limited time or resources, affecting their ability to support their child's writing development effectively.*

Keywords: *early writing, parenting, home-based writing activities, parents' perspectives on early writing, family literacy practices.*

Introduction

Early childhood literacy development is pivotal to a child's overall cognitive and educational progression. Early writing, a fundamental literacy component, demands careful attention and cultivation from an early age. This study delves into parents' perspectives concerning home-based early writing activities for children aged 3 to 6 years. Understanding parents' practices and beliefs in fostering early writing skills at home is crucial for educators, as the home environment plays a significant role in initiating early writing, with parental involvement being a key determinant.

This research aims to analyze survey data collected from parents, exploring the frequency and types of activities employed at home to enhance their child's early writing skills. This study contributes to a broader understanding of early

literacy initiatives within family settings by scrutinizing the diversity of approaches and parental perspectives. The findings have the potential to inform educational practices, guide parental support programs, and inspire collaborative efforts to optimize the home environment for fostering early writing skills in young children.

Literature review

At approximately the age of 3, many children typically reach a stage where they can engage in scribbling activities and generate letter-like forms that resemble writing. Draw, scribble, and write, children gain an understanding of the role print plays in their lives and the way writing is used to communicate ideas (Kidd et al., 2014; Puranik et al., 2011). Despite this progress, it is important to note that, at this point, they may not have fully mastered the actual formation of letters. This phase reflects their developing understanding of the connection between making marks on paper and the concept of writing, laying the foundation for more refined writing skills in the future (Puranik, Lonigan, 2011; Graham, Hebert, 2010). Studies conducted on preschool-aged children have also demonstrated correlations between early literacy skills with later reading and writing acquisitions in the formalized literacy period in different language systems (Zhang et al., 2023; Silinskas et al., 2020).

Between the ages of 3 and 4 years old, children typically start recognizing and using some letters in their writing endeavors; for example, they may be able to write their name. One of the initial words that children commonly acquire the ability to write is their own first name (Both-de Vries, Bus, 2008). Alongside these written expressions, children might draw pictures and make initial attempts to label them by incorporating letters or marks resembling letters (Zhang, Quinn, 2020).

By the age of 5, children are expected to have acquired several fundamental writing skills. These include proper pencil grip, letter formation, letter-sound correspondence, basic spelling skills, and writing familiar words (Puranik, Lonigan, 2014). Overall, by age 5 – 6, children's writing abilities are expected to reflect a significant advancement from their earlier scribbling and letter-like forms as they gradually acquire the foundational skills necessary for effective written communication.

Children undergo a sequence of developmental stages as they embark on the journey of learning to write. These stages span from initial scribbles to mastering the ability to write their name, representing anticipated milestones in their writing development. Parents play an essential role in nurturing the early writing skills of young learners (Puranik et al., 2018). Central to this role is the need for parents to actively participate in and appreciate the joy and satisfaction derived from writing. Parents need to motivate children to express their thoughts and capture

their ideas in written form, fostering a positive and enjoyable attitude toward communication through writing (Lonigan, Shanahan, 2009). Parents support their children's writing development by participating in writing activities together (Puranik, Lonigan, 2011; Syomwene, 2022; Aram et al., 2017).

The home literacy environment encompasses literacy practices between parents and children, including shared book reading, alphabet instruction, spelling guidance for names and words, and supporting phonological awareness through rhyming games (Incognito, Pinto, 2021). These practices within the home setting hold significant meaning for the early literacy development of children (Bindman et al., 2014). Parents' general knowledge and comprehension of literacy development play a crucial role in nurturing their children's writing skills (Aram, Yashar, 2023).

From a very early age, children begin exploring writing features (Arrow, Mclachlan, 2011). Writing aids children in grasping the connection between print and sound. Moreover, each instance a child engages in drawing, painting, coloring, scribbling, or printing contributes to developing their fine motor skills. In the early years, educators and families need to offer young children experiences that develop not only letter-sound correspondence and handwriting skills, but also an understanding that the printed book is readable and that writing serves as a means of expressing their ideas.

Given that young children arrive at preschool with diverse backgrounds and experiences, educators must acknowledge the varying levels of writing knowledge and skills they bring to preschool. Children's experiences can significantly differ. Educators create equitable learning opportunities by valuing each family's unique experience and each child's interests and abilities.

When educators utilize home writing practices, children can link new learning with their existing knowledge. For instance, by understanding the various types of writing that take place at home (such as grocery lists, notes to family members, emails, and text messages), educators can integrate opportunities for children to engage in similar types of writing during instructional lessons and play experiences (Incognito et al., 2021; Septiani, Syaodih, 2021).

Promoting appropriate measures, such as raising parents' awareness of the importance of literacy in the home environment, is very important to ensure that children have ample opportunities to participate in language and literacy activities together with their parents, which in turn would have a positive impact on the child's future academic achievements (Bigozzi et al., 2023). Parental involvement significantly impacts a child's academic achievement (McDowell, Jack, Compton, 2018).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine parental engagement in developing their children's early writing skills in a Latvian setting. The aim was to investigate how parents encourage and enhance their young children's writing skills in the home environment, specifically focusing on children aged 3 to 6. The data was collected by a structured questionnaire sent electronically using QuestionPro, an acknowledged online survey platform.

The survey intended to get comprehensive insights into parents' strategies, endeavors, and challenges in assisting their children's initial writing efforts. The sample consisted of 148 randomly selected parents with children between 3 and 6 years old. The survey questionnaire comprised 14 items that employed the Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "every day." These items were used to evaluate the frequency of different writing activities carried out at home. In addition, six open-ended questions were included to collect qualitative data regarding parents' thoughts and experiences. A mixed-methods approach was essential to thoroughly comprehend parental involvement in the early phases of writing development. Creswell (2014) emphasises the value of mixed-methods research: "Mixed-methods research provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research. For instance, quantitative data provide a broad picture that can be enhanced and filled in with the depth and detail provided by qualitative data" (p. 215). This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of parental involvement, combining numerical data with personal narratives to provide a more comprehensive representation.

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to discover trends and frequencies in parents' replies to Likert-scale questions. The study provided valuable insights concerning the frequency of different writing activities performed at home and the level of parental participation. Content analysis was applied to identify and evaluate parents' comments in order to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions. This approach enabled the recognition of shared patterns and challenges encountered by parents in assisting their children's writing progress, thereby enhancing the numerical results with individual viewpoints and personal encounters.

Research results

The survey targeted parents having children aged 3 to 6 years, and the results reveal a well-distributed age composition among the children, with 22.93% at four years old, 24.84% at 3 and 6 years old each, and 27.39% at five years old. This balanced age representation enhances the study's comprehensiveness in capturing insights into parenting practices for writing development across the early childhood spectrum.

Conducting additional statistical analyses, such as examining correlations between age and parental involvement in writing activities, holds the potential to unveil nuanced insights into the intricate relationship between age and practices fostering writing development. The diverse age distribution enhances the study's robustness, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of writing-related practices throughout different stages of early childhood.

The survey asked how they learned to write themselves; the answers often overlapped with how they currently help their children. Parents mentioned diverse sources that helped them learn to write, including schools, preschools, and family members such as mothers, fathers, older siblings, and grandparents. The importance of an educational institution can be found in many answers. Schools and preschools are frequently cited as sources of learning, emphasizing the importance of formal education in developing writing skills. Many mentioned that they learned to write in school, starting from preschool or the first grade. Teachers played a significant role in the learning process. Parental involvement is prominent, with mentions of mothers and fathers actively participating in the learning process. Grandparents, especially grandmothers, also play a role. Sibling influence is notable, with older siblings serving as examples or actively contributing to the learning process. Some individuals stated that they learned to write independently, showcasing a self-driven approach to acquiring this skill. Expressions like "myself" (pati) and "curiosity" (zinātkāre) indicate a personal motivation to learn. Reading books and exposure to written material were identified as contributing factors to writing proficiency. Acknowledging the diversity of experiences in learning to write is crucial, as some individuals vividly recall specific details. In contrast, others do not remember the exact methods employed, mentioning such answers as "do not remember" or "do not know." It shows that a blend of formal education, familial support, and personal motivation collectively played a crucial role in fostering the development of writing skills.

Parents were asked if their children see them writing daily. The majority of respondents indicate that the child sees someone writing several times a week (41.89%), followed by every day (20.95%). Once a week and once a month also have notable percentages at 17.57% and 15.54%, respectively. A small percentage (4.05%) mentioned that the child never sees someone writing.

Analyzing the data on how often a child asks how to write a word or sentence: The majority of respondents (30.41%) mentioned that their child asks several times a week, indicating a high frequency of curiosity and learning. A significant portion (25.68%) reported that their child inquires once a week, a notable number (17.57%) claimed their child never asks, and some respondents (13.51%) reported a monthly frequency, indicating a moderate level of interest in learning how to write. The smallest portion (12.84%) mentioned that their child asks every day.

Although a significant number of respondents mentioned that their children never ask them to write words or sentences. This could be influenced by various factors, such as the child's age, interests, or educational environment.

It is interesting to note the perceived differences in the contributions of various family members. Mothers seem to have the most significant impact on a child's writing development, followed by fathers and sisters, while grandfathers are perceived as having the least involvement. Based on the responses, mothers are perceived as the primary contributors to a child's writing development (52.54%), followed by fathers (12.71%) and sisters (11.02%). In comparison, grandfathers are mentioned as contributing the least among those involved (2.12%).

To improve the child's writing skills, parents describe the activities they do at home in the survey. Parents employ various methods, including using dedicated writing notebooks, drawing on chalkboards or paper, and engaging in activities that promote letter recognition and handwriting skills.

Many parents use specialized writing practice sheets, activities, and workbooks designed to enhance writing skills. This shows a proactive approach to providing structured learning experiences. There is a significant emphasis on joint activities where parents actively participate with their children. This involvement ranges from reading and drawing together to teaching letter recognition and writing techniques. Some parents incorporate creative elements, such as drawing, coloring, and playful activities, to make the learning process enjoyable for children. Parents adapt to their child's readiness and interests, tailoring activities to suit their needs. Positive reinforcement is present in responses where parents celebrate their child's achievements, providing encouragement and praise for efforts in writing. Parents use various materials, including writing tools, books, and specialized writing sheets.

The data also reflects an awareness of age-appropriate practices, with some parents introducing writing skills early on while others wait for signs of interest and readiness in their children. Additionally, sibling influence emerges as a factor, with older siblings contributing to the writing development of younger ones.

In summary, the data showcases a wide variety of approaches that parents use to foster writing skills in their children, demonstrating a blend of structured learning, creativity, and positive reinforcement within the family context.

Regarding mobile applications, the data indicates that a significant majority of parents (80.41%) never use mobile applications for developing their 3-6-year-old children's writing skills, with only a small proportion (1.35%) using such apps daily. This may suggest that parents prefer alternative methods or are not inclined to use technology for this specific aspect of their child's development. Possible reasons could include concerns about screen time, a preference for traditional teaching methods, or limited awareness of suitable applications for this age group.

In addition to parents' self-reported writing promotion activities at home, the survey included specific tasks (Fig.1). where parents indicated their engagement frequency, ranging from once a month to every day or never.

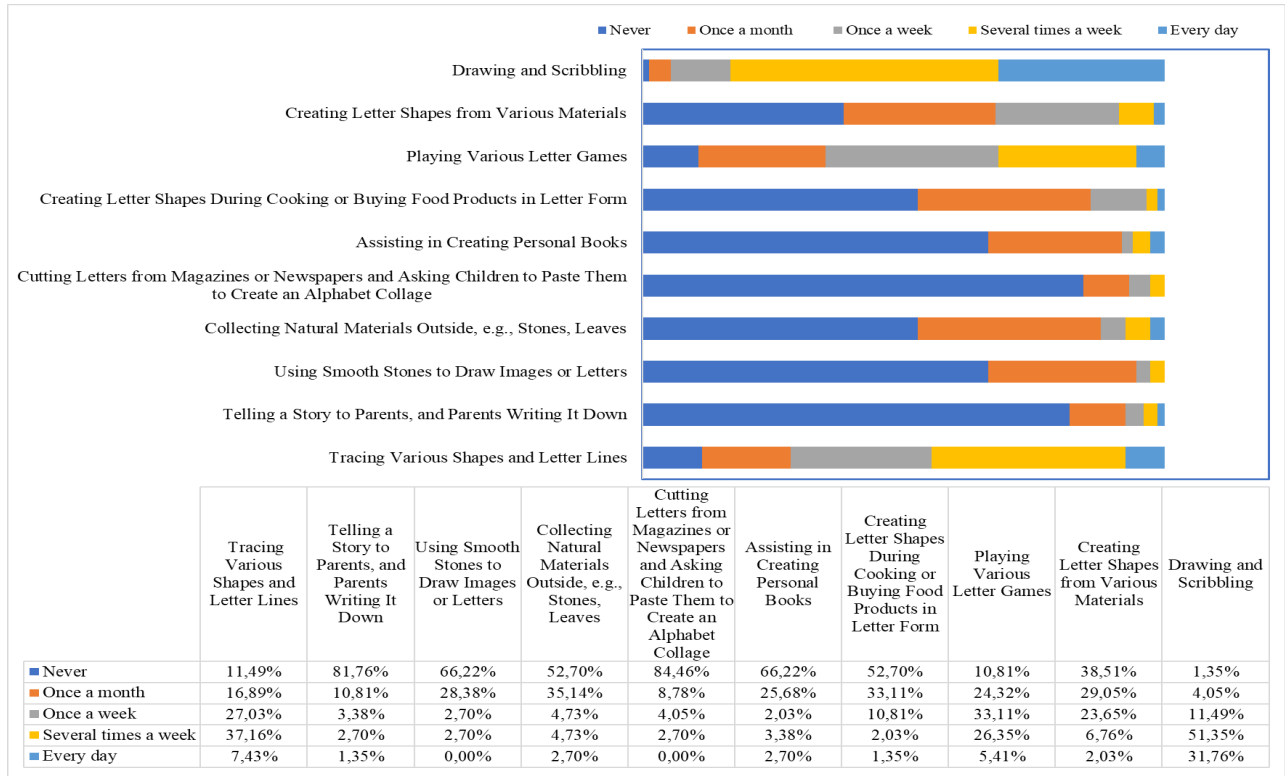


Figure 1 Parental Engagement in Writing Activities (made by authors)

Specific tasks: drawing and scribbling, creating letter shapes from various materials, playing various letter games, creating letter shapes during cooking or buying food products in letter form, assisting in creating personal books, cutting letters from magazines or newspapers and asking children to paste them to create an alphabet collage, collecting natural materials outside (e.g., stones, leaves), using smooth stones to draw images or letters, telling a story to parents, and parents writing it down, tracing various shapes and letter lines.

Over half of the parents encourage their children to draw and scribble every day (31.76%), with a significant number also doing so several times a week (51.35%). The majority of parents (38.51%) reported never encouraging their children to create letter shapes from various materials. A substantial portion (29.05%) does so once a month. A considerable number of parents (33.11%) engage their children in playing various letter games once a week. Only a small percentage (5.41%) do this every day. More than half of the parents (52.70%) reported never involving their children in creating letter shapes during cooking. The majority (33.11%) do so once a month. The significant majority of parents

(66.22%) reported never helping their children create their own books, while a smaller percentage (25.68%) does so once a month.

Another essential aspect is encouraging a supportive and diverse learning environment that caters to individual preferences can help foster a well-rounded approach to literacy development. The survey included an open-ended question about how parents set up an environment for their children that promotes early writing skills. The majority of parents (83%) actively strive to create a conducive environment for their children's writing development. This involves setting up an appropriate workspace with a suitable desk and chair, ensuring the availability of various writing accessories, and some even investing in ergonomic furniture, a blackboard in the nursery room, and adequate lighting. On the other hand, a minority (17%) has not yet made efforts to establish a dedicated writing environment. On the other hand, a minority (17%) has not made dedicated efforts to establish a conducive writing environment, instead exemplified by children using their older siblings' desks or opting for unconventional surfaces like letters on the refrigerator to play with them or fogged-up window to write during dinner preparation.

Parental involvement is widely recognized as a significant factor in a child's academic success, and gaining insights into their viewpoints regarding collaboration with teachers provides valuable information about the broader support of early literacy.

In the survey, most respondents (72%) expressed a desire to receive suggestions from teachers to enhance their child's writing skills at home. Their preferences ranged from seeking guidance on issues like teaching a child to hold a writing instrument to specific exercises tailored for home practice. Another group (21%) felt confident in addressing writing-related challenges independently or indicated that their child faced no writing difficulties. Additionally, 8% of parents reported already receiving teacher recommendations and exercises.

Conclusions

The study provides valuable insights into parents' diverse practices to promote early writing skills in children aged 3 to 6 years.

Parents shared insights into their writing learning experiences, emphasizing the role of educational institutions, familial support, and personal motivation. The varied sources mentioned highlight the multifaceted nature of acquiring writing skills. Regarding children's exposure to writing, the data indicates that a majority observe someone writing several times a week, with notable frequency variations based on the child's age, interests, or educational environment. Children's inquiries about writing also vary; some show frequent curiosity, while others exhibit less interest. Perceptions of family members' contributions to a child's writing development reveal mothers as the primary contributors (52.54%),

followed by fathers (12.71%) and sisters (11.02%), while grandfathers are perceived as having the least involvement (2.12%).

Parents employ diverse methods to enhance their child's writing skills, emphasizing joint activities, structured learning experiences, and age-appropriate practices. Regarding mobile applications, a significant majority of parents (80.41%) never use such apps for their 3-6-year-old children's writing skills, suggesting a preference for alternative methods. In creating a conducive writing environment, 83% of parents actively strive to set up an appropriate workspace, including suitable furniture and writing accessories, showcasing a proactive approach.

Regarding teacher suggestions, 72% of parents expressed a desire to receive recommendations, highlighting the potential benefits of collaborative efforts between parents and teachers. Some parents (21%) felt confident in addressing writing-related challenges independently, and 8% had already received teacher recommendations.

Parental involvement in developing their children's writing skills has multiple benefits, encompassing cognitive processes related to writing, such as idea generation, vocabulary enrichment, and code-related skills like letter and sound knowledge. Correct holding of the writing tool is also essential, emphasizing the need to develop the child's gross and fine motor skills.

For several reasons, understanding how parents support children's participation in writing activities at home is critical. First, parental involvement plays an important role in writing activities, an essential aspect of literacy development, and parental support can improve a child's proficiency in this skill. Secondly, home environments significantly influence a child's learning experiences. Identifying how parents support writing activities provides insights into the resources, encouragement, and guidance children receive outside formal educational settings. Third, parental involvement in writing activities can contribute to developing positive attitudes toward learning and education. It promotes a supportive and engaging learning environment, influencing a child's motivation and enthusiasm for learning tasks. In summary, understanding parental support for children's participation in writing activities at home is critical to understanding children's holistic development, the influence of the home environment on learning, and the broader cognitive and attitudinal aspects of writing skills.

Discovering specific steps parents take to improve their child's writing skills allows educators to understand effective practices beyond preschool, allowing them to provide more targeted and comprehensive recommendations and strategies. Educators can also use this information to create collaborative initiatives, encouraging parents to participate in their child's writing development actively. This knowledge can help develop adaptive and inclusive teaching methods that recognize and build on children's diverse home experiences.

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