

Even in our digital age, early parental writing support is key to children's literacy

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Children of the Information Age are inundated with written words streaming across smartphone, tablet, and laptop screens. A new Tel Aviv University study says that preschoolers should be encouraged to write at a young age—even before they make their first step into a classroom.

A new study published in the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* explains why early [writing](#), preceding any formal education, plays an instrumental role in improving a child's literacy level, vocabulary, and fine motor skills. The research, conducted by Prof. Dorit Aram of TAU's Jaime and Joan Constantiner School of Education in collaboration with Prof. Samantha W. Bindman of the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign and other colleagues in the U.S., assessed the merits of early parental mediation of children's literacy and language in English, and recommended useful techniques to that end.

"Parents in the U.S. are obsessed with teaching their kids the ABCs," said Prof. Aram. "Probably because English is an 'opaque' language. Words do not sound the way they are spelled, unlike 'transparent' Spanish or Italian. Parents are using letters as their main resource of teaching early literacy, but what they should be doing is 'scaffolding' their children's writing, helping their children relate sounds to letters on the page even though the letters are not transparent."

"Grapho-phonemic mediation"

Prof. Aram has spent the last 15 years studying adult support of young children's writing. A major component of this support is what she calls "grapho-phonemic mediation." Through this method, a caregiver is actively involved in helping a child break down a word into segments to connect sounds to corresponding letters. For example, parents using a high level of grapho-phonemic mediation will assist their children by asking them to "sound out" a word as they put it to paper. This contradicts the traditional model of telling children precisely which letters to print on a page, spelling it out for them as they go.

"Early writing is an important but understudied skill set," said Prof. Aram. "Adults tend to view writing as associated with school, as 'torture.' My experience in the field indicates that it's quite the opposite - children are very interested in written language. Writing, unlike reading, is a real activity. Children watch their parents writing and typing, and they want to imitate them. It is my goal to assist adults in helping their children enter the world of writing by showing them all the lovely things they can communicate through writing, whether it's 'mommy, I love you' or even just 'I want chocolate.'"

Building a scaffold

In the study, 135 preschool children (72 girls and 63 boys) and their parents (primarily mothers) in an ethnically-diverse, middle-income U.S. community were observed writing a semi-structured invitation for a birthday party. The researchers analyzed the degree of [parental support](#) and assessed the children's phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, word decoding, vocabulary, and fine motor skills. Overall grapho-phonemic support was most positively linked to children's decoding and [fine motor skills](#).

Prof. Aram and her counterparts found that "scaffolding," or parental support, was most useful in developing early literacy skills. "The thing is to encourage children to write, but to remember that in writing, there is a right and a wrong," said Prof. Aram. "We have found that scaffolding is a particularly beneficial activity, because the parent guides the child. And, if that parent guides the child and also demands precision in a sensitive and thoughtful way - i.e. 'what did you mean to write here? Let me help you' - this definitely develops the child's literary skill set."

Prof. Aram is currently researching interventions to promote the early writing of [children](#) from low socio-economic backgrounds, parental writing mediation for a digital world, and different schools of thought on parental writing mediation.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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