

December 7, 2007

4AM-3

Dear Parents,

Literacy emerges for young children at different rates and at different times. That's why in play-based classrooms, the focus is on offering children a range of experiences and the encouragement to experiment with what they have observed, what they know, and what they want to try. Young children are drawn into the realm of literacy when they have the opportunity to encounter print and its uses in meaningful ways.

Learning how to write their names is something that all children in our classroom are working on accomplishing at some level. Each child approaches this task differently. Some are still building the fine-motor control necessary to form letters, or some are still developing the idea that each letter takes on its own distinctive form. Others string together random letters to form their name, or some know their name has particular letters, but they write them all over the page. Many children are still experimenting with grips or handedness, trying to figure out what feels most comfortable to them. It is not unusual to see children changing hands, or writing letters backwards, or in unusual formations at this age.

What is most important is that children feel encouraged to try to figure it out for themselves. We honor whatever attempts a child might make, and even acknowledge their frustrations, explaining that writing is something that even we had to practice a lot in order to get good at it. How we might support a child in accomplishing what they set out to do depends upon a lot of factors and there are many different variations in how we go about assisting a child, though we are always trying to think of what method will best enable a child to gain confidence and do it on their own as much as possible. For some, this might mean helping them find an example of the word they are trying to write from someplace else in the room—like the cubby tags, or the name book. Sometimes we will write a word out for a child to copy. Other times, we may simply spell the word letter by letter for them or, if a child is starting to identify sound-letter correspondences, then we can help them sound out a word. Some children are able to form letters on their own, others need to see an example, and still others request help in remembering the mechanics of how a particular letter is formed. Often, other children collaborate and help each other write words or specific letters.

In our classroom, we don't aim to teach the children particular things about literacy, rather we infuse the environment with print and stand poised to expand upon children's interests. We seek to offer kids varied and meaningful opportunities to notice and utilize things in print. A selection of writing utensils are intentionally kept near the playhouse and block areas and these regularly get incorporated into

dramatic play scenarios, either spontaneously by the children or at an adult's prompting. Many children in this group have been very eager to find the clipboards and other writing materials we have available in the classroom and simply practice "writing" on them (at the end of the morning we usually find pages and pages filled with scribbles littering the block and play house areas). We try to be on alert for these spontaneous opportunities to help children develop and practice their literacy skills and want to encourage them in discovering the next thing.

Many literacy opportunities emerge out of our daily structure and routine, as well as from the necessities of group life. You have probably often heard us reminding and encouraging children to put their names on their own artwork, or have seen one of our many and ongoing sign-up lists. Besides calling children's attention to the social necessity of print--it is hard to know whose picture this is unless it has a name on it, or when there are so many children who want to have turns that we need a way to keep track and remember--helping children write their name on a painting or on a list can be an opportunity to offer some individual guidance or coaching. This week we introduced a new way for picking turns when we play the game Wolf, Oh Wolf! in the gym. We wrote each child's name on an individual index card and after showing everyone that there is a card for everybody, we shuffled the deck and then picked whose turn it is to be the wolf. Everyone is highly motivated to get their turn and so this simple activity becomes a great vehicle for kids to increase their awareness of print. Kids who might not yet be identifying their own name are starting to figure out what the first letter is and will look for that. Kids who already know and can identify their own name have the chance to see how many other letters and combinations there are and there are always spontaneous discussions that emerge about what letters kids have in their names, or how two names start with the same letter but are really different.

Bringing literacy to a wide range of interests means that we try to incorporate not just reading and writing, but all sorts of fine-motor activities all over the classroom. From making crowns, to using hole punchers, scissors and stencils, to building with Mobilos or Legos, to using some of the other small manipulatives we have out on the shelves, these activities encourage children to utilize that pincher grasp that is so integral to writing. Even activities like twisting open the top of a glue bottle are opportunities for children to figure out how to make the muscles in their fingers execute the ideas they might have.

Lastly, a couple of other quick reminders: Now that the cold weather is upon us, please remember to label your child's belongings, including boots, hats and mittens. As you can imagine, we all get a little confused when we are getting ready at the end of the day and not everyone can identify their belongings. Also, it may be time to update your child's extra change of clothes in their cubby.

Best to all,

Kerstin & Anita