

Wiggles, Wiggles, and Wonder: How Early Motor Skills Shape Young Writers

By Daniela Jamois, Lead Practitioner at London South Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

Daniela has taught in children's centres, nursery schools, PVI's, reception and school-based nursery classes. She has led large teams and supported practice improvement for over 23 years.

Watch a nursery room for five minutes and you'll see in it: wiggles, wiggles, reaching, rolling, squeezing, tapping, turning and twisting. To many, it's just movement. To early years practitioners, it's **the beginning of writing**.

From Reception, the Writing Framework is clear: *handwriting and spelling should be taught explicitly and sequentially so that transcription becomes automatic and frees working memory for composition*. If that's the expectation **from** Reception, the question for nursery is: **what needs to happen before then?** The answer is: **a lot—and much of it is physical**.



Why this matters now

Policy.

The ambition for **75% of children to achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) by 2028** sharpens the focus on strong early foundations.

Communication, language and **physical development** are not “nice to haves”; they are the bedrock for later literacy success (Development Matters, DfE, 2025).

Evidence.

The EEF's *Preparing for Literacy* reminds us that early writing doesn't start with worksheets. It grows from **high-quality adult-child interactions**, explicit teaching of **foundational skills**, and rich, play-based experiences that build readiness (EEF, 2018). The SEED study highlights how **movement-rich environments** support self-regulation and attention—key ingredients for later writing fluency.

Practice.

The Writing Framework advises Reception and KS1 to **teach handwriting daily**, follow a **cumulative sequence**, and **avoid lengthy writing tasks** before foundations are secure. That guidance strengthens nursery's role: the better we build the base, the smoother the later journey.



When do strong foundations begin?

Development Matters states it plainly: **“Physical development underpins all other areas of learning.”** In nursery, we are uniquely placed to notice early gaps and respond

swiftly—whether in **communication and language, personal, social and emotional development**, or **gross and fine motor control**.

Children who've had fewer opportunities to crawl, climb, roll, push, or carry may need **intentional floor time** and movement-rich play to build:

- **Core strength** and **shoulder stability**
- **Bilateral coordination**
- **Wrist mobility** and **hand control**

As Development Matters also reminds us: “**Fine motor control and hand–eye coordination must be developed before children can manage handwriting.**” We are not rushing writing; we are **readying bodies** for it.

Make mark making meaningful

Children repeat what feels purposeful. When marks carry meaning, children are motivated to **repeat, refine and revisit**, building control and confidence.

Try:

- **Large-scale shared mark making** on floor-taped paper linked to a favourite story. Add props from the text and a range of tools to offer agency and challenge.
- **Vertical mark making** on easels, fences or walls using brushes and rollers of varied thickness. Vertical work strengthens shoulders and encourages the **wave-like and circular movements** behind letter formation.
- **Role-play writing**—lists, menus, tickets, memos, labels—so children see that writing is **useful, social and valued**. As the EEF notes, children benefit from **print in meaningful contexts**.



Physical development is the route, not the detour

Motor development shouldn't be bolted on; it should be **woven through** continuous provision.

Everyday opportunities:

- **Pegging, threading, twisting, opening**
- **Dough work**, scrunching and tearing for collage
- **Construction** that pushes, clicks, twists or slots
- **Outdoors**: collecting small natural items, tapping pegs, using simple tools

Activities that develop the **pincer grip** (thumb and forefinger) are especially valuable, laying the groundwork for controlled mark making and later handwriting. Or, put simply: **letter formation starts in the shoulders, arms and core—not at the pencil tip.**



Forest school willow weaving of a catalan tray

Charlene Gordon from Charles Dickens Nursery shares a favourite fine motor activity the two year old children in her nursery find especially motivating and intriguing.

"I set up a simple mug rack with elastic bands to encourage fine motor development. The children have to use the tips of their fingers to hook the elastic over the peg. Once the elastic is over they learn to adjust their hands to pull and hook across to the next peg. It is so easy to adjust this activity to the different stages of the child."



Support from the London South Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

We're helping settings navigate current expectations with:

- **Webinars and in-person training**
- **Practical demonstrations and showcases**
- **Peer networking** for leaders, practitioners and childminders

We also signpost to the **EEF Early Years Evidence Store**, which connects research to practice with clear, classroom-ready strategies.

Key takeaways

1. **Movement is the starting point for writing**, not an optional extra.
2. **Meaningful mark making** builds motivation, control and early symbol use.
3. **Gross motor strength** underpins fine motor control and pencil grip.

4. **Well-designed environments**—rich in print, play and purposeful movement—prepare children for confident writing.
5. **Evidence should guide decisions**, from provision design to daily routines.

Practical next steps

Reflective prompts

- Which children avoid movement-rich play—and what might we change to invite them in?
- Do we offer **large-scale, vertical and fine-motor** mark-making opportunities every day?
- Where could our environment better support **shoulder, arm and core** development?
- How are we modelling **purposeful writing** across role-play and real routines?
-

Try tomorrow

- Add a **vertical mark-making station** with varied tools.
- Plan one **story-linked floor canvas** each week.
- Refresh role-play with **authentic writing props** (tickets, dockets, clipboards).
- Introduce a **daily finger-to-thumb warm-up** song or routine.

Final word

If we want fluent writers later, we must invest in **strong bodies, confident talkers and joyful mark makers now**. Letter formation isn't a side quest—it's the route. And in nursery, that route runs straight through **movement, play and relationships**.

Further reading:

- [Preparing for Literacy | EEF](#)
- [Study of early education and development \(SEED\) - GOV.UK](#)
- [The writing framework - GOV.UK](#)
- [Development Matters - Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage](#)

