Nurturing Writing

Q: What can I do to help my child write better?

A: Writing is a product, or a manifestation of thoughts in your child’s head. In order to cultivate a stockpile of interesting thoughts, you need to feed the brain and nurture it. First and foremost, your child must read, read, and read. If your child is still very young, and not quite able to read on his/her own, then you must read WITH your child on a regular basis. It does not really have to be daily, just regularly. Say, every weekend for an hour, or every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for 20 minutes before bedtime. Whatever works within your schedule.

Get him /her a library card. Let him/her loose once a week in the library, picking out and leafing through any book s/he likes. Let him/her borrow 20 books a week, even if s/he only gets to read half of those. Do not forget educational periodicals. They are just as important in the development of modern thought.

Next, you must discuss with your child the topics s/he has been reading about. This will develop his/her metacognitive skills, or higher-level thinking. You can do so while reading together, or over dinner table, or while riding in the car, it does not really matter. Why did Jack steal the goose that lays golden eggs? Does this make him a thief? Why did his mother not scold him? Is it OK for a prince to marry a beauty who has been sleeping for 100 years? Is she not older than his great-grandmother?

The next bottleneck is often the inability to pour out brain content onto paper. A highly voluble child often becomes verbally constipated at the sight of a sheet of blank paper. The best training system is to encourage your child to keep a diary. A diary is not read by anyone but the writer. This takes away the fear of making grammatical or spelling mistakes and being scolded for them, or being made to correct them. These are most often the greatest obstacle to fluent transmission of thought onto paper. If you pick up a child’s diary, and compare the writing from month to month or from year to year, you will see an extraordinary growth in content, form, and organization. And, along the way, somehow, in grammar and spelling.

These are skills that take years to develop. However, it is very common to see a child’s writing style attempting to copy that of the most recent book s/he has read. They often start writing their own stories. I still remember my first son, at age eight or so, writing his first “masterpiece” novel, that started with a description of a crowd in a town, very much similar to the beginning of The Three Musketeers that we’d been reading together at the time. Similarly, some years later, my 7-year-old daughter penned a story that started with something like, “I still remember the day I left the orphanage. Miss Pennyworth stood there at the gate, waving at me…” I am not sure which book that imagery came from, but it certainly brought me great hopes for her future writing skills!

Many parents tend to focus only on the mechanics of writing, and wonder why all the squeezing and wringing of a child’s brain produce poor, uninteresting writing. Mechanics actually come very naturally to a child who has been reading widely. By the time school teachers go through the motions of teaching how to write, your child will be like a fish in water!