



by Karen Stephens

Emotional Attachments Motivate Children's Language Mastery

Preschool children have an impressive array of listening and speaking skills. Reading and writing abilities are in the formative stages — almost ready to bud, but not just yet. Without written language as a communication tool, preschoolers often rely on art to express their affection. A crayon or marker drawing is offered up to a parent or teacher, “Look what I made just for YOU!” Of course, it is offered with the hope that the recipient “oohs and ahhs” and promises to hang it on the wall.

But even for preschoolers, sometimes a drawing doesn't communicate, especially if a weighty issue lurks. One of our program's preschoolers encountered such a moment. Chris would be leaving our child care program to enter full-day kindergarten in a few weeks. The upcoming transition had him thinking. And lucky me, Chris wanted to share his thoughts with me. He didn't want to draw me a picture, though. No, he wanted to use words just like he'd seen his sister, mom, and dad do. Since he couldn't write himself, here's how he solved his communication problem.

One morning I came to work and retrieved notes from my in-basket. Chris spied me and followed as I walked to my office. As I rifled through the mail, Chris stood by my side, gazing intently. I'd flipped several envelopes and he asked, “Karen, did you find a letter for you in your basket?” I replied, “Yes, several of them.” Then I came to a thin piece of paper, not in an envelope. As I read, I realized it was a letter dictated by Chris. No wonder he was curious about a letter in my basket. You should have seen his eyes while I was reading it, full of innocent expectation.

On the paper, Chris' 8-year-old sister, Deanna, had penciled his thoughts for him. Good thinking. Chris couldn't write yet, but he was resourceful and found someone handy who could. The dictated letter turned out to be the sweetest “love” letter I've ever received.

Chris' message came on kid stationery. Chris added helicopter and airplane stickers to dress up each corner. The letter consisted of a few simple sentences, each progressively slanting downward, but still in discernible lines. The last line nearly slipped off the page, but sister Deanna had foresight; she squeezed her letters tighter and tighter. Not a word was left dangling. By doing so, she made sure Chris' thoughts were fully communicated.

Here's what Chris said — with Deanna's original spelling intact.

“Dear Karen,

Some day we are going to be apart. Sometimes we are going to miss each other. Some day I am going to be at my sister's school. Somday I am going to be in college. Form: Chris. Witen by: Deanna. I love you Karen!”

Talk about a tear jerker! Chris' mama cried when she read it, too. (Women swoon over a sensitive guy no matter what his age!)

“Literacy gives children a tool for putting their hearts as well as their brains to work.”

I share Chris' letter because it shows how caring kids can be. But more to the point, Chris' note illustrates that language and literacy mastery plays a critical role in helping children reach their true human potential in all its forms — socially and emotionally as well as intellectually. From that letter, you can see that Chris and Deanna are both socially and intellectually skilled. In terms of language arts, Deanna is well on her way to becoming accomplished in reading and writing. Between home and school, she's obviously had a lot of support, right down to kid-choice stationery. (Yes, having access to the tools of language is important if you want to grow a reader and writer.)

Although Chris didn't read and write yet, he knew the fundamental principle behind reading and writing. He knew little squiggles are created on paper to tell people things. He realized specific squiggles mean specific things. He couldn't decode the squiggles yet, or group them to make any sense. Ah, but he knew big sis could. She could manipulate the squiggles to make them say whatever he wanted them to! And so he relied on her expertise. (Once again proving that siblings are for more than rivalry.)

Through the process Chris discovered that language is a marvelous tool for self-expression. Chris' emotional attachment to me and our entire child care staff motivated him to WANT to read and write. And that, my friends, is the all-important key to children learning to read and write. Wanting has to come first. Once children have a true desire to read and write, there is little to hold them back.

To be enticed into the world of words, children must see a purpose and advantage to acquiring language skills. That purpose encourages them to make the concentrated effort needed to unravel the mystery behind all those abstract, confusing symbols. The need to communicate with others, the urge to cement bonds of affection leads to language mastery. That social need, as well as children's innate intellectual curiosity about the world, is exactly what takes them down the path to literacy.

Chris could skillfully express himself when speaking. The words Deanna recorded prove Chris was downright eloquent beyond his years. Even I, someone who has been around children over 25 years, was surprised at his sensitivity.

Chris had pondered his rite of passage to kindergarten. Through written word he revealed that this transition was causing him a touch of separation anxiety. And to top it off, he revealed he had already thought about his future. He would be going to college, so we'd be missing each other a long, long time. Don't tell ME children aren't deep.

Helping children see all the many uses for reading and writing will give them a red carpet to the world. Through reading they'll step through the ages to see how human experience has unfolded on this blue/green swirl of a planet. They'll tap into the thinking of anyone who cared enough to write for posterity, from ancient philosophers to generations of extended family. The written word places the past, present, and future at children's feet; it prepares them for far more than just intellectual pursuits. Literacy gives children a tool for putting their hearts as well as their brains to work. It can make poets of them all. Young Chris is proof positive.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.