

*Early Literacy Article Sept. 2008*

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“Bam!” Jake drew a loop with his blue marker, hesitated and then poked two straight sticks onto each of its sides. The prickly sausage shape perched on top of a large yellow scribble. “It’s Superman. He’s on the school bus.” Jake changed the colour of his marker to forest green and made a fat circle. He added two red splotches and a jagged line inside the circle. “That monster is taking Jen’s lunch! Superman ‘ill stop him!” Jake made more action sounds, flew his blue marker high above his paper, landing it onto the bulbous green monster. Jake scribbled that monster into a blue-green blob.

Jake’s daycare teacher, seeing Jake lay down his marker, asked what he would like to say about his picture. Jake looked at his drawing and replied, “My sister goes to school.” Pointing to the yellow scribble he added, “On the big bus.” Jake’s teacher wrote the words on the bottom of his picture.

Jake’s imagination is fun to observe. But Anne Haas Dyson, researcher in children’s early writing development, argues that Jake is demonstrating a pre-writing skill that adults often gloss over. Jake is learning what symbols are and how to use them through the interplay of his speech and picture drawing. While talking and drawing Jake creates figures and action, and links his unique experiences, culture and familiar people to graphics.

From the time infants use gestures, children demonstrate a basic understanding that speech can be represented visually. When children sculpt with playdough or create objects using craft materials their understanding of symbolism is enriched. When children begin to draw and scribble, their ability to create words and ideas visually shifts from three dimensional to two dimensional. The realization that alphabet letters symbolize speech sounds only makes sense to children if, firstly, they understand that their talk can be captured visually on paper.

Initially Jake is not thinking that his speech can be encoded into letters and words his daycare teacher prints at the bottom of his picture. The differences between Jake’s talk as he draws and the words that his daycare teacher writes are common. When Jake’s parents come to pick him up from daycare, he may tell them brand new details about his picture. Jake does not do this because he is forgetful. He does this because he is exploring the various ways in which his words can be represented on paper.

One day very soon, Jake will draw a large “S” on the belly of his Superman figure. Jake is poised to grasp how words are made up of speech sounds with specific graphic symbols we call alphabet letters.

Providing Jake with many opportunities to draw and scribble does more than strengthen his hand muscles and fine tune his control of the marker. Every artistic endeavour Jake engages in helps him build the foundation he needs to take spoken words into a two dimensional medium others can see and eventually read.