



# Julia Volkman

## Love notes and literacy

Not long ago, a friend of mine wrote me a note and slipped it in my pocket. It didn't say much, just a little thank you for something I'd done. But that note...it brought such joy to my heart. I fingered it in my pocket throughout the day and read it to my son when I got home. In the classroom, I'm always writing notes but at home, well, fatigue often gets in the way. That is changing and it is a good change.

I've been making time to put a little note in my son's lunch box most days. At first, I let him watch me write it. Now I try to sneak them in so he doesn't notice. The notes are pretty boring. They say things like, "I hope you like your ham sandwich. Love Mom." Totally uninspired but it's what I can manage early in the morning. And, most importantly, it's enough. Soon after I started writing his notes, I started finding notes in my lunch bag or on the white board in my office. They say things like, "I love you Mom." Today, he spontaneously wrote a note to my partner that said: "To Adam. From Dante. I am fond of the flowers you gave mom. Thank you." Of course, the spellings don't quite look like this and the order of the words is a bit creative, but we all got it. And this extraordinary occurrence unfolded from the half-asleep ham sandwich notes.

A similar phenomenon has happened with my daughter but that is about poetry. My son is a slow eater. So, most nights, we are sitting at the table with clean plates passing the time...and trying not to go for seconds. We were low on conversation one night so I picked up a poetry book and began reading. Everyone perked up. My daughter requested a few that she remembered. My partner recited some he knew from a book with a CD.

### Teaching Vocabulary

1. Give 3-period Lessons



2. Play Sorting Games



3. Play Matching Games



4. Play "Bring Me" Games

"Bring me a tissue."

"Bring me a pencil."

"Bring me a sponge."

### Directly Teach Vocabulary

It is amazing how easy it is to forget to give 3-period vocabulary lessons. Yet these are the bread and butter of our language program, not only to increase the number of words a child knows, but also to give the child a chance to exert himself upon those words by sorting, matching, and carrying them. (See illustration for more.) (Note: It is best to make your own card materials. If you are unable to do so, you can purchase high quality materials from [www.maitrilearning.com](http://www.maitrilearning.com))

### Making Words

1. Make Phonetic Words



2. Make the Child's Words



3. Make the Child's Story



of poets reading their poems and played part of that one night. That was all it took. Poetry is now alive in our home and both my 17-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son are writing their own.

My intention is not to take you on a little stroll through my family life, but to illustrate the power of even tiny doses of inspiration. The child's mind really is absorbent. All we need to do is start the ball rolling and then get out of the way. Just follow the fine print in your albums. Here's a brief refresher.

### Embrace the Oral Tradition

What are the words that bring you joy? Are they poems that make you laugh? Songs? Stories of your life or the great deeds of others? Use that to bring oral language alive in your room. Offer these again and again, encouraging and inspiring the children to memorize, recite and tell stories just as you do.

### Adore the Sandpaper Letters

I once saw Lynne Lawrence give a sandpaper letter presentation at a NAMTA conference. She put her whole body into it. She loved tracing them so much she kept doing it, making the child wait for a turn. The lesson was like dessert—everyone wanted more. If we add in the green sandpaper phonograms, the child's appetite can be satiated. (Dig into those phonograms as soon as the child knows 10-12 letter sounds; this is critical if we want to later free the child to write his ideas—see Step 4 below.)

### Inspire Children to Make Words Independently

The first time the child writes with the movable alphabet, we guide him through phonetic words we know he knows the sounds for. But so often, we kind of get stuck here. We give the children all these phonetic objects or pictures to write words from and don't really move away from that. The alphabet becomes a chore instead of a wonderful tool. The key is to move the child to independence at the earliest possible moment. As soon as they understand the mechanics of choosing letters to make a word, their words are ready to come out. Ask them what they had for breakfast, to name their favorite animals, to write the names of their family members, and so on. Find their interest and inspire them to symbolize it. (See illustration for more.)

#### Writing Words

1. Prepare the Hand with Art



2. Copy Words



3. Label Everything



### Write and Label Everything!

As soon as the hand is ready, get it writing words. This often begins by writing down the words made with the movable alphabet. Use the chalkboard at first until they are ready for the smaller space and more delicate touch of paper. Slowly increase the challenge by having her sit at a table across the room so she is writing the words from memory (and maybe walking back and forth across the room to remind herself what she wrote). Then, start labeling. Take post-it note pads and cut them in half. Show them how to label the biggest and smallest pink tower cube, the items in their favorite work, the clothes they are wearing, the parts of their body (how they love to wear that sticky note on their lip), etc. The key is to move step-by-step, at the child's pace so she feels she can succeed with every increasing challenge.

Continued on Page 8