

My child uses “invented” spelling. Is this OK?

Parents often wonder about when they should expect to see mostly correct spellings in their children’s writing. At the beginning stages of learning to read and write, children often spell words using only a few of the letters in the word and/or using letters that are not correct. They use letters to stand for the sounds that they notice in the words. This approach to spelling is called by different names including invented spelling, sound spelling, and temporary spelling.

Many parents worry that the use of this type of spelling will make their child a “bad speller.” While it is certainly true that prolonged use of primarily invented spelling might interfere with the development of spelling skills, the use of invented spelling in the early primary grades is actually quite helpful for children who are in the process of learning how to use the alphabet.



In fact, invented spelling supports the development of both reading and writing. This is true because it encourages children to really think about the sounds in the words that they want to write and about the relationships between those sounds and the letters in printed words. Thinking about the sounds and letters in words helps to develop children’s phonics skills.

When children first begin to use letters in their attempts at writing words, they usually use only one or two letters to stand for an entire word. However, as they do more writing, they begin to represent more of the sounds in the words they write and usually get to the point where it is possible for an adult to understand what they have written even though many of the words are spelled incorrectly. For example, this message: “I lik to swm in the oshin” (I like to swim in the ocean) can be read even though some words are misspelled. When children demonstrate the ability to spell in this way, they typically begin to move toward more conventional (correct) spelling.

We want children to learn to spell so that they can communicate in writing. Allowing invented spelling at the early stages encourages children to focus more on the communication aspect. They may attempt to write longer and more interesting messages when there’s no pressure to write every word correctly.