

HEN Newsletter

spring
2021



Exploring Education: Montessori Approach | Home-educating through the Years
Nature Study | Home-education: My Story | Banana Bread | Our Day | Creative
Writing | Phases of the Moon | Salt-dough Modelling | Podcast Review

Contents

04



'Exploring education: The Montessori approach' by Gráinne McMenamin

08



'Home-educating through the years' by Jane Donegan

13



'Nature study ... and a reality check' by Catherine Darby

16



'Home education: my story' by Heather Rice

18



Gluten-free banana bread

19



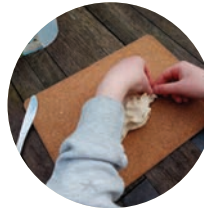
'Our day' by Emilia Szmada

20



'Ourselves' by Dave Carroll

22



Salt-dough modelling

23



Podcast review by Lorraine McHugh

Editor's message



Welcome to our new-look spring issue. I am happy to be part of the new *HEN Newsletter* team and hope you will enjoy this issue. I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Marta for her past contribution as former editor. It is only now that I can fully appreciate the work that goes on behind the scenes in order to get this little magazine together and distributed.

A special thank you to Liz Hudson of the Little Red Pen Publishing Services, who has also come on board to make our magazine into a work of art! Many thanks to Catherine, who alongside her position of PR officer for HEN, will feature in a regular column. Finally, a big thank you to Theo, young editor of the *Chicklit* magazine for his continuing dedication!

Perhaps you have a great podcast or book that you can recommend to other members? Or have you made your own?

Can you share a favourite family recipe? We would love to hear more! We are also keen to get a fly-on-the-wall look at how your typical day shapes up. As we welcome many new families to our home-ed community, an insight into how things work for other families can be inspiring or even reassuring at times, so please drop us a line at newsletterhen@gmail.com.

For my family (we have four children aged thirteen, ten, eight and four years old), nature has been a reliable constant in the past year of uncertainties. Indeed, our local shores, woods, cycling and walking routes have sustained us all far beyond what we imagined possible. Just as the recent first blooms remind us that spring is set to return, we are hopeful that the days of seeing all our friends and extended family will also soon return.

Gráinne McMenamin



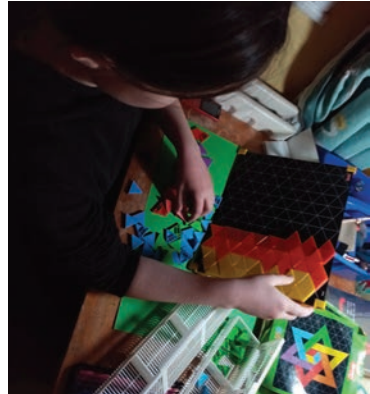
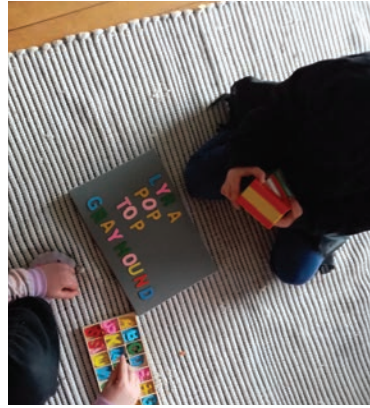
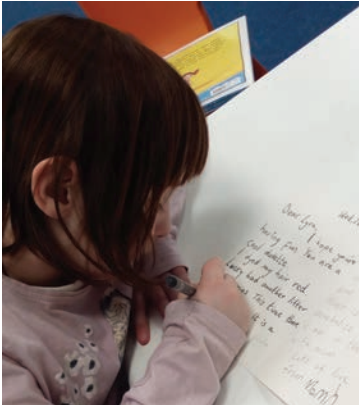
Exploring Education: The Montessori Approach

At the core of the Montessori philosophy is founder Maria Montessori's respect for the child. She found that children have a natural curiosity to learn and much greater powers of concentration than they were given credit for. When children are offered an opportunity for self-directed learning, she discovered, they naturally flourish.

Montessori called the years from birth to age six the peak receptivity period for a child's 'absorbent mind' when children are constantly absorbing information through all their senses. She was one of the first to recognise that children

develop in stages, which she called 'sensitive periods' when they are particularly capable of learning a concept. Children are in the sensitive period for learning to walk, for example, when they are willing to pick themselves up repeatedly and put one foot in front of the other.

Within the Montessori concept, children's activities are referred to as 'work' because she felt that a child's task during childhood is to develop towards their full human potential through practising new skills and establishing social roles and values, Montessori refused to trivialise these endeavours as 'play'.



The tools for Montessori's method of self-directed learning are her beautifully designed, self-correcting materials. Wooden graduated cylinders, for example, fit correctly into only one particular hole, teaching the child the concept of discriminating between sizes without intervention from a teacher. Because Montessori understood that learning progresses from the concrete to the abstract, all of her materials are hands-on. Children learn the abstract mathematical concept of the decimal system, for example, by working with chains of beads that are marked off every tenth bead. The materials are designed to challenge children at many different levels and to build on concepts they have already mastered.

The Montessori concept believes in providing child-sized equipment, with materials invitingly arranged on low, open shelves. Activities are divided into four distinct areas: practical life, sensorial, mathematical and language. The practical life skills area gives young children a chance to develop everyday skills like sweeping and pouring. By mastering these activities, they are also laying the foundation for academic learning. The sequencing of steps in table-washing, for example, is left to right, preparing children for the left-to-right eye motion of reading.

Sensorial materials teach children to recognise differences and relationships in shape, size, colour, temperature, weight, tone, value, texture, taste and scent. Each sensory concept is isolated. These exercises are designed to prepare the child for reading, writing, maths, geometry, art, music and more.

Maths skills are learned through counting rods, spindles, cards and beads, progressing from manipulating objects

to mental calculations. Children learn to understand the concept of 'how many' because they actually hold the amount in their hands.

In the language skills area, children learn to write before they can read, building words and sentences phonetically with a wooden moveable alphabet. They learn the kinaesthetic feel of the alphabet by tracing over sandpaper letters with their fingers, which teaches them the motions that they will need for writing.

There is an emphasis on responsibility for their environment. Children are encouraged to put materials away when they are finished with them and to care for plants and animals. They are also encouraged not to interrupt or disturb each other's work. For example, using simple cotton rugs laid out on the floor at home signifies that a child's project or game setup is not to be tidied away or disturbed.

Other key concepts include the grouping of children within a three-year age span to allow the children to learn from and support each other in a nurturing community. Furthermore, the Montessori teacher's role is that of facilitator and observer, avoiding unnecessary interference or corrections.

One criticism of the Montessori approach is that it does not include a creative arts programme or opportunity for fantasy play. Although Montessori's ideas are most often applied to early childhood education, she did design a curriculum for older children aged six to ten and ten to fourteen years old, involving the children in keeping a journal of their day's work which is periodically reviewed by the teacher.



‘The secret of good teaching is to regard the child’s intelligence as a fertile field in which seeds may be sown, to grow under the heat of flaming imagination.’

(Maria Montessori)

Home-educating through the years

Jane Donegan

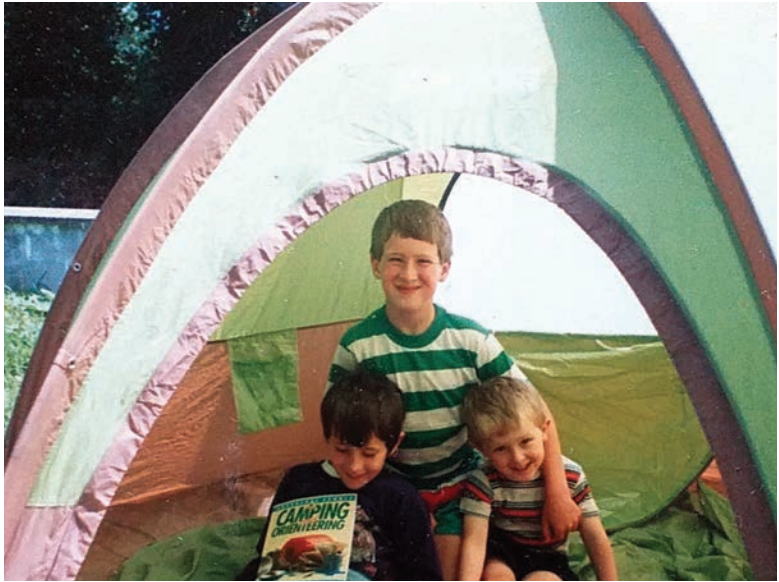
The following are some of my thoughts of our experience un-schooling our six children over a period of thirty-three years. Today our children are aged between forty and twenty-three. We are also grandparents of six, and it's really very special to watch our grandchildren living and learning at home and in the wider world just as their parents did. Thanks especially to our two daughters-in-law for the wonderful way they parent our grandchildren.

Looking back to the time when we made the decision to un-school our children, someone I met described how her children didn't go to school but learned at home. At that moment, an idea was planted, and soon after I came across John Holt's book *Teach Your Own* and the *Growing without Schooling* magazine, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Like many who were starting out in those days, our early experience of home education was based on our own experience of school, so in the beginning it was easy to separate our daily life from our home-school life. Thankfully, our children were good teachers, and we quickly realised that it is impossible to separate the two. How we live and what we learn are very much intertwined. I realised that those moments of play and times snuggled in a chair reading together were just as important (if not more so) than our times spent working on the 'three Rs'.

After thirty-three years of un-schooling, the person I was at the beginning of our journey is not the same as the one I am now. Many like us who started all those years ago had no guide, no books, no podcasts. We learned and discovered as we went along, realising our children were our best teachers. The wonderful thing I have learned is that as much as each family's journey is unique, each child is unique as well. Each of our six children learned in their own time, in their own way.





Like many parents, I sometimes found the wait for them to reach a particular developmental stage, for example reading independently, a bit challenging. One learned to read at six, another at seven, two learned around the age of nine, and two just before they were twelve. I recall the anxiety I sometimes felt, but I also remember that I was confident that they would read when they were ready. It helped to have a very laid-back and easy-going husband who never had any doubts! Not only did they all learn to read, but they all became voracious readers as well, and still enjoy a book in their Christmas stocking too.

If you're concerned about your late-reading child, it may be helpful to keep in mind some of these suggestions given by Dr Peter Gray who asked those involved with unschooling to share their

experiences of learning to read without instruction. By listing and organising the main points, he came up with the following principles:

1. For non-schooled children, there is no critical period or best age for learning to read.
2. Motivated children can go from apparent non-reading to fluent reading very quickly.
3. Attempts to push reading can backfire.
4. Children learn to read when reading becomes to them a means to some valued end.
5. Reading, like many other skills, is learned socially through shared participation, older helping younger.
6. Some children become interested

in writing before reading, and they learn to read as they learn to write.

7. There is no predictable 'course' through which children learn to read.

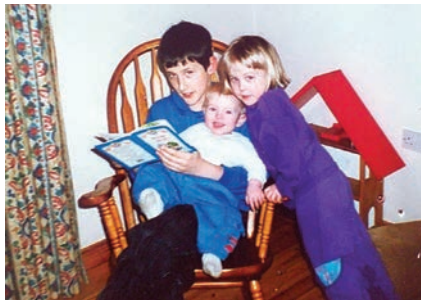
Something memorable a friend said in our early days of unschooling was that when we are worrying that our children are not up to scratch or we're constantly comparing them to others, it is time to get back to the basics: not the 'three Rs' but the 'three Ts': Time, Talk and Trust. It's a great reminder to ourselves to trust our children and not let fear get in the way.

What we learned over the years is that learning happens everywhere. We only need to identify our children's passions and find

ways to facilitate their interests. We learned our children were our best teachers, and that children learn best when they are interested and motivated to learn more.

Each day at home was an opportunity to learn how to live together peacefully and reinforced my belief that the more time we spent with our children the easier it was to spend time together. That's not to say that we didn't have difficult days and days of doubt. It is important to realise that there will be tough days, and that self-care is important. Have a chat with a friend, take a bath on your own, go for a walk – whatever helps to keep you going.

It was a special time in our lives, and one we're glad we got to share with our children.



Science Activity: Observe the phases of the moon

Materials

- Pencil
- Paper
- Clipboard

Method

1. Draw eight round moon-like shapes.
2. Next to each shape leave space for the date and time to be recorded.
3. Choose a clear night and go outside and observe the shape of the Moon.
4. Colour the first moon-like shape identical to the moon in the sky.
5. Wait two nights and observe the shape of the Moon again and colour the second circle.
6. Continue this until each of the eight moon-like shapes are completed.

Did you know?

The Moon does not shine any of its own light onto Earth. We can see the Moon from Earth because it is reflecting the light from the Sun. On Earth it looks like the Moon is changing shape, but the Moon is spinning slowly on its axis as it orbits Earth – this changes the amount of light we can see.



Nature Study ... and a Reality Check

Catherine Darby

Nature Study, for me, is a bit like Routine. It's one of those things that I imagine the ideal home-schooling mother has got down pat. She and her children all keep beautiful Nature Journals where they regularly and willingly document their observations. They draw lovely little illustrations and remember the names (and the Latin names) of all manner of flora and fauna.

Does this woman regularly buy nice journals specifically for Nature Study and then forget to use them? Does she have beautiful books about How to Keep a Lovely Nature Journal gathering dust on her bookshelves? Does she have the crumbs of a thousand leaves and pinecones in the bottom of her handbag and the claws of a long deceased family of crabs in the glove-box of her car, along with a collection of stones and shells? Does she have a thousand ideas and intentions in her head that have been waiting for several years now to be translated onto paper?

Of course she doesn't, but I am guilty of all of the above.

I'm pretty sure this fictional woman only exists in my imagination, and let me tell you, Nature Study isn't the only thing she does better than me . . .

However, Nature Study may have just been a slow burner for me. I feel like it

has been finding its way into our days little by little, but in a very significant way, this past year. While we have always enjoyed time outdoors and pored over specimens collected during walks in the bush or mornings at the beach, something has changed. Part of that something is my acceptance that the aforementioned ideal is just that: an ideal. But it goes deeper too.

We have returned to our native Ireland after ten years in Australia. We loved Australia. The sunshine, the beaches, the bush, the abundance of beautiful parks. It is a country of immense and diverse beauty. But, even though a part of me will always belong there and it is a part of me, it wasn't our country. It wasn't our landscape; we were visitors.

We returned to Ireland toward the end of summer. We have had so much summer over the past ten years that I was desperate for autumn, winter, spring, seasons. I ached for these seasons during my years in Australia. Yes, there are advantages to having nine months of guaranteed sunshine and a short winter; you can plan a picnic or a day at the beach and you can be 100 per cent certain that when you put away your winter clothes you won't have to go rummaging for a warm sweatshirt a month later. The Australian seasons are beautiful in their own way, but I missed that cycle

that my people have lived through year after year, generation after generation.

Soon after venturing out into the Irish home-education social scene we made some wonderful new friends who reintroduced us to so many awesome places. We are fortunate enough to live in one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland. (I may be a little biased.) We're on the coast, and we have mountains, rivers, woodlands and access to many beautiful gardens.

We were in our element. We could go out walking at any time of the day once we had warm clothing and good boots. In the Australian summer it was too hot to go out walking between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Ironically, we seem to spend more time outdoors here than we did in Australia. The familiarity of the outdoors here, the smells of the earth, the damp leaves, the rain, the colours of autumn and even the naked beauty of winter have all made my heart sing.

At times when I've felt overwhelmed by the enormity of this hemispheric move we've made, lonely for my Aussie friends, unsure of where we would end up, the woods, even when wet and cold, have offered a singular solace.

And now we have moved to a house surrounded by trees and bushes and garden. There are windows everywhere so even when we're not outside it feels like the garden is part of the house. I've yet to put curtains or blinds on the windows so we're woken up each morning by sunrise and the dawn chorus. I sit by the same window to write each morning and have observed the changes in the trees outside as we've progressed from spring into summer. When we first moved in

they were sparse but beautiful. Now in summer they are full, heavy, ripe, their branches weighed down with foliage. I have a new appreciation for these seasonal changes and the trees of my childhood having missed them for so long.

And we have so many birds: Robins, Wrens, Thrushes, Great Tits, Blue Tits, Goldfinches, Bullfinches. (There is a lot of interesting debate online regarding the capitalisation, or not, of bird names. I choose to capitalise.)

Every day we watch, mesmerised, as they gather food for their young and introduce them to the wider world of the garden and surrounding trees. Last night, we were entertained by a Thrush trying to crack a snail's shell on the frame of our hammock, to no avail. The other day we watched a family of young Blackbirds try to gather worms in the garden as their mother watched on, occasionally helping.

It all feels so novel after Australia – such a different landscape with different wildlife. So new, but at the same time it feels like home in the most profound way. It occurred to me soon after we arrived back in Ireland, in the town I grew up in, that it wasn't just that I belonged here, but that this place belongs to me.

And so, somehow, Nature Study seems to have become a part of our day in a very unintentional way. It feels effortless. Perhaps it's because we are in our own 'natural habitat'. Maybe it's because we are finally feeling settled after many years of uncertainty about where we would end up. Who knows?

Whatever the reason, Mother Nature has welcomed us back to Ireland with open arms. She has passed no judgement



on our unfinished Nature Journals or our lack of diligence in recent years. And I am reminded, as I need to be every so often, that it is the process that counts, not the end product. Keeping a perfect Nature Journal is not the only way to do Nature Study, although it may give me great satisfaction as a person who likes to tick boxes (with a child who has no desire or need to tick boxes).

So the dust has been brushed off the 'How To' book. The journals are at hand, should we require them. We can translate this reignited love for our surroundings into something tangible when we want to or we can just observe what's going on and share our thoughts with each other. Most importantly, Nature Study has

become a part of our daily life. Like so much other learning, it is not a 'subject' to be studied within a particular time frame; it is simply life.



Home Education: My Story

Heather Rice

I have written the story of my experience of home-educating my five children and made it into a book, *Home Education: My Story*, in the hope it helps other families. For over twenty years I have been educating my children at home, and I realised that often people ask the same questions when they hear that my children did not have formal schooling. The book is my answer to questions such as ‘Why did you choose to home educate?’, ‘How did they learn?’, ‘What did an average day look like?’, ‘How did you not go mad having them at home?’, ‘How did they get into college without a Leaving Cert?’, ‘What about socialisation?’ and ‘Is it legal?’ I hope it gives anyone an interest in this route ideas and information to help them make their decisions.

Recently I have noticed a lot of families struggling with home-schooling children while working from home, due to the lockdowns, and hoped I could reassure them that children will learn lots naturally through life and play. I really feel there is a lot of stress currently and hope if they read my story it would help them relax, not try hours of formal work but enjoy learning in a more natural way. The mental health and relationships in the family are important, and it is a difficult time for many.

We chose to let the children follow their interests and learn through them in

a natural, free-range, unschooling type of way. I feel humans naturally are inquisitive and want to discover the world around them. If let self-direct they will master all sorts of amazing skills and find their own path, leading parents into areas they never imagined.

Three of my children are adults now. My eldest, Nadia, is a graduate of Crawford College, Cork, and works as an artist and an art administrator. Maiya is studying film-making in IADT, having worked in and managed a restaurant for years. Luka is in third-year animation there too while my younger pair, Kalia and Zen, are still home-educating.

We were lucky to have so many amazing families on this path with us, and I love seeing how the connections formed when the children were all young have blossomed into wonderful friendships. We would have been one of the families who founded the Home Education Network, and the children adored all their conferences and meet-ups over the years.

In September 2020, I did a programme called ‘Work It Out’ and discovered how to write ebooks and get paperbacks self-published through the Kindle Direct Publishing part of Amazon. It is a brilliant course I highly recommend for anyone over sixteen wishing to look at using their skills and knowledge in useful ways. I first published my Alphabet

books that I created from crochet toys photographed. One is of edible things, the other is of animals. They combined my joy of creating toys from my head with my photography and years of home-educating. They are called *Heather's Crochet Edible Alphabet* and *Heather's Crochet Animal Alphabet*. I did a couple of fun book readings with the toys on Zoom before Christmas, getting the kids to bring something that started with the first letter of their name and we had great fun.

I then published my *Wildflowers of the Slieve Bloom Mountains* book of over 100 wildflower photographs and descriptions of their uses and lore. I had done a 100-day project of posting a

photo each day of the local flora which again combined my love of photography, nature and learning. It got an incredible response from people so I had made it into a Heritage Week project and was delighted to get the book out for Christmas.

I then decided to share our story of education and am delighted with the feedback I have received so far from both the home-education community and those in the mainstream system. The book is available as an ebook/Kindle book on Amazon and a paperback, but with Brexit and Covid, shipping to Ireland is messy so I will have copies for sale soon. My email is henamalu@yahoo if anyone is interested.



Gluten-free banana bread

This is the go-to recipe for brown bananas in our house ever since Lorraine shared her delicious banana bread at a home-ed picnic. I might not always have spare butter for baking, but I usually always have a couple of eggs and a bottle of olive oil in the cupboard. I omit the

salt, use half the sugar (80 g) and usually add an extra banana to make up the sweetness. The original recipe calls for gluten-free flour, but I have made it with self-raising flour too. As we have a big family, I double the recipe and make two loaves at once.

Ingredients

160 g light brown sugar
4 tbsp olive oil
2 eggs
180 g gluten-free flour
2.5 tsp baking powder
1 tsp salt
2 bananas, mashed

Method

1. Preheat oven to 170°C.
 2. Grease a loaf tin with butter and lightly coat with flour. This will prevent sticking. Or you could line it with greaseproof paper.
 3. Use a hand blender to mix the sugar, oil and eggs in a bowl.
 4. Next, sieve the flour, baking powder and salt into the bowl.
 5. Add the mashed bananas, and use a wooden spoon to gently fold the mixture together.
 6. Pour into the loaf tin.
 7. Bake for 40–50 minutes. You can cover it with tinfoil after about 25 minutes. It is still a little springy/spongy when taken out after 45 minutes.
 8. Remove from the tin and place on a wire rack to cool.
 9. Enjoy sliced, with or without butter.
-



Our Day

Emilia Szmanda



My main reason to homeschool my two wonderful boys (aged ten and nine) was an unclear situation with the current crisis caused by the pandemic. I did not want my boys to go to school where they would not be able to socialise and behave like kids. I did not want them to be afraid or worry about a virus, so I decided to keep them at home.

I strongly believe that it was my destiny as I love having my boys around me

and getting to know what they are good and bad at. This is a wonderful experience that I highly recommend to any parents. I will keep doing it even when this situation is all over as I see a huge progress since I have started to teach them.

We have been baking and cooking a lot and doing loads of art. Here are some photographs of our lime zest tart, croissants with jam and a 'hand tree' made by the boys.

Ourselves

Like one of those stories where two friends talk and a third asks, 'What are you on about?'

And we talk here over the past fifteen months or so since before Covid back to September 2019 when we decided to take time out and home educate.

And home education was just a lucky legal and constitutional right we have to take that time out because the educating part was to be so much more than we ever thought or could imagine it might be, when we took that life-saving decision to 'home educate' for three different reasons.

And we ask each other what are we doing and why and how much guilt do we still feel for dropping out, slipping and dumping the mask, not answering the phone?

How do *we* feel?
What has changed?

Life.

Everything
has changed.

Now we live on our own planet to our own tune.
And we've found so many more who live here too.
It's nice to find people like you, almost a species like you hidden in plain sight and now smiling and recovering.

It's hard to explain
but it's good.

Sarah said to me maybe two weeks ago, 'Daddy, it's like over a year since I've felt overwhelmed ...'

And I heard that and almost cried.
And I thought about what does success mean for your children?
Your daughter?
Or yourself?

Maybe if you heard someday from your daughter that 'It's over a year since I've felt overwhelmed' you might sit back and sigh and cry and feel that FFS you've won some little battle and your daughter has also.

And you don't worry so much anymore about teenage horror stories which may have been or could have been, which seem to be so 'normal' for our school-going children and especially for those 'additional needs' ones.

So when we get up late and sleep late pandemic or not and have no nine-to-five or homework, no stress and we wonder if we should put more stress on ourselves because that seems to be the way for children these days and we talk and wonder why we should.

And Adam at eleven says he's bored and wants to get back to France.
And types at 100 words per minute and laughs with his online friends and knows himself exquisitely well and is recovering from a life of

‘What’s wrong with you?’
from me
and his teachers
and all.
And now he’s his own boss again
of his own life.
And happy.

And David who since a toddler
always laughed out loud in his sleep
and still does
and he makes us laugh still

and writes short stories which would
stop you dead
and draws like Picasso.

And we are happy.
And we are recovering.
And we are individually ourselves.
And we are individually going to live
our individual lives
as ourselves.

Dave Carroll

For this activity, you need a copybook or piece of paper. Draw a generous margin on the left of the page. Then pick a subject from below:

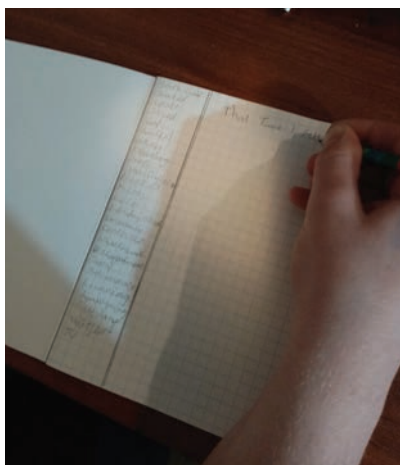
- My annoying sister/brother/pet
- Winning a game
- A fond memory
- That time I fell

In your margin, write down all the related words that come to you, as fast as you can. Don’t worry about spellings or stop to wonder why you wrote something. Just fill it up!

If you prefer to check spellings, a good point to do so is once the margin is full. That way you can note the correct spelling next to the attempt so the correct form is used when writing out the actual poem or story. I tend to favour fluency over accuracy!

Then use this word list to help you to write a story or poem about your chosen theme.

Creative-writing activity



Salt-dough modelling

Salt-dough modelling is an easy and fun craft activity and great for involving several children of mixed abilities. Try making letters, numbers, play foods or small decorations or models which can later be painted. It is also possible to press leaves or shells into the dough to create beautiful patterns.



Ingredients

225 g (2 cups) plain flour
100 g (½ cup) salt
2 tsp cooking oil

Method

1. Thoroughly mix the flour and salt in a bowl and then add the oil and 100 ml (½ cup) water.
2. Stir the water and oil into the flour mixture and start to bind the ingredients into a dough. Discard the spoon at this point and mix the dough with your hand, adding more water gradually by sprinkling it into the mix with your fingertips. By adding the water drip by drip, you will know the instant the dough is ready. It should be firm enough not to stick to your hands but not so dry that it is crumbly.
3. Turn the dough out onto a smooth surface and knead it for at least 10 minutes (to avoid cracks when baked), until warm and smooth, pliable and very slightly warm.
4. Shape the dough into the desired form.
5. Bake at 145°C for 2–3 hours, depending on the size of the models, or until solid.

Podcast review: First Name Basis and Bite-sized Black History

Lorraine McHugh



Jasmine Bradshaw is a Black Biracial American woman, mother to two daughters, who uses her podcasts to educate the listener on race, culture and religion. She wants to educate parents to teach their children inclusivity and to talk openly about difficult topics in relation to race.

The main podcast, *First Name Basis*, is for adults, parents and older teens and is free on Spotify. I would absolutely recommend it. I am not religious at all, so I just skip over the rare religious ones I have come across, though I did particularly enjoy the episode 3:08 entitled: 'Jesus Had Brown Skin'.

Jasmine has recently released a children's podcast called *Bite-sized Black History*. It was released to coincide with for Black History Month, February 2021. It costs \$55.00, for which you get to download a set of twelve podcasts, lasting on average 8–10 minutes, with each one focusing on one or two historical Black figures. It comes with a booklet containing a picture of each person to colour in and prompts for discussion such as 'I was excited to learn ...' and 'What is a goal you would really love

to achieve?' People such as Olympic sprinter Wilma Rudolph, inventor Garrett Morgan and civil-rights activist Claudette Colvin are discussed and celebrated in a child-friendly manner.

I had been listening to *First Name Basis* for a couple of months before Jasmine released *Bite-sized Black History*. I know we think of podcasts as being free, but this child-friendly podcast celebrating Black history is wonderful, and you can see the time and effort that went into researching each individual. It is a brilliant resource to have and so worth the investment.

I have used it with three children ranging in age: eight, six and three years old, and they all love it! They request it every time they are together for home-educating (in a child-care bubble during lockdown) and listen to the episode of the day twice. It prompted some lovely discussions on skin tone and difference.

I would also recommend getting the Crayola Multicultural Crayons to get different skin tones right. I think it shows the children you are using it with that you are respectful of Black people and people of colour in general.

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