

# Active Learning Through Art

by Leighan Rinker

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What do we know about how young children learn? We know that children learn best through their five senses, through interacting with concrete materials, through engaging in conversations rather than being lectured to, and through activity. As a matter of fact, we know that the active involvement of the learner is the most important single factor in learning. This is true for all learning, whether a child is learning science, social studies, math, music, or art.

## The Value of Art Experiences for Young Children

A well-planned and implemented art program can greatly enhance a child's total learning experience. As he explores his own creativity and uses his imagination artistically, he will develop feelings of confidence, self-esteem, and individuality. As he experiences art through his five senses, his sensory-motor skills improve. As he develops his perceptual skills, he enhances his cognitive development. As the child works collaboratively on a group art project such as a

mural, he learns social skills — cooperation, sharing, and appreciation for the ideas of others.

Art is important for art's sake. It provides opportunities to explore various media and to use one's imagination and creativity. Art can also be a vehicle for teaching or reinforcing other subjects. Science lessons can be taught through art as children make leaf rubbings, create a nature collage, fingerpaint butterflies, or paint on snow. Children learn social studies as they study other cultures and experience batik or tie-

dye art. Literature comes alive when children illustrate an original story or create a class-made book. Even music takes on more meaning if children *paint a song* or fingerpaint to music of varying tempos.

## The Development of Children's Creativity Through Art

Creativity is the process of bringing something new into being or the ability to produce something unique. All children are creative in varying degrees. However, their creativity can be nurtured and developed through a teacher's encouragement and appreciation or it can be stifled, even destroyed, by a teacher's criticism and demand for conformity. Creative art should provide the child with opportunities for originality and flexibility. In art, children can be allowed to think and experiment *outside the box* without judgment.

There should be no *right* or *wrong* way to do things, and the *process*, not the finished *product*, should be the main goal of the art experience. It is through creative art where children are free to

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determine the outcome of their efforts that they develop a sense of confidence and independence, learn to make decisions, and begin to problem solve. This is true of children of all ages and all abilities.

Teachers should avoid cut-and-paste activities, mimeographed or photocopied sheets, and any project where children must duplicate the teacher's model. The skills taught through these unimaginative activities can best be learned through the use of open-ended materials that stimulate creativity.

## Teachers Are the Key to Creativity

The classroom teacher is the primary factor in determining whether or not an art program encourages creativity in children. Youngsters' imagination and creative expression will flourish if their teacher:

- provides free art periods with a variety of materials available and an atmosphere where children can create at their own pace
- asks open-ended questions that encourage children to freely express their ideas
- encourages children to share their ideas through active involvement in art
- engages in creative activities with children, being careful not to make a model for children to duplicate
- recognizes and rewards children for being creative
- allows some choice in the art activity, the number of choices increasing with the age of the child
- is flexible regarding how materials are used as long as children are safe and not destructive

## Goals of an Art Activity or Program

Every art activity should incorporate the five ingredients of active learning:

- concrete materials for each child
- manipulation and exploration of those materials by the child
- choice by the child of what to try with those materials
- language from the child to discuss what he is doing
- support by adults and peers in the form of recognition and open-ended questions

An art activity should also:

- be safe
- be appropriate to the child's age and ability level
- allow ample time for relaxed, unhurried exploration of materials and expression of ideas
- allow for success
- provide for originality and independence
- be easy to set up and clean up
- be fun for children and teachers alike

The optimal art program requires a classroom teacher who sets goals, understands her role, knows how to best set up each art activity, and can evaluate both her children's progress and the effectiveness of her art program.

With goals in mind as she plans her art program or a specific art activity, it is important that the teacher also understand her role.

## The Teacher's Role

First and foremost, teachers must be aware of the age and ability levels of

their children. All children go through a predictable sequential pattern of artistic development, but the precise age at which any specific skill or perception develops varies from child to child. Each child's ability to scribble or make marks on paper becomes more complex as his motor control develops.

There are three basic stages of artistic development. The *scribble stage* is typical of one- to three-year-olds. At first, their scribbles are random and disordered, later becoming more controlled as patterns and designs emerge. The *basic forms stage* generally is seen in three- and four-year-olds through their circles and squares or unplanned creations that make them think of something after it appears on the paper. The final level is the *pictorial stage* when four- and five-year-olds draw with a preplanned purpose and their drawing or painting represents something in real life. With an understanding of children's motor skill and perceptual level, the teacher can select appropriate art materials and activities that guarantee success.

The teacher's role is also to provide opportunities and encouragement for independent and creative artistic expression. She accomplishes this by providing the time, materials, and freedom for children to make their own decisions regarding how to use art materials as they express their unique ideas and feelings. She values the child's *experience* more than the appearance of the final product. Art materials and activities should be varied, providing children with many experiences using different media. Some possibilities are:

- painting
- collage and sculpture
- modeling materials
- chalk
- crayons and markers
- printing

## Tips for Setting Up an Art Activity

Once a teacher has established goals for her art program and understands her role, she needs to determine how she will set up her art center or activity. Art activities should be easy to prepare, set up, and clean up. Some tips for creating an effective art area are:

- materials and activities must be developmentally appropriate and safe for the intended group of children
- provide a separate space for art activities, preferably near art supplies and a water source and away from the main traffic flow
- organize and label art materials — they should be accessible to children so that budding artists can independently access, clean up, and put away materials
- locate the teacher's art supplies in a separate area from children's materials
- provide good lighting for art area
- locate the art center where the teacher can easily supervise
- provide paint shirts near the art center and easels
- provide a surface or rack for drying artwork near the center and easels
- equip the center with child-size tables, chairs, shelves, and easels
- table and floor surfaces should be easy to clean, thus allowing for mess and spills
- limit the number of children allowed at the center at one time
- provide art materials (paper, scissors, crayons, markers, chalk, easel, paints) on a daily basis to encourage independent art experiences
- provide *special* art activities that require more teacher preparation, instruction and supervision on a weekly basis
- prepare materials in advance so children do not have to sit and wait
- occasionally utilize the outdoors as an extension of the classroom for art
- proudly and attractively display children's artwork

- weaving and stitchery
- woodworking

Teachers who model creative behavior themselves have the most creative children, thus the teacher's role is to join the children in art activities, being careful not to create a model for them

to copy. The role of the teacher also includes teaching proper and safe ways to use materials, such as how to hold a paint brush or cut with scissors. She must establish ground rules that pertain to safety and consideration of others and supervise children to assure adherence to the guidelines. Cleaning up the

art center is another valuable lesson taught and modeled by effective teachers.

The manner in which a teacher talks to children about their art can either encourage independent thought, confidence, and imagination or instill a sense of judgment and inhibition. Comments should be descriptive and factual rather than evaluative or directive. For example, she might say, "I see you drew squares and circles." Or, "April is using many dark colors in her painting. Michael has chosen light colors." Open-ended questions encourage children to think and use language. The teacher may ask, "Did you have fun doing this art? Tell me about your picture." Or, "How did you make these curly lines?"

Some suggestions for how *not* to talk to children about their art are:

- don't ask "what is it?" — children may not know what it is; they may not intend it to represent anything
- don't identify what you think it is
- do not make vague judgmental comments such as "I like your picture" or "that's pretty"
- do not ask children in advance what they are planning to create — very young children rarely plan in advance what their finished product will look like
- don't quiz children on the colors they are using
- do not focus on neatness either during the art experience or in the finished product — such comments inhibit creativity

Sometimes it is best to say nothing at all. If one approaches a child, smiles, pauses, and says nothing, the child will often initiate a discussion about his art.

## “When I Looked at My Picture Framed and Hung, I Saw Myself as an Artist!”

When a teacher displays a child’s artwork, it shows the child that his creation is valued. Edna Hibel, internationally renowned artist, explained that as a very young girl she enjoyed drawing pictures when she finished her classroom math assignments. Her mother bought dime-store frames for Edna’s early creations, and when the young girl viewed her work displayed on the walls in her home, she then saw and believed in herself as a real artist. Thus began her long and successful career as a painter of women and children.

Every child deserves to see his artwork displayed. Some helpful hints are:

- displays should be at the child’s eye level
- matted, framed, and hung artwork makes an attractive display — mats and frames can be made with construction paper
- pictures can be grouped according to a theme, project, or colors
- encourage children to put their name on their artwork because *artists* sign their work — if the child is unable to do this, the teacher can provide child’s name
- do not change or *improve* a child’s artwork — display it *as is*
- periodically change wall displays to create interest
- be sure your classroom is not cluttered and disorderly, which causes frustration rather than satisfaction when a child views his art displayed
- give each child a turn at being *Artist of the Week*, framing and hanging

one of his art pieces

## Evaluation Is Important

It is important to occasionally evaluate your art program and individual art activities to determine if you are meeting your goals. Look at your art materials, room environment, and techniques. Are they appropriate for your group of children? Are children developing skills and concepts through art? Are they enjoying the artistic activities and experiencing success? Are they thinking creatively, developing confidence, and demonstrating individuality through their art? Are they exposed to a variety of media and activities?

As you evaluate each child’s progress, look for evidence of his developing creativity and skills. Date examples of his work and save them in his file to help you assess his progress. Compare over time the child’s ability to control his hands in coordination with his eyes; his use of space, shapes, and patterns; his sense of color and design; and his expression of imagination. This information not only tells you about the child’s artistic development, it also provides a progress report on your art program.

Bertrand Russell said: “There are certain things that our age needs. It needs, above all, courageous hope and the impulse to creativeness.” Every teacher of young children can provide a program where children can experience the exhilarating joy of creating through art. As art provides freedom to experiment and express, children learn to be divergent thinkers, problem solvers, and imaginative visionaries. Through art, we can give our children multiple gifts that they may enjoy for a lifetime.

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## ► Buyer's Guide to Art Materials ◀

The following directory is a partial listing of companies manufacturing or selling art materials. Companies were included free of charge. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. Request free information about these companies by circling the number for each company on the Product Inquiry Card (between pages 64 and 65).

### abc School Supply

3312 North Berkeley Lake Road  
Duluth, GA 30096  
(800) 669-4222  
www.abcchoolsupply.com  
Circle 60 on Product Inquiry Card

Lorna Paris

### All American Graphics

14455 South Broadway  
Gardena, CA 90248  
(310) 532-3322  
Circle 61 on Product Inquiry Card

Kathy Belton / Bill Schwab

### Art Supplies Wholesale

4 Enon Street  
Beverly, MA 01915  
(800) 462-2424  
www.allartsupplies.com  
Circle 62 on Product Inquiry Card

Liz Lyman

### Beka, Inc.

542 Selby Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55102  
(651) 222-7005  
www.bekainc.com  
Circle 63 on Product Inquiry Card

### Childcraft Education Corporation

2920 Old Tree Drive  
Lancaster, PA 17603  
(800) 631-5652  
www.childcrafteducation.com  
Circle 64 on Product Inquiry Card

### Dick Blick Art Materials

PO Box 1267  
Galesburg, IL 61402-1267  
(800) 447-8192  
www.dickblick.com  
Circle 65 on Product Inquiry Card

Darrell Whitlock

### Discover Products, Inc.

800 Brandi Lane  
Round Rock, TX 78681  
(800) 728-2330  
www.discoverproducts.com  
Circle 66 on Product Inquiry Card

Tina Badham

### Do A Dot Art

31192 La Baya Drive, Suite F  
Westlake Village, CA 91362  
(818) 597-9430  
www.dotart.com  
Circle 67 on Product Inquiry Card

General Customer Service

### Ellison Educational Equipment, Inc.

25862 Commercentre Drive  
Lake Forest, CA 92625  
(800) 253-2238  
www.ellison.com  
Circle 68 on Product Inquiry Card

### Environments, Inc.

PO Box 1348  
Beaufort Industrial Park  
Beaufort, SC 29901-1348  
(800) EI-CHILD / (800) 342-4453

Rob Klassen

### Friesens Learning Products

511 Industrial Drive  
Altona, MB R0G 0B0 (Canada)  
(800) 613-3130  
www.friesenslearning.com  
Circle 69 on Product Inquiry Card

Maureen Gallagher

### Galison / Mudpuppy Press

28 West 44th Street  
New York, NY 10036  
(212) 354-8840  
www.galison.com  
Circle 70 on Product Inquiry Card

Kevin McGrath

### Galt America

230 Woodmont Road  
Milford, CT 06460  
(203) 876-7289 / (800) 899-4258  
www.galttoys.com  
Circle 71 on Product Inquiry Card

Brandon J. Snow

### Kelly's Crafts, Inc.

PO Box 219  
Ross, OH 45061  
(800) 828-9818  
www.kellyscrafts.com  
Circle 72 on Product Inquiry Card

Erin Caldwell

### Lakeshore Learning Materials

2695 East Dominguez Street  
PO Box 6261  
Carson, CA 90749  
(310) 537-8600  
www.lakeshorelearning.com  
Circle 8 on Product Inquiry Card

Customer Service

### PCI Educational Publishing

PO Box 34270  
San Antonio, TX 78265  
(210) 377-1999  
www.pcicatalog.com  
Circle 73 on Product Inquiry Card

Holly Green

### Print \* Play

PO Box 23514  
Ventura, CA 93002  
(805) 642-5205  
Circle 74 on Product Inquiry Card

### School Specialty

PO Box 1579  
Appleton, WI 54913-1579  
(888) 388-3224  
www.junebox.com  
Circle 75 on Product Inquiry Card

Smitty Thomas

### Sonoco / Stancap

3150 Clinton Court  
Norcross, GA 30071  
(770) 476-9088  
www.sonoco.com  
Circle 76 on Product Inquiry Card

Todd Hurst

### The Step 2 Company

10010 Aurora-Hudson Road  
Streetsboro, OH 44241  
(800) 446-1135  
www.step2childcare.com  
Circle 77 on Product Inquiry Card

Corrections to  
July / August  
"Docia Shares a Story"

Our apologies to . . .

. . . Judy Brunk,  
executive / program  
director of the Hill & Dale  
Family Learning Center in  
Santa Monica, California,  
for incorrectly stating the  
center was preparing for  
their 15th anniversary gala  
— in actuality, the center  
was celebrating its  
50th anniversary.

. . . South Carolina  
ETV Early Childhood  
National Programming for  
not crediting them for  
"Just as a pebble makes  
ripples on the water, all  
childhood experiences  
affect how children grow  
and learn."