

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Children as artists

Cathy Myer

Young children are artists. They use all sorts of materials to show what they have noticed about the world. They might draw the rain falling onto the tent during a family holiday, paint a giraffe seen at the zoo, model a fish from clay and press patterns into its body. What they make can say more about their experiences than they are able to describe in words because, with their hands, they can show the fatness of those clouds, the giraffe's long neck or the amazing scales on the fish.

But children need help to become artists. Just as you help plants to grow, you can provide the right conditions to help children develop as artists.

What children need to become artists

First-hand experiences

It is easy to give children something to make art about. There are so many rich experiences to be had in quite simple everyday activities like feeding the ducks, walking in the rain, cuddling a rabbit, collecting leaves, seeing a fire engine, having a picnic in the garden, going to the zoo or listening to a piece of music. Anything that involves doing and using their senses (touching, looking closely, smelling, moving about, listening) will give children something to think about and ideas for things to make – things they can 'say' using materials.

Good materials to use

Children will use anything to make marks – tomato ketchup and spilt milk are two favourites. They love to use all of the following, and more.

- Drawing. Chalks and pastels, wax crayons, pencils, felt-tip pens (many wash off just with water) and charcoal sticks.
- Painting and printing. Readymixed liquid paints sold in bottles are easier to manage than the little water-colour paint boxes.

- Paper to draw, paint and print on. Any kind of paper will do – brown wrapping paper, large sheets of coloured paper, plain white drawing paper, old rolls of wallpaper or scrap paper that has already been used on one side. Each gives children a different experience.
- Modelling. Home-made playdough and other soft modelling materials (especially clay), cardboard boxes and tubes, wood, glue and card, building bricks and construction kits.
- Cutting, weaving, wrapping and sticking. All sorts of materials are useful here – fabric, wools, ribbons and paper including used giftwrap, tissue paper and sweet wrappers. Scissors are essential and must be sharp enough to cut, as children get frustrated by trying to learn to cut with blunt scissors. (Make sure that good scissors have rounded ends and always supervise children when they use scissors.)
- The natural world provides free art materials including leaves, petals, feathers, pebbles, gravel, bits of bark, sticks, sand and mud.

New skills

Children need to be shown how to use all these materials. They need to know how to use scissors and glue, how to mix paints, how to squeeze, roll out and join clay, how to press things into the clay to make patterns and textures and how to load a sponge with paint and print its shape onto a surface.

This is not the same as showing children 'the right way' to draw a cat. The adult way of drawing a cat using two circles with ears and a tail has nothing to do with children's own experience of a cat. They can draw (paint, stick, model) cats in any way they choose – once they have been shown how to use the stuff for making their art.

Space for being creative

Cover a big table or the floor with newspaper or a plastic tablecloth to keep things clean. A tray or a wooden board on the table or floor can also provide a good flat surface that is easy to wipe down.

Making art outside is wonderful and there are many simple ways to provide outdoor spaces for making art. Peg a sheet of paper to the fence for painting on, offer chalks for drawing on paving slabs, lean a board against a wall to make an easel or lay a board across bricks to make an outside table. Children can even 'paint' on walls using just water.

Blackboards are very useful as they can be wiped clean and used time and again. They can also be turned into an easel by clipping a piece of paper over the surface. The sand pit gives a great opportunity for building sculptures in sand, shaping and carving it to make three-dimensional shapes.

Time for being creative

Making something takes time. Children need to feel that there is no rush – that what they are doing is important. If it is possible, children love to have a space ready for making art, where they can go whenever they want to make a model or a picture. This doesn't need to be a large space and could be a corner at home which is set up for making. Of course, this isn't always possible – but a cupboard, shelf or box full of a child's art stuff that is always in reach is just as useful. Children like to choose what they need and help to clear away afterwards.

Someone to talk to

One of the best ways to help children develop as artists is to talk about what they have done. It is not very encouraging if you always ask 'What is it?' when they bring a drawing or model for you to look at. But asking children to talk about what they are doing is often very revealing and thrilling.

Children look at the world and show it in amazing ways. They choose what is important to them – the fluffiness of a cat, perhaps – and describe it with marks. Young children don't care much about drawing something that is 'correct'. Everyone knows that cats have four legs so they may not bother to draw the right number of legs on their cat – but that fluffy coat might be really special to one child and so that is what she will draw.

Talking to children about what they have made will help them to develop their language – but it also shows them you think their art is important. Children need confidence to learn anything, and knowing that you value what they do is a great boost to confidence.

Valuing what they make

Time spent talking to children is one way of showing that you value their art. Another is to show it to family and friends. Art is made to be seen and shared, so put it up on the wall or on a shelf so that others can enjoy it. It can be difficult to keep a collection of models on the shelf for a long time as they take up space and can fall apart when moved. A photograph of the clay pig or the playdough pizza is an exciting record of the original and will give you all something to talk about. Pictures are easier to keep as they can be collected into a folder. If you date them they will be a real treasure to look back on.

Creative ideas to enjoy with children

Babies and toddlers

- Put a large piece of paper or a plastic tablecloth on the floor and one or two pots of paint with a brush in each for a baby or toddler to explore the magic of colour. This is even better outside on a warm day when it can be done with no clothes on.

- Provide a bucket of water and a decorating brush or a paint roller for 'painting' the outside walls or the fence with water.
- Provide plastic pots containing liquid paint and a plastic tray for finger painting.
- Make playdough by mixing 300 grams of flour with 100 grams of salt and gradually adding water. Add food colouring.
- Provide damp sand with scoops, spoons, spades and lolly sticks for carving. Provide plastic tubs and cardboard boxes for moulds for the sand.
- Provide a range of 'tools' for painting, such as pieces of sponge, strips of stiff card, sticks and short-handled brushes.

Children age three to four

- Peg a large piece of paper to the fence or a board for painting on. Provide wide and narrow household paintbrushes.
- Make pavement art by providing chalks for drawing on the patio or the path.
- Go for a walk to collect leaves, grasses, moss, shells, sticks, pebbles or feathers. These can be arranged into patterns and used over and over again.
- Make natural weavings by wrapping and winding wools round a stick or even a tree trunk.
- Tear, roll, twist and scrunch papers, and glue them to a piece of paper or card to make a lovely textured surface.
- Make a collection of things that can be painted on one side and pressed onto a piece of paper to make a printed pattern. A good way of making a printing pad is to squeeze some liquid paint onto a plastic tray or saucer, cover it with a piece of J-cloth and press the printing object onto the pad. The paint squeezes through the J-cloth and the shape of the printed object comes out clearly.
- Collect pebbles, shells, sticks, stones, corks, old keys – anything – to press into sand to make patterns.
- Provide clay for modelling. Clay is strong and really holds its shape. It is great for exercising hand and arm muscles that are needed for drawing, painting and writing. Roll, squeeze and pinch the clay into shapes. Press things into it to make patterns and textures.

- Provide cardboard boxes for your child to cover with paint. They can be left plain or they can be painted with patterns. Use them afterwards to build colourful towers, castles and walls.
- Go for a walk and make a collection of things, such as a 'green' collection or a 'soft' collection. If you collect several different types of things, you could sort and group them together at home.

Children as artists

Useful publications

Helen Bromley (2006) *Making my own mark: play and writing*, London: Early Education.

Ursula Kolbe (2005) *It's not a bird, yet*, London: Peppinot Press.

Ursula Kolbe (2007) *Rapunzel's supermarket*, second edition, London: Peppinot Press.

John Matthews (2003) *Drawing and painting in early childhood: children and visual representation*, London: Paul Chapman.

Cathy Myer (2000) *Not just pictures: children developing creativity through art*, London: Early Education

Cathy Myer (2003) *Not just pictures*, London: Early Education.

Useful contacts

Most **art galleries and museums** have special activity days, so look out for those which are suitable for young children in your local area.

Libraries also offer activities and are a good source of information for what's going on.

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Early Education

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

