

Foster Children's Creativity

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Young children are naturally curious, imaginative and eager to experiment and discover. They tell stories, dance, dress up, invent games and explore with Duplo, Lego or Mechano. Creative activities are those that encourage children to make whatever comes to their mind. They are not spectator oriented but experiential with right brain stimulation and self-expression.

One of the easiest, yet most misunderstood, areas of creativity involves artistic materials such as paper and crayons. To young children artistic ability and an end product are of little value. The benefits of children having access to art materials are as follows:

1. Provide a visual language to express their experiences and feelings. The colour black has a different message than red or blue.
2. Help children establish confidence in their own abilities and ideas.
3. Experientially learn such things as glue sticks and the colour red when mixed with yellow makes orange.
4. Become aware of their senses by feeling, touching, smelling, seeing and sometimes tasting.
5. Improve their hand-eye coordination.

Many of us had our creative juices sucked when we were young. A teacher may have said "The sky is not pink. It is blue. Re-colour your picture." We've all seen pink skies in Alberta sunsets and know that in a world of Oz and dreams any colour is a possibility.

Years ago I took our children, Kelly and Ben, to the library storytelling time where a story about an elephant was read. At the conclusion the children were handed lunch bags and directed to stuff them with newspaper, poke 4 popsicle sticks into the bottom and make "an elephant trunk" by twisting the bag opening. What was accomplished by this exercise? The children were obedient in following directions. If materials had been provided for the children to create at their own developmental level I am certain that three year old Ben's end result would have looked very different from his five and half year old sister's. There are times when children need to respond with total obedience to adult directions but not in activities that are intended to provide a creative outlet.

Rhoda Kellogg collected over a half a million children's drawings and traced the artistic development of children from two to eight. She discovered that children first scribble and then an emerging oval appears within the scribbles. Eventually a distinct oval or circle shape is drawn. Children at this stage have mastered enough hand-eye control to make this shape. Mandelas exist naturally in our environment—Mom's face, the sun, a clock on the wall or the wheels of a bicycle. Those circular shapes eventually are used deliberately to create a house or a big head with other ovals as eyes and mouth. As more control is developed typically four to five year olds start noticing and drawing shapes in their environment such as squares, triangles, numbers and alphabet letters.

Suggestions for nourishing creativity with artistic materials:

1. Avoid making models for children to copy.
2. Help children see, smell, hear, touch and then express.
3. Forget a logical world when looking at children's creations. Ideas of proportion are different.
4. Be honest and polite. Careful of inappropriate praise as well as criticism.
5. Fill your home with crazy, fun and beautiful visual images.
6. Provide a variety of materials to be freely used. Some basics include fat crayons for toddlers, lots of crayons for the older ones, watercolour felt pens, tempera paint (red, blue and yellow and mix them together to see the magic), paint brushes, glue, scissors, old magazines, gift wrap, shelf paper, paper plates, plasticine and play dough.
7. Appreciate the creative activity and de-emphasize that a product needs to look like something. After all some of the most well paid artists create canvases with mere splashes of beautiful colours.
8. Avoid asking "What is it?" and say "Tell me about your picture."

The world needs more creative minds and you can make a difference in that department. Happy crayoning.

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