

children as illustrators

Making Meaning through Art and Language

Susan Conklin Thompson

photographs by Keith Thompson



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National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036-1426
202-232-8777 or 800-424-2460
www.naeyc.org

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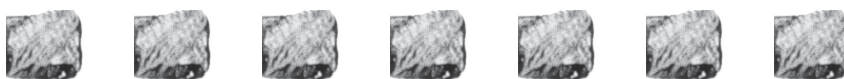
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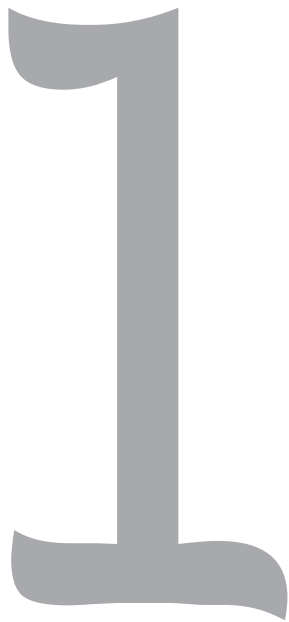
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Understanding Children as Creative Beings

A four-year-old child slowly pushes both hands through a wide smear of blue paint on the large painting before her. Swirling her fingers around and around, she is so engrossed that she doesn't notice her teacher sit down quietly beside her. Finally the child pauses. Leaning back from her creation, she notices her teacher smiling at her. "I see you're working very hard," the teacher says, "Can you tell me about your painting?" Looking up with a shy smile, the girl says in a soft but animated voice: "The wind came down and blew ALL around!"

Like this child, young children everywhere love to explore the materials available to them and to express themselves creatively. One's relationship to art begins in these early years. The attitudes developed during childhood about creativity and artistic ability carry over into adolescence and adulthood, dramatically influencing interest in art and confidence in creating it throughout life. Thus it is important for young children to have opportunities to express themselves freely and experience positive feelings and success in art activities.

Children, Art, and Exploration

When children are young, they experiment with different art processes and materials. Schirrmacher (2002) tells us,

In the early years, children's creative functioning emphasizes a process orientation. The emphasis is on making and doing rather than on

completing a project. For example, children may paint but end up throwing the picture away or not claiming it to take home. The primary satisfaction is in the processing, the smearing with paint, rather than in what it turns out to be. (7)

When we see young children use paintbrushes and water to paint on the side of a house or on a fence, we see them enjoying the process, not the product. Process-oriented activities, such as reading children a book about flamingos and encouraging them to represent flamingo colors with paint, help children connect what they learn to the world around them.

For many teachers, shifting the focus of any project to emphasize the learning process rather than the product is difficult. They experience pressure from families, colleagues, and others in their schools and communities to have children complete identifiable products. Many early childhood educators fall into the trap of encouraging the young children in their classrooms to create something discrete that others can understand and appreciate, such as in the following example:

During a second grade unit on the ocean, the teacher introduces an activity using clay. "You can mold the clay into any of the creatures we studied that live in the ocean or on the ocean floor. When you're finished, you can put your animal in the back of the room to dry. Now watch me. This is how to work with the clay. First I roll the clay into a ball, then I pinch eight long tentacles and make a round head. I pinch the clay to form the beak, and then I use a pencil to poke two eyes. On each of the tentacles. . . ."

After the octopus demonstration, each child receives a hunk of clay. To the teacher's dismay, the children do not seem interested in creating ocean creatures. "They wanted to roll the clay into snakes, pinch it, stretch it, and push objects from the room into it to make impressions," she complains later to a colleague. Then she laughs and says, "I guess I should have given them a chance to play with the clay first. I don't think they ever worked with clay before, and they wanted to experiment with it."

Teachers often feel that a finished product reflects positively on them as teachers and is a tangible representation of children's learning. They are afraid that when children don't bring home projects representing their learning, parents will wonder whether learning is taking place. Educating parents and others about the value of process, documenting what children learn through play and their own artistic experiences, and recording children's conversations are all techniques teachers can use to help others understand the value of the learning that is taking place.

Focusing on process provides the means for children to express themselves. Self-expression in art is most likely to take place when children are involved in meaningful activities, when the creative process is valued, when there are many opportunities to explore different materials, and when children are allowed and encouraged to discover art elements such as line, shape, and texture (Kieff & Casbergue 2000). During the creative process children play with ideas and materials, learning and practicing new forms of creative expression.

Play and Art

Young children construct knowledge about their everyday environment through play. As children play they gain understanding of themselves, their friends, and the world around them. Play also helps children deal with disturbing events, which they portray through their play. Play provides opportunities for children to learn and work through ideas, being just who they need to be at the time they are playing. As Jones & Reynolds (1992) relate,

Young children learn the most important things not by being told but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interactions with the physical world and with other children—and the way they do this is by playing. (1)

Isenberg and Jalongo (1997) state that play is the essential style of learning for children. Play experiences with appropriate materials lead to intellectual growth and help children become better problem solvers as they use the information they have gained to confront new challenges (Hughes 1999). Piaget (1951), Vygotsky (1978), and other theorists (e.g., Sutton-Smith [1967]) argue that development of symbols and symbolic capacities, which takes place in children's play, contributes to language, concept formation, and other aspects of intellectual functioning. Play also allows children greater control over their environment and activities as they leave reality to engage in higher-order thought processes.

Play in art can be about exploring materials—a three-year-old sponging paint on sheets of newspaper, experimenting with different colors; a young child adding a drop of food coloring to a bowl of water; children blowing through a straw into a puddle of paint or splattering paint with a toothbrush. In *Children, Play, and Development*, Hughes (1999) describes a child playing with and exploring clay:

Aaron is busily playing with a large lump of clay. He pounds it repeatedly against the table, then pulls off a large piece, breaks it into several smaller pieces and rolls them into balls. He soon grows tired of rolling,

Play is the essential style of learning for children.

and so he flattens the balls into pancakes, which he distributes to each of the other three children seated at his table. Later he collects his pancakes and stretches them into hot dogs. Then he rolls them into balls again. Next he takes some of the balls, breaks them in half and makes smaller balls of the broken pieces. Finally, when he begins to tire of the clay, he rolls the balls together in the following manner: First, he combines two small ones into a larger one; then he repeatedly adds another ball to the growing mass until he has a fairly large lump, which he proceeds to join to the original lump of clay that the teacher had given him. (178)

Involving children in concrete manipulation of materials keeps them in touch with concepts that many adults know only through vocabulary. For example, young children have informal knowledge about items floating in water through playing in puddles and floating toys in the bathtub. Their knowledge is not expressed through language such as *surface tension* and *density*, although it is important not only to involve children in play but also to give them some vocabulary related to what they are learning. In the example above, Aaron gained firsthand knowledge about the physical properties of clay, learning that while he could change its appearance radically it would always remain the same quantity (Hughes 1999, 178–79).

Examining textures indoors and outdoors can also be part of children's play and exploration. Discovering and collecting natural materials with interesting textures and using them to make prints and collages, or finding small objects in the classroom and pressing them into playdough to make patterns, make for exciting, engaging learning experiences.

Play in art can be about working through feelings and events—a young child playing outside with friends draws chalk pictures of her dead goldfish on the sidewalk to help her process its death; or a child whose family has recently moved paints a picture of his old house. These children are playing with creating and refining their own narratives via an artistic process. Kieff and Casbergue (2000) explain that “Children develop the ability to identify and clarify their own feelings as they express them through art materials and techniques” (174). “Their paintings, drawings, collages, songs, stories, and constructions reveal what they see and understand about the world around them” (173).

When two or more children engage in social play with clay, tissue, paper, fabric, or other art materials, they share ideas, expand their imaginations, and enhance their social skills. What is shared and learned is then added to a child's knowledge bank and encourages additional experimentation. Art activities that are meaningful to children can provide this forum for their constructive and creative play and learning.