

The importance of creative arts in early childhood classrooms

At circle time, Ms. O'Brien introduces the concept of self-portraits to her group of 4-year-olds. She shows examples from the art world, including the self-portraits of Frieda Kahlo, Vincent Van Gogh, Gustave Caillebotte, Pablo Picasso, and Rembrandt (all available at Google images).

With the group, Ms. O'Brien explores the artists' interpretations of how they looked. She points out the ways in which a painted self-portrait differs from a photograph. Her intention is to build the children's understanding of *unique*.

To reinforce this concept, she asks pairs of children to identify each other's uniqueness using descriptive words. Afterward, the children are free to create their own self-portraits using materials—paint, markers, crayons, pencils, watercolor, chalk, paper, and mirrors—in the art area.



This self-portrait activity is one of many standard opportunities children have to engage in the creative arts, activities that are essential for fostering young children's cognition and imagination (Koster 2012). Indeed, such activities are fundamental for supporting children's cognitive growth and overall development.

An overview of creative arts

Creative arts are activities that actively engage children's imagination through art, dance, dramatic play or theater, puppetry, and music. The creative arts engage children across all domains—cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical. Activities are deliberately *open-ended* (not prescriptive), foster *divergent* thinking, and support the *process* without particular attention on the *product*.

Mayesky (2013) offers teachers eight ways to help children express their natural creativity through the arts.

- Help children accept change. Fear and anxiety are the enemies of creativity.
- Help children realize that some problems have no easy answers.
- Help children recognize that many problems have many possible answers. The goal is to explore and discover.
- Help children monitor and accept their own feelings.
- Value children's creativity, even when it's messy.
- Recognize and acknowledge children's joy in all creative endeavors.
- Help children appreciate their own unique characteristics and expressions.
- Help children persevere. Encourage them to explore, discover, and explore again.

Mayesky's ideas provide an appropriate template for examining creative arts across all developmental domains. Completing art activities, for example, may



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foster the growth and maturation of children's fine and gross motor skills (Koster 2012). More specifically, grasping a paintbrush promotes children's use of fine motor skills, while skipping to music with a partner enhances gross motor skills.

Creative arts may also help children explore their emotions, both displaying and regulating them (Koster 2012). Theater and puppetry activities, for example, can help children explore their emotional range and, in play, develop emotional self-regulation and self-control. Developing the ability to control emotions during childhood is essential to the emotional regulation required in adulthood.

Opportunities for collaboration, negotiation, and problem solving, all milestones in social development, are plentiful in creative arts activities. For instance, choosing roles for an enactment of *The Three Little Pigs* could involve negotiating gender roles, vocabulary, sound effects, props, and different story endings. Creative arts activities also offer stimulating opportunities for exploring cultural differences in music, art, ritual, and holiday celebrations (Koster 2012).

Applying the theories

According to Piaget (1962), young children's cognition is fostered through exploration and participation in play activities, especially imaginative play, within their environments. Later, Vygotsky (1978) stated that play enables children to learn new things, not so much *reflecting* thought (as Piaget suggested)

but *creating* it. Vygotsky further believed that children's learning depends on social interactions and supports called *scaffolding*. Scaffolding, provided by someone with a greater knowledge base, helps a child build the skills that are necessary for optimal development.

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Early childhood educators can apply these theories. For example, teachers can offer opportunities for creative arts play by using the dramatic play area. When children are engaged in dramatic play, their imagination and creativity levels soar because they adopt certain roles related to specific characters or individuals. In addition, children build social skills when they experiment with creative arts like puppetry, creative movement, music, and dance in dramatic play scenarios (Ginsburg 2007).

Similarly, children's physical skills can be enhanced with painting activities like making a mural with paint, feathers, collage materials, and markers. During this activity, for example, a child whose fine motor skills are not fully developed can mimic and learn from a child whose fine motor skills are more refined. One child, using a large paintbrush, watches and imitates the second child gluing small feathers onto the mural.

Creative arts and developmentally appropriate practice

Developmentally appropriate practice (Copple and Bredekamp 2009) ensures that activities are planned and offered according to the skills and interests of individual children and children in a group. Creative arts activities ideally enhance children's continuing development, both stimulating and engaging it, without frustration or boredom.

Toddlers. Children between 18 months and 3 years are still learning about colors, shapes, lines, and rhythm. Build interest areas or *centers* so they can engage in play, either alone or with other children.

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Offer a choice of creative arts materials including large crayons, watercolor, play dough, and collage items as well as large sheets of paper (Copples and Bredekamp 2009). Encourage physical development with deliberate and intentional movement and music activities rather than playing background music throughout the day. Offer simple puppets to enhance language development. And make sure there are ample materials so that toddlers aren't expected to share.

Preschoolers. Children between the ages 3 and 5 are fascinated by symbols and sequences (Koster 2012). Preschoolers represent objects, people, and events in the environment symbolically and creatively. For example, pebbly sand becomes the vegetable soup to feed a doll, and stacked hollow blocks represent horses on the range. Provide preschoolers with opportunities to collaborate with one another in creative activities, such as class murals, group constructions, puppet play, and dance moves. Foster this creativity by allowing children to work in large groups (not limiting the number of children in a center) and give them time and support (but not interference) as they negotiate and problem solve.

Integrate the creative arts in your classroom

Capitalize on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky as you integrate creative art experiences in your early childhood classroom. Remember, children learn through exploration and interactions within their

environments and with each other. Providing opportunities for collaboration, discovery, and exploration in creative art experiences will foster children's levels of cognition, which in turn may promote their physical, social, and emotional well-being (Koster 2012).

References

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