



## Activities for

# Visual Art

*It's not play dough. It's sculpture* (preschooler quoted in Wien, Keating, & Bigelow, 2008, p. 78).

## The Development of Visual Art in Children

Changes in virtually every aspect of development affect a young child's ability to create visual art. Cognitively, because preschoolers can hold images in mind — a flower, a person, the act of running — they can represent their observations and experiences in two and three dimensions. As children learn labels for attributes such as color, size, and texture, they use this knowledge when choosing and working with materials. Gains in social and emotional skills allow children to express their feelings in drawings, sculpture, and collage. Physical development, especially fine-motor skills and eye-hand coordination, enables children to use art materials and tools with increasing control.

Culture, as well as exposure, also influences the way young children perceive and create art. For example, some religions ban the use of the human figure in art and architecture. Instead, there may be more emphasis on geometric patterns or depictions of nature. Particular colors or design elements may predominate in various geographic or ethnic groups. Weaving or beadwork may be



common in one culture, carving or ceramics in another. Some children experience a great deal of art in their homes and communities; others see very little in their daily lives. All these factors can affect the young child's awareness of visual art in the environment, and his or her ability to make art. Despite these differences, researchers have identified a typical series of steps in developing art from late toddlerhood to the early elementary years (Swann, 2008; Wright, 2003):

- At first, children treat art materials as no different from other objects. For example, they may roll crayons, tickle their cheek with a paintbrush, or poke things into a lump of clay.
- Next children explore the properties of art materials and tools. For example, they discover that crayons make marks on paper, that the amount of pressure on a brush handle affects the type of marks the bristles make, and that clay can be patted flat, squished into a ball, or rolled into a tube.
- Children make simple representations, often accidentally (see Chapter 2), and name or label them according to some recognizable attribute. Thus a squiggly line may be a snake, blobs of paint may be called raindrops, and a flattened piece of clay may be identified as a pizza. Children will often describe their artwork in much greater detail than appears in the creation itself — for example, naming the “toppings” on the pizza even though the surface of the clay is smooth.
- Children become increasingly concerned with the accuracy of their representations, beginning with basic features and adding actual details. So a drawing of a snake may acquire thickness, a pattern



on its back, and a head with a darting tongue. Rain may fall in a scene that includes a house with a door and windows as well as trees and flowers. Items stuck in a clay pizza may include red beads for pepperoni or green confetti for peppers, and the pizza may even be cut into slices.

At every stage of creation, children are learning more about the nature of art and also about themselves. “Whether the intent is realistic depiction, storytelling, pattern making, or a combination of the three, children’s visual intelligence is at work” (Soundy & Lee, 2013, p. 71). Moreover, for young children, drawing is also the first stage in learning to write. Visual art is a readily accessible language they can use to depict their experiences and express their ideas.

## **Materials and Equipment That Support Visual Art**

Stocking the classroom and outdoor areas with the following equipment and materials will help preschoolers explore a variety of two- and three-dimensional art forms:

- Water source (indoor sink; outdoor spigot or hose)
- Smocks or paint shirts
- Sponges, towels, newspaper
- Surfaces including easels, walls, floors, wooden pallets, clipboards, pavement
- Fasteners (stapler, scissors, hole punch, glue, paper clips, elastic bands, pipe cleaners, string)
- Paper of various colors, sizes, textures
- Paints (tempera, watercolor, and finger paint in primary colors [red, yellow, blue], white, and black)
- Paint pumps
- Paintbrushes of various widths, with both flat and tapered ends
- Paint rollers
- Crayons (including a range of skin-tone colors)
- Colored pencils
- Markers of varying thicknesses
- Chalk, charcoal, oil pastels
- Ink pads and stamps, stickers
- Modeling clay
- Play dough

- Beeswax
- Sand
- Modeling tools (rolling pins, dowels, cookie cutters, tortilla press, garlic press, molds [containers] of various shapes and sizes)
- Collage materials (wood scraps, pieces of fabric, yarn, ribbon, feathers, beads, buttons, sequins, natural materials [shells, twigs, leaves, pebbles, pine cones])
- Frame loom, chainlink fence

For additional ideas on materials for the visual arts, see *The High-Scope Preschool Curriculum* (Epstein & Hohmann, 2012, Chapter 6 (pp. 171–221)).

### **Teaching Strategies That Support Visual Art**

To nurture and support young children’s interest in visual art, use the following strategies as you carry out the daily routine:

#### **Provide diverse examples of visual art throughout the learning environment.**

In addition to painting and sculpture, help children become aware of the artistry in everyday objects such as a ceramic bowl, woven scarf, or hand-carved tool. Point out the beauty in nature, including the interplay of light and shadow, the many shades of green in the yard, or the design on the metal hinges of a door. Make sure that the examples of art throughout the room represent the diversity of children and families in your setting. For example, choose different types of fabrics and patterns in the dress-up area, and showcase artists from around the world in the book area.

#### **Give children time to explore art materials and tools in depth.**

While it is important to supply young children with a variety of open-ended art materials, don’t overwhelm them with too many at once. Allow them to explore each material, by itself and then with tools, before introducing something new. For example, provide children with one primary color (red, blue, or yellow) with white and black, before giving them another color to mix in. Likewise, encourage preschoolers to feel and mold clay with their bare hands, over several days or across several small-group times, before you offer them a variety of modeling tools. When children are given the time to become familiar with a material, their ideas for using that material creatively expand.

### **Display and send home children's artwork.**

Preschoolers enjoy sharing their artwork with others and seeing what their peers create. Set up wall space, shelves, and pedestals at the children's eye level to display their work. Encourage them to describe their creations to parents at dropoff and pickup times, emphasizing *how* the artwork was made rather than *what* the final product is. Let children take artwork home so parents can display it prominently and proudly.

For more information on teaching strategies that support visual art in preschool, see Epstein (2012, Chapter 3.)

### **Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Visual Art**

Because art is a universal language, it allows people of different backgrounds to communicate with one another. Use online resources and those in your local library to discover more about visual artists whose histories are similar to those of the children in your program. Choose books with illustrations representing a wide range of artists and genres from around the world. Ask families to suggest artists or art forms they admire and/or whose work they have at home. Art is also a good vehicle for exposing preschoolers to people, settings, and cultural practices that differ from theirs. Find books and reproductions of artwork that illustrate different ways of life. Below are suggestions for diversifying the range of artists, genres, and media that children can encounter in the preschool setting. Build on these ideas to familiarize children with a wide range of visual art forms and the men and women who create them.

**Artists.** You might talk about and show examples of work by the following artists: Romare Bearden (African-American painter); Dawoud Bey (African-American photographer); I. M. Pei (Asian-American architect); Maya Lin (Chinese-American architect); El Anatsui (Nigerian collagist); Diego Rivera (Mexican muralist); Frida Kahlo (Mexican painter); Zaha Hadid (Iraqi-born architect); Isamu Noguchi (Japanese-American sculptor & landscape artist); Harvey Pratt (Native American painter and sculptor); Teri Greeves (Native American beadworker).

**Genres.** The following are genres you could introduce children to, which together reflect a diversity of cultures and influences: Chinese calligraphy; Japanese brushwork; Indonesian batik; Majolica pottery; Navaho rugs; African masks; African wood carving; Native American quill and beadwork; Native American sand painting; African quilts; Middle Eastern mosaics

**Materials (media).** You could introduce children to the following materials, which reflect artwork done in a variety of cultures: feathers; quills; beads; sand; charcoal; pen and ink; powdered minerals

(nontoxic); wood blocks; tessera (mosaic tiles); yarn; raffia; embroidery thread; recycled (reclaimed and scrap) materials (cleaned and with rough edges or other hazards removed).

### **Adapting Visual Art Materials and Activities for Children With Special Needs**

To enable children with a variety of special needs to participate fully in visual arts activities, try the following ideas:

- Provide alternate items that are easier to hold and manipulate (e.g., adaptive scissors, large paint brushes, glue sticks with velcro straps).
- Make brush handles and crayons easier to grip by wrapping them with masking tape or sliding them through a slit in a small rubber ball.
- Provide magnifying glasses and spot lighting (e.g., flashlights) to enhance visibility.
- Scent paints and play dough (e.g., with herbs and spices, cooking extracts) to provide additional sensory stimulation.
- Lower easels to make them more accessible.
- Strap boards for painting, drawing, and sculpting onto wheelchair trays.
- Buy hypoallergenic art materials.

### **Adapting Visual Art Materials and Activities for Children Who Are Dual language Learners (DLLs)**

Visual art does not depend on language, but it can be a vehicle to help children grow in their receptive and expressive English language skills.

Try these suggestions with DLL preschoolers:

- Encourage children to name and describe, in their home language, the visual art materials and tools they use, and provide the English equivalent.
- Label visual art materials and tools in the language(s) children in the classroom speak, as well as in English.
- Encourage DLL children and native English speakers to collaborate during visual art activities, sharing their discoveries and ideas, and helping one another solve problems.
- Make “work-in-progress” signs in the language(s) children in the classroom speak, as well as in English.



- Partner DLLs with native English speakers during visual arts activities. Act as a translator to help children understand and carry out one another's ideas. Check with DLL children to make sure you have correctly understood and communicated their ideas. Check with native English speakers to make sure they understand the DLL children's intentions.

