

## **Art in Early Childhood: Curriculum Connections**

*By Jill Englebright Fox, Ph.D., and Stacey Berry, M.Ed.*

Art has traditionally been an important part of early childhood programs. Friedrich Froebel, the father of kindergarten, believed that young children should be involved in both making their own art and enjoying the art of others. To Froebel, art activities were important, not because they allowed teachers to recognize children with unusual abilities, but because they encouraged each child's "full and all-sided development" (Froebel, 1826). More than a century later, early childhood teachers are still concerned with the "all-sided" development of each child. Our curriculum includes activities that will help children develop their cognitive, social, and motor abilities. As Froebel recognized, making art and enjoying the art of other people and cultures are very important to the development of the whole child. The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of art in young children's learning and development and to describe elements of an art program within a developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum.

**Art and Socio-Emotional Development** Young children feel a sense of emotional satisfaction when they are involved in making art, whether they are modeling with clay, drawing with crayons, or making a collage from recycled scraps. This satisfaction comes from the control children have over the materials they use and the autonomy they have in the decisions they make (Schirmacher, 1998; Seefeldt, 1993). Deciding what they will make and what materials they will use may be the first opportunity children have to make independent choices and decisions.

Making art also builds children's self-esteem by giving them opportunities to express what they are thinking and feeling (Klein, 1991; Sautter, 1994). Sautter (1994) stated that when children participate in art activities with classmates, the feedback they give to each other builds self-esteem by helping them learn to accept criticism and praise from others. Small group art activities also help children practice important social skills like taking turns, sharing, and negotiating for materials.

**Art and Cognitive Development** For very young children, making art is a sensory exploration activity. They enjoy the feeling of a crayon moving across paper and seeing a blob of colored paint grow larger. Kamii and DeVries (1993) suggested that exploring materials is very important because it is through exploration that children build a knowledge of the objects in the world around them.

Activities centering around making art also require children to make decisions and conduct self-evaluations. Klein (1991) described four decisions that child artists make. First, they decide what they will portray in their art—a person, a tree, a dragon. Second, they choose the media they will use, the arrangement of objects in their work, and the perspective viewers will take. Children decide next how quickly or how slowly they will finish their project, and finally, how they will evaluate their creation. Most often, children evaluate their artwork by thinking about what they like and what other people tell them is pleasing (Feeney & Moravcik, 1987).

As children grow and develop, their art-making activities move beyond exploring with their senses and begin to involve the use of symbols. Children begin to represent real objects, events, and feelings in their artwork. Drawing, in particular, becomes an activity that allows them to

symbolize what they know and feel. It is a needed outlet for children whose vocabulary, written or verbal, may be limited (de la Roche, 1996). This early use of symbols in artwork is very important because it provides a foundation for children's later use of words to symbolize objects and actions in formal writing.

**Art and Motor Development**\_While making art, young children develop control of large and small muscle groups (Koster, 1997). The large arm movements required for painting or drawing at an easel or on large paper on the floor build coordination and strength. The smaller movements of fingers, hands, and wrists required to cut with scissors, model clay, or draw or paint on smaller surfaces develop fine motor dexterity and control. With repeated opportunities for practice, young children gain confidence in their use of tools for making art and later for writing.

Making art also helps children develop eye-hand coordination (Koster, 1997). As children decide how to make parts fit together into a whole, where to place objects, and what details to include, they learn to coordinate what they see with the movements of their hands and fingers. This eye-hand coordination is essential for many activities, including forming letters and spacing words in formal writing.

**Art Experiences in Classrooms for Young Children**\_Although art activities help children develop in many areas, teachers must recognize that art also has value in and of itself. Fostering the development of children's aesthetic sense and engaging children in creative experiences should be the objectives of an early childhood art program.

Activities that involve children in both making and enjoying art are essential if programs are to meet the needs of the whole child. The challenge for early childhood teachers is to provide these activities in an art program that is developmentally appropriate and that can be integrated throughout the curriculum. Such a program should include:

- using reproductions to expose children to masterpiece art
- taking field trips to local museums to provide opportunities for art appreciation
- providing access to a classroom art center in which children choose their own topics and media
- displaying children's artwork in a classroom gallery
- involving families in the art program.

To integrate an art program into a developmentally appropriate curriculum, adults must recognize that children express their ideas through art, just as they do in writing. Creative teachers find ways to support children's learning across the curriculum through activities in which children make art and enjoy the art of others. The following elements form the basis of an art program to be integrated into a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children.

**Using Masterpiece Reproductions**\_Posters and smaller reproductions of masterpiece art can be purchased at most art museums or through teacher supply catalogs. Less expensive reproductions can be obtained from calendars, stationery, magazines, and newspapers. Teachers can use these reproductions in many ways to support children's learning throughout the

classroom and curriculum.

Reproductions may be used on signs to designate learning centers or label parts of the classroom. For example, Jacob Lawrence's *Builders #1* might be displayed in the woodworking center, or Jean Simeon Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* could be hung over the water table. Reproductions could be used to indicate gender on the restroom door or where children line up to go outside. Reproductions could also be used on bulletin boards to accompany displays related to thematic units. The work of Piet Mondrian might be used to illustrate a focus on primary colors or shapes, that of Claude Monet might accompany a unit on spring, while the works of Maurice Utrillo might go with a study of communities. Masterpiece art would not, in either learning centers or group discussions, replace the use of real objects or photographs as visual aids, but would provide children with another way of seeing and thinking about the concepts they are learning. Reproductions help children to make the connection "between reality and art—someone's interpretation of reality" (Dighe, Calomiris, & Van Zutphen, 1998, p. 5).

**Museum Field Trips**\_Taking young children to an art museum can be a challenging experience for any adult. Museums are designed for grown-ups who engage in thoughtful reflection, not for active children who want to point and exclaim. With a little preparation, however, a museum field trip can be an enjoyable experience for all.

Many museums schedule special times for children's tours and family visits. During these times, the museum staff and other patrons expect children to visit, and special tours and support personnel will be available. If the children will not be participating in a tour planned specifically for them, it is important that the teacher select a few key items on which to focus during the visit. Artwork done by artists featured in the classroom or portraying objects related to thematic units will be of interest to the children. They will have a context for thinking about and discussing what they see. Because the attention span of young children is short, museum field trips should not be lengthy. Thirty minutes is probably long enough for children to view the pieces pre-selected by the teacher without getting tired or frustrated in the museum setting. Other exhibits can be saved for future field trips.

**Classroom Art Center**\_The art center should provide opportunities for child-centered activities. Although teachers might suggest themes, too much direction or assistance interferes with the creative process. Adult models for children to follow are also frustrating because most children do not have the fine motor and visual perceptual skills to replicate adult efforts. Instead, teachers can encourage children to design and complete their own projects by recognizing that the same themes may be repeated many times as children explore ideas and practice skills.

Open-ended materials such as paint, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, clay, and assorted paper support child-centered activities. Although having too many choices can be overwhelming for young children, making a selection from two or three options at a time is an excellent way for children to practice decision-making. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1975) also "cautioned" teachers not to change materials or introduce new materials into the center too often. Children need time to practice and develop skills with materials if they are to use them to express their ideas and

feelings.

Finally, it should be noted that the creative process takes time. Although some children will complete their artwork within a short time, others will need large blocks of time to design and make their projects. The design of the art center and the class schedule should encourage children to return to a project and work until they decide it is completed (Edwards & Nabors, 1993).

**Displaying Children's Art in a Classroom Gallery**\_A classroom gallery exhibiting children's art highlights the work for the children themselves and for classroom visitors. A large bulletin board or wall space provides a backdrop for the gallery. Children should take the responsibility for mounting their work and selecting its placement in the gallery. Labels, including a title for the work, name of the artist, medium, and year of creation, can be dictated and will provide a meaningful experience with print. Children can also serve as curators and lecturers, giving tours of the gallery to classroom visitors.

**Involving Families in the Art Program**\_Keeping families involved in the life of the classroom is an important responsibility for early childhood teachers. Sharing with families the role of art in the curriculum and the activities in which their children are participating will encourage their support of the program and of their children's learning. Family involvement can be encouraged in several ways. Inviting families to participate in museum field trips and classroom art activities provides the opportunity for shared experiences and discussion between children and their parents.

Teachers may also suggest at-home art projects for children and parents to participate in together. These projects should always be optional and teachers should provide any special materials that might be needed in a packet which includes explanations and directions for the project. Brand (1996) suggested linking art projects with book themes as a way of encouraging parents with differing skill levels to feel comfortable in working with their children at home. For example, after reading *Lucy's Picture* (1995) by Nicola Moon, children and parents might work together to create a collage depicting activities they would like to participate in together from materials found at home and/or supplied by the teacher.

"Artists' knapsacks" for children's use at home are another way to involve families in classroom art activities. Four to five knapsacks, each featuring one medium such as paint and paper or modeling clay, can be available for children to check out and share with their families. Although the general purpose of the knapsacks should be shared with parents, specific directions for each knapsack need not be provided. The goal of the knapsacks is to encourage the same creative use of materials at home as in the classroom.

**Conclusion**\_Through the art activities described in this article, young children will develop abilities and skills that have application in many other areas of the curriculum. Most importantly, however, children will also develop an appreciation for the art of other people and cultures, and the confidence to express their own thoughts and feelings through art. Far from creating individual prodigies, this integration of making and enjoying art in the early childhood classroom will result in the "all-sided development" of the children participating.

**Jill Englebright Fox, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

**Stacey Berry, M.Ed.**, is a kindergarten teacher at Mary Munford Model School in Richmond, Virginia.

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