
BACK TO BASICS

Art center

Art activities offer children the opportunity to express creativity as they explore materials and concepts like line, color, shape, symbol, and graphic representation. The best art activities support investigation and experimentation and avoid focus on the product or result.

Use these guidelines to help children become young—and confident—artists.

- Position the art center in an area with good lighting and, if possible, near a water source.
- Focus on open-ended activities—those that allow and encourage children to be involved in the process of creativity. Avoid closed activities—those that have only one correct method or product.
- Encourage invention and independence. Avoid giving strict step-by-step instructions and making models for children to copy.
- Give children easy access to art materials. At a minimum, paint, paper, crayons, scissors, and paste should be available at any time during the day.
- Ask open-ended questions about children’s artwork. For example, say, “Tell me about your picture. I see that you used both paint and markers.” Avoid making assumptions and evaluations about what a child has drawn, as in “What a beautiful blue fish.” Sometimes children share information about their artwork, but it’s OK if they don’t. Even seemingly harmless questions like “What’s that?” can shut down the creative process. Accept art for its own sake—not for the product created.
- Avoid writing on children’s artwork. Encourage children to sign their own art. If a child wants to dictate information about the art, write on a separate piece of paper that you can attach to the artwork without damage.
- Expect children to share clean-up tasks and to be responsible for their own materials. Show children how to control paint drips, wash brushes, cover dough and clay containers, hang up smocks, and wipe up spills.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

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- Use art materials that are safe and nontoxic. Stress that art materials and equipment are used only for visual art projects in the designated art area.
 - Eatable materials, like peanut-butter play dough or chocolate-pudding finger paint easily confuse children. Avoid using food as an art medium.

AVOID WRITING ON CHILDREN'S ARTWORK.

- Develop a consistent and non-biased procedure for art displays. Avoid displays that reflect *your opinion* of what's most clever, successful, or pretty. Routinely ask, "Do you want this art to be placed so everyone can see it?" Respect children's decisions.
- Bring art projects outdoors for both group artwork and individual endeavors.

Art center basics

- Designate areas for storing art supplies as well as for drying and displaying finished art.
- Use easels that are stable and, ideally, big enough to accommodate partner painters.
- Buy left- and right-handed scissors that are blunt-ended, comfortable, sharp, and smooth in operation.
- Provide a variety of paper including colored construction paper, drawing paper, newsprint, tissue, cardboard, foil, and wallpaper scraps.
- Offer a variety of painting tools. In addition to standard brushes, provide sponges, feathers, combs, cotton swabs, toothbrushes, medicine droppers, spray bottles, and roll-top bottles.
- Provide chalk, markers, watercolors, pencils, and crayons.
- Offer and let children discover the best uses for glue, paste, glue sticks, and tape.
- Invite sculpting with play dough, clay, and materials like straws, toothpicks, Styrofoam®, pipe cleaners, and colored wires.
- Collect reusable junk for collage such as cloth scraps, cardboard tubes, string, ribbon, greeting cards, gift paper, and yarn.
- Buy powdered tempera paint. It's economical and can be used dry or mixed to any consistency for

- the easel, stamping and printing projects, and finger paint. Contain the paint in muffin tins, reused food tubs, or commercial paint cups with lids. Add a few drops of dishwashing detergent like Dawn® to paint mixtures to improve washability.
- Provide smocks and furniture protectors. Layers of newspaper or vinyl sheeting are effective in containing messes.
- Teach children how to dispose of leftover or unwanted materials. Paint, glue, dough, and clay can clog plumbing pipes. Use a plastic-lined garbage can instead. ■