

# Art for children with delays and disabilities: Teaching the way children learn

Teachers across America begin the school day with similar goals: that their students will go home proud of their accomplishments, able to communicate better, and excited about what tomorrow's lesson may be.

Despite the similarity of these goals, not every child begins the school day with identical strengths. Each child brings a unique set of skills, experiences, and learning styles to the classroom, challenging educators to balance teaching an entire class with meeting each child at an individual level.

With one out of 20 American children now entering school with a disability (Brault 2011), teachers need to be capable of adjusting their lessons to challenge their most accelerated students while uplifting those that are struggling. Fortunately, even with limited resources and time, an educator can effectively address the various needs of the class by adopting a curriculum that includes daily art and sensory experiences.

## How can art projects help?

While art projects are often seen as ways to fill time in the school day, the benefits are widely underestimated. Studies have found that art reaches students

that are at-risk or not being reached otherwise. This means that a curriculum filled with dynamic art experiences allows you to reach a far greater audience of children, from those with attention deficit hyperactivity dis-

can give children with disabilities a sense of pride. Because these students often struggle academically and socially, being able to create something they're proud of can provide a crucial boost to their self-esteem. This is especially

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order (ADHD) to behavioral issues (Stiegelbauer 2008).

Incorporating art into the classroom allows you to bridge the communication gap often caused by cognitive or verbal delays (Cruz 2009). Many children, especially those with Down syndrome or an autism spectrum disorder struggle to vocally articulate their thoughts. Creating visual art gives them the opportunity to express their beliefs, interests, and understanding of their world in a non-verbal way (Kyle 2012). This form of communication also can be especially valuable for teachers and parents because it offers a glimpse of the world from the child's perspective.

Along with encouraging communication, art in the classroom

important for those whose confidence is already low.

Finally, while lecturing may seem to be the fastest way of teaching a concept, lectures are not the best way for any child to learn. Art projects give children the opportunity to explore a variety of textures, smells, and sights, encouraging them to learn in the best possible way: by exploring their world (Stiegelbauer 2008).

## How to choose a successful art project

Finding an art project that is both developmentally appropriate and fun can seem daunting, but keeping in mind three important traits can make the choice easier. When planning art for the curriculum, remember the following:

**Encourage sensory experiences.** The arts provide the young brain with unique ways of collecting information. By opening up additional opportunities to learn through sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste, a teacher is much more likely to reach all the children in the classroom (Stiegelbauer 2008).

Look for projects that allow students a sensory experience of some sort, which will not only help develop their understanding of the world but also help maintain the interest of the entire classroom. These experiences can be as simple as incorporating a new texture into an existing project (replacing pieces of paper with sandpaper or felt, or replacing circle cut-outs with buttons) or creating a unique project revolving around a new art medium (clay or shaving cream, for example).

Although some sensory experiences can be overwhelming for children with special needs such as autism, offering these experiences over time is an important step to giving them more control and comfort with the world around them.

**Value the creative process over the final product.**

Educators often feel the pressure of sending each child home with a beautiful craft that their families can admire. But helping a child too much, through every step of a project, may take away a valuable learning experience.

Instead, you can take pictures as children work on their projects and make a collage of both the photos and the art. This not only communicates the importance of art but also will help the parents understand and appreciate the

process their children went through to create it. Regardless of how it is achieved, displaying children's art is an important part of the art-making process and gives all children a valuable self-esteem boost to see their creation on display (Cruz 2009).

Giving children more freedom when creating an art project also will give them a sense of independence and control over the product, leaving them more confident and prouder of what they've created. Children with special needs or who are at risk in any way can especially benefit from this independence in a world where they might not be able to do everything with as much freedom as their peers. The confidence this self-sufficiency can give children is extremely valuable and ought to be cultivated by teachers whenever possible.

**Allow modifications for many levels.** Ideally art projects can be modified to challenge and interest an entire classroom at each child's unique skill level. This doesn't mean that you throw out all your existing projects but rather that you think of modifications that could be made to better fit various abilities. If a child struggles with following verbal instructions, for example, try giving visual instructions (rebus, photos, or video, for example) or allowing the child to work alongside a peer (Bain and Hasio 2011).

Another obstacle can arise with children who are overwhelmed by new sensory experiences. In these cases, being prepared and having other options can save an art project. Have gloves or alternate materials available if a new texture seems too troubling for a

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child, for example.

Finally, be aware of the fine motor skills a project requires and think of adaptations that can be made for children who struggle with these skills. If the activity calls for the use of scissors, for example, consider having adaptive scissors available or modifying the activity to involve tearing rather than cutting.

Regardless of how you decide to incorporate art into the classroom, understanding its benefits and choosing developmentally appropriate art activities is crucial. As an educator, you have the special task of teaching while still making the school day exciting and fun. Through using a curriculum filled with art experiences, you can reach all the children in the classroom, highlighting their most positive attributes and

allowing them the confidence and skills to succeed in school.

Additionally, you are instilling positive attitudes toward learning that will benefit children for the rest of their lives.

## Sample activities

Listed below are a few simple, yet modifiable, art activities that can be used in a classroom. All can be done on table tops, and the instructions consist of only two or three steps. This list is directed toward preschoolers and kindergarteners but can be adapted for other ages and developmental levels.

### Tape art

Here's what you need:

- painter's tape, cut into short and varying lengths
- washable paints

- paintbrushes
- cardstock paper or canvas

1. Invite children to use the painter's tape to make designs on the paper.
2. Have children paint over the tape and allow to dry.
3. Show them how to remove the tape to reveal the design.

**Modification ideas:** Use sponges instead of paintbrushes, or make shapes or letters with the tape. If children have trouble using both hands, tape the paper to the table.

### Colorful leaves

Here's what you need:

- contact paper cut into leaf shapes, one or more leaves per child
- tissue paper in fall colors such as yellow, orange, and brown
- scissors

1. Invite children to cut the tissue paper into small squares.
2. Show them how to remove the backing from the contact paper leaves to reveal the adhesive and how to stick the squares to it.

**Modification idea:** If children struggle with scissors or cannot cut squares, have them tear the paper into strips or pieces. If they have trouble removing the backing, start a corner for them, or apply glue to a leaf shape cut out of cardstock.

### Name decorating

Here's what you need:

- glue sticks
- construction or typing paper, one sheet per child
- pom-poms, buttons, or other small objects

1. Write the child's name with a

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- glue stick on a sheet of paper.
- Invited children to place pom-poms or other objects on the glue. Allow to dry.

**Modification ideas:** Allow children to write their own names using a glue stick or marker. Have children sprinkle glitter or sand on the glue and shake off the excess.

**Caution:** Small objects pose a choking hazard for preschool children. Provide careful supervision or choose a different activity.

## Shaving cream masterpieces

Here's what you need:

- disposable aluminum pan
- shaving cream (sensitive skin, unscented)
- food coloring or paint
- paper
- ruler
- pencils

- Invite children to spread the shaving cream evenly in the pan, allowing them to explore its texture.
- Add a few drops of food coloring or paint to the shaving cream, and swirl it using the eraser end of a pencil.
- Invite children to lightly press a sheet of paper on the paint and remove it from the pan.
- Have children use a ruler to scrape the shaving cream off the paper. Allow to dry.

**Modification ideas:** Give children other objects of various sizes to swirl in the paint and discuss how each object moves the colors differently.

## Painting with cooking implements

Here's what you need:

- potato masher, chop sticks,

melon baller, plastic fork, small strainer, and other implements

- washable paints
- several aluminum or metal pie pans
- paper or canvas

- Allow children to explore the different implements.
- Pour a small amount of paint into each pie pan. Encourage children to dip an implement into a paint color and press it on paper.
- Allow children to explore making different designs and using different color combinations.

**Modification idea:** If a child has trouble grasping an implement, tape a piece of foam around the handle.

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