

# Art development in young children: Scribbles matter

Why do children make art? What do their lines, colors, shapes, and designs mean? Does children's art have any meaning? How do educators learn to recognize the art of different children? Why is art so much easier to appreciate than to understand?

For teachers planning learning spaces for children, an area for art is essential. It's useful to remember the goals of art experiences and how those goals can contribute to a child's overall developmental success. Rather than simply the ability to copy or even respect another's work, appropriate developmental goals include building hand-eye coordination, fine-motor control, dexterity, and visual acuity. Further, teachers best use art experiences to foster independent decision-making, self-evaluation, and self-regulation—making choices that are satisfying and informative.

As in all developmental domains, both nature and nurture have a hand in art development—and the

eventual ability to make and interpret the meaning of marks. Theorists, from Ebenezer Cooke in 1830 to Viktor Lowenfeld in 1987, propose a framework for art development—one that progresses from scribbling to more realistic representations of experiences, ideas, and symbols. Theorists and practitioners recognize the sequential stages of development, and that a child's progress through each stage is highly individualized. Art skills develop in tandem with children's overall development and their access to the time and tools needed to make marks.

Across time and cultures almost all people create art. Far removed from what we think of as *artists*, most of us engage in many of the same art processes as children:

- Applying paint or ink, for example, to paper, a wall, or fingernails;
- Forming clay or bread dough, for instance, into a 3-dimensional shape; and
- Interlacing yarn, fabric, or wood into patterns and designs.

For everyone, artistic skill develops with practice, support, and access to materials in a process of discovery and experimentation.

## Developmental stages

Experienced early care and education teachers recognize three developmental stages of children's art: **scribbles**, **basic forms**, and **representations**. These stages are sparked by children's earliest experiences with the tools for making marks.

The earliest stage, **scribbling**, begins in toddlerhood. Younger children are likely to be more interested in purely sensory experiences like mouthing markers, than using the marker to put lines on paper. Early scribbles are likely to be random jabs, scratches, and lines on a page. Later controlled scribbles reflect a child's power to control a marking tool

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and experiment with basic shapes and designs.

**Early scribbling** is disordered and random. In this stage hand-eye coordination is fledging, balance unsteady. There is no desire or ability to make a line go one way or another. The delight of the art experience is in handling a new tool that sometimes makes marks but also has a container for dumping and collecting. The experience is all process—exploration with the senses—and seldom reflects handedness or cognitive intent.

Reinforce this early scribbling stage by observing rather than asking. Make comments that are specific and appropriate to the child's developmental level like, "Wow, you moved your whole arm while you worked," or "I see you made red marks." Avoid labeling art work with names or asking for stories or titles for the art. Acknowledge, encourage, and save a few pieces of art for the child's portfolio.

The later scribbling stage, **controlled scribbling**, describes a child's ability to recognize the correlation between motions with a tool and marks on a page: "I did that." This typically occurs between the ages of 2 and 3, about 6 months after the earlier stage. The scribbling reflects the skills the child has built to control the marks. This new control engenders more experimentation, and lines start to loop and zigzag.

Support controlled scribbles by offering an expanded range of tools like colored chalk, liquid tempera, and stout crayons. Vary the type, size, and color of available paper. Encourage work at the table, easel, and the floor—each offering unique

challenges to control and refine muscle strength.

Recognize that deliberate attempts at making marks can be foiled by the environment—a table that's too high, a sidewalk that has cracks and bumps, or paint that's too fluid to control.

Understand that some children find favorite patterns and may cover countless pieces of paper with the same jabs, swirls, or loops. Note too that the child's hand-eye coordination is increasingly refined; the brain and eyes direct the movement of the fingers, hand, and arms.

**Basic forms** reflect a child's experience with the tools that make marks and the words and materials that reflect shapes—lines, crosses, ovals, circles, squares, and triangles—in the environment. Significantly, the child has both the muscle control and hand-eye coordination to replicate the basic shape and the cognitive strength to consider additional features. For example, a circle shape might expand into a series of coordinated circles called *spirals*, or a child may draw a rectangle over and over, varying size and color.

Generally, the first basic forms are the circle and oval. Later, as muscle control improves, 3- to 4-year-olds add squares, triangles, and rectangles to their art, reflecting the ability to draw lines of equal length in relationship to each other.

Reinforce the basic forms stage by adding to the available art-making tools for children to choose. Crayons, markers, and liquid tempera are inviting but may become boring to children who see the same materials every day. Experiment with offering fewer, then more crayon or marker colors. Introduce tempera as a liquid or as a powder to mix into a variety of consistencies. Provide lead pencils and lined paper. Offer a variety of paper styles including construction paper, easel paper cut in a variety of sizes or shapes, and newsprint.

Children reach the final developmental stage when they have the ability to draw a combination of marks that make pictures. This is called the **pictorial or representative stage**, and many 4- and 5-year-olds are at this level. These early pictures are different from scribbles in their intent—the child means to draw a specific thing without the earlier sensory motivator. The pictures combine basic shapes to represent an idea or reality; the shapes become symbols of houses, trees, animals, gardens, trucks, and people according to the child's individual interest, curiosity,

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and mental image.

In the **early pictorial stage** children work to perfect their symbols—typically a combination of shapes recognized as a house or a person. Circles, squares, rectangles, and spirals form heads, doors, hair, and chimney smoke. The symbols change frequently, often refined with repetition. Think about the number of examples you’ve seen of a two-story house with a tree and flowered yard (a classic representation even for children who live in apartment buildings or on farms).

In the **later pictorial stage** children combine symbols in complex representations of ideas, experiences, and ideas. They build new symbols on familiar ones to tell a story or describe an event: A circle becomes a specific symbol for the sun. Each child (with opportunity and experience) develops a unique approach to symbols called a *schema*. Attentive teachers seldom need to see a child’s name on work from this later pictorial stage. The schema, a personal and individualized symbol, is a unique signature. Listen for a child to say, “That’s Arron’s picture. That’s how he draws a tree.”

With the skills needed to represent ideas symbolically, children transition fluidly to the ultimate symbol manipulation—shapes to letters to written and read words. Art development, some argue, is foundational to literacy, and literacy foundational to success in the academic and adult world. Perhaps more than rote recitation of the alphabet or directed letter-shape practice, children most benefit from the slow-paced

experiences that translate scribbles into rich reading and writing skill.

## Guidelines for success

Understanding and observing children’s art development gives teachers a baseline from which to plan, support, and appreciate art experiences. Adapt these ideas to reflect the ages and stages of the children in your group.

- Accept children’s work as the child creates it. Avoid adding or correcting. Proportion, shape, color, and approach are unique to each creation and may reflect nothing more than a child’s current fascination with the color magenta.
- Know that coordination and muscle strength develop from experience—we exercise muscles to build new ones. Avoid coloring sheets and other adult-created templates that don’t support basic skill development.
- Offer art experiences every day, occasionally rotating or introducing new materials and tools. Remember children need continuity—changing materials too often may truncate a child’s need to refine and reproduce a specific shape or symbol.
- Make comments that are specific and concrete, and avoid comparisons and evaluation. Practice is essential to skill-building; your exclamation of “Terrific!” doesn’t offer useful guidance on self-evaluation or the child’s individuality.
- If a child is reluctant to engage in art experiences, it may be because of past criticism. Help the child get started with words that instill confidence. Encourage experimentation and reinforce individuality—each child has ideas to represent even when the group is using the same materials.
- Unless you’re a therapist, don’t try to determine a child’s psychological health by the art produced. Not all children who draw tiny pictures are shy; bold colors don’t necessarily signal extraversion; and sometimes it is fun to paint in black.
- Plan for safety. Make sure all supplies are non-toxic. Introduce new materials with deliberate words on how the material is used. For example, demonstrate as you say, “Twist the cap like this and gently squeeze the tube at the back end. Put this much paint on the paper. Twist the cap back in place so that the paint doesn’t dry out.”
- Plan for messes. Provide smocks, protect surfaces with plastic or newsprint, and keep clean-up

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supplies accessible. Show children how to put on smocks, cover the table, and wash brushes so they can work independently. Add a few drops of detergent to liquid tempera to minimize stains.

- Discourage waste. Having a well-equipped art shelf lets children see that there are enough materials for a project; hoarding isn't necessary. Help children learn to use what they need and to return supplies to their proper place.
- Encourage respect and effort. Confront children who make negative, disparaging comments about another's work, and give positive comments to the targeted child. Refrain from posting what you determine to be the best examples of products; all children deserve to have their efforts honored.

## Activities to support art development

Try some of these activities, always keeping in mind the journey from scribbling to meaningful marks.

### At the easel

- Offer markers and crayons.
- Use a number of shades of one color of liquid tempera.
- Provide the same color of paint as the color of paper.
- Use black and white—switching the paint and paper colors.
- Vary the style of brushes. Invention counts here: Try out brushes for dish scrubbing, house painting, or

styling hair. Offer stiff, flat, floppy, and soft bristles.

- Offer crayons and paint. Invite children to experiment with the results according to which goes on the paper first.

### Big explorations

- Provide large boxes to paint. Consider a house painting project after you've cut door and window openings in a large refrigerator box.
- Affix a long sheet of mural paper to an inside wall or the outdoor fence. Invite children to make a cooperative painting.
- Clip an old white sheet onto a fence. Give the children spray bottles filled with diluted food coloring. Note that pulling the lever on a spray bottle requires different small-muscle strength than holding a marker or brush.

### At the art table

- Offer soft tools for making marks: cotton balls, cotton swabs, and sponges, for example.
- Finger paint with ice. Tape freezer paper (glossy side up) to the table. Offer finger paint and a bowl of ice cubes to use to spread the paint. As the ice melts, the paint dilutes. Help children notice what happens and why.
- Help children investigate chalk. Offer light colors and dark paper, wet chalk on dry paper, dry chalk on wet paper, and chalk on heavy-toothed paper and cardboard.

### Prompts

Encourage drawing and painting experiences with older kindergarten-age children with art prompts.

- Draw something you cannot see.
- Draw what you had for breakfast this morning.
- Draw as many animals on a page as you can.
- Draw a picture of an angry sea or a calm ocean.
- Draw a picture of yourself.

### In the writing center

- Take dictation. Write the child's words and read the words back to the child. Older children will appreciate telling stories that are transcribed for the group to hear.
- Illustrate stories. Put a book that you've shared with the group on the writing table. Invite alternative illustrations.
- Invite children to practice their signatures. Provide

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enlarged copies of famous signatures and encourage lavish, bold marks (think John Hancock on the Declaration of Independence).

## References

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## Resources

The International Collection of Child Art is housed at Illinois State University. The site is a great inspiration for teachers and children. <http://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/icca>.

The Web Archive of Children's Art is accessed through the database at Indiana State University Art Department. <http://childart.indstate.edu>. ■