

# Preschool painting

## A primer

**W**ow! I see greens, reds, blues, and yellows," says Ms. Eloise, looking at 4-year-old Darrell's easel painting. This will be a nice addition to his portfolio, she thinks to herself. She turns and reaches for the drying rack so he can hang the painting to dry.

Mandy interrupts: "Can I paint now?"

"Yes, in just a moment," says Ms. Eloise. She sets up the drying rack, turns back to the easel, and stops short. Darrell has just run his paintbrush through all the colors on the paper, making it a mass of brown.

"There, I'm done!" he announces.



**A**s experienced early childhood teachers know, preschool painting is about process, not product. Whether a child's painting turns out to be a neatly formed rainbow or a brown muddle, the learning takes place in the doing.

Painting—and indeed all art activities—promote children's learning and development. But some teachers may regard painting as academic dessert to be enjoyed only after the children have finished the main courses of letters and numbers. Other teachers may hesitate to set up painting activities because of the mess.

Planning can minimize the mess, and an understanding of painting as a process can embellish learning objectives. In addition, teachers may find painting a big help in managing the classroom. When children are restless or irritable, for example, painting can help soothe and calm them.

### How painting fosters learning

Painting is a nonverbal experience. It uses a different part of the brain than reading or math.

When painting, children express themselves in lines, shapes, and images (Beal 2001)—a kind of visual thinking. The experience fosters growth in all areas of development.

**Physical.** When children spread paint on paper, whether with fingers or brush, they are developing muscular control in the arms, hands, and fingers.

**Cognitive.** Painting is a sensory experience. Children see the colors and shapes, hear the brush swishing in water, smell the paint and newsprint, and feel the paper's crispness, all of which inform them about their world. They experiment with colors, shapes, lines, and designs. When they think about which colors to use and where to put the colors on the page, they are planning and organizing. When they mix colors and try different brushes, they are learning about cause and effect.

**Language.** As children paint, they learn names for colors and shapes. They talk with teachers and playmates about what they're doing. They may dictate descriptions of their work to the teacher.

### Social and emotional.

Children develop social skills by taking turns at the easel and helping with cleanup. They express their feelings through colors they select and the marks they make on the paper. They enhance their creativity by playing with shapes and colors. They decide when they are finished and whether they like it. In the process, they develop feelings of confidence and self-esteem: "I'm making this." "I'm doing it all by myself."

#### Basic materials for painting

- table
- easel, freestanding and foldable for easy storage (or tabletop easel made from a cardboard box)
- paper of various kinds, including 24-inch-by-36-inch newsprint
- clothespins or binder clips to hold the paper to the easel
- paintbrushes, short and long handles, flat and round hair bristles
- liquid tempera paint in at least the three primary colors (red, blue, and yellow) and also black and white
- watercolor sets with brushes
- finger paint
- small containers to hold paint, such as plastic paint pots with lids
- drying rack, foldable (or a clothesline or fishnet)
- plastic smocks with hook-and-loop fasteners (or recycled shirts cut to fit children)
- sponges, about 3 inches by 5 inches
- newspaper or plastic sheeting for the floor
- paper towels
- liquid soap

## Create the environment for painting

Painting is a fundamental activity in the art center that children can choose during free play time. Ideally the art center is in a quiet area of the room, out of the path of traffic. For easy cleanup, locate it close to a sink and running water, and provide paper towels and liquid soap dispensers. Protect the floor with newspapers or an old plastic shower curtain.

Because toddlers have limited wrist control, they may find it easier at first to paint on the floor or while standing at a table. As they gain control, children will enjoy standing at a wall or an easel to paint. The amount of space in your classroom will determine how many children can paint at a time. Two or more paint surfaces will promote socializing.

Educational suppliers offer sturdy easels with rubber feet to prevent sliding and trays to hold paint cups. You can make a tabletop easel out of a cardboard box. If space is limited, you can tack plastic to a wall and mount newsprint on it at children's height and nail a narrow shelf underneath.

## Introduce toddlers to painting

With toddlers, painting is a simple activity. Limit it to one or two children at a time. Dress each child in a larger child's T-shirt or plastic smock. Place a small dab of finger paint on a washable table top. Invite the children to spread the paint around. Talk about the color, the hand movement, how the paint feels, and how the children feel. Continue until they lose interest.

Instead of a table top, you can provide each child with a cafeteria tray. This defines a work space for an individual child. Start with only one or two colors of finger paint. Vary the experience by offering non-toxic shaving cream, colored with tempera.

Children can also finger paint on a large piece of paper taped to the table or the floor. Many teachers prefer coated paper, but it can be expensive. For variety and enrichment, offer different kinds of paper—butcher paper, brown paper from grocery bags, typing paper, construction paper, newspaper, cardboard, poster board, waxed paper, and aluminum foil.

As children develop greater control in their hands and fingers, introduce brushes. Dip a short-handled paintbrush into one color of tempera paint and show children how to move the paintbrush across the paper. Allow them to try. When they lose interest, encourage them to help wash brushes in water and put away the materials.

#### Finger paint recipe

- ¼ cup cornstarch
- 2 cups cold water
- food coloring or powdered tempera

1. Mix cornstarch and water in a saucepan, stirring constantly. Bring to a boil and allow it to thicken.
2. Stir in food coloring or tempera to achieve the desired color. Allow to cool.
3. Pour into a small pint-sized plastic jar. Cover with lid and refrigerate until ready to use.

**Yield:** approximately 2 cups

## Introduce preschoolers to painting

One way to introduce younger preschoolers to painting is to prepare a tray for each child. Each tray holds a brush, wet sponge, a plastic container for water, and two or three shallow containers (such as jar lids) of tempera paint. Start with the primary colors and later add white and black. Tape paper to the table or floor, or use an easel. Hang a smock by each painting surface. The number of smocks limits the number of children who can choose painting at free play time.

At group time, explain that children will choose a tray, fill the water container, and place the tray by the paper. If children have no experience with painting, show them how to put on a smock and explain why it's necessary. Demonstrate dipping the brush into the paint and moving it around on the paper. Explain how to wash out brushes, and emphasize that this keeps each different paint its original color. Show them how to clean up their trays when finished.

If only a few children have never painted before, they can

### Cornstarch paint recipe

- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
- food coloring

1. Mix cornstarch and vinegar in a small jar.
2. Add two or three drops of food coloring to achieve the desired color.

**Yield:** Approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup

**Note:** This is a smooth paint that will adhere to most surfaces.



usually figure out what to do by watching other children. The teacher can briefly review instructions with the entire group and then stand close by and gently offer encouragement and reminders.

Watercolor offers another enjoyable medium for painting, but it requires a bit more control. It's best to use a paper thicker than newsprint, one that will absorb and hold water. Educational suppliers offer a watercolor paper, but it's a bit expensive. Coated finger paint paper and coffee filters are other options.

Demonstrate how to fill the paintbrush by dipping it into water and a color several times. Children apply the paint, allowing the color to flow on the paper. Expect drips and blurred edges.

Encourage children to change the water often for true color.

A popular watercolor technique is wet-on-wet: wet brush on wet paper. First dampen the entire sheet of paper with a wet sponge, a water-filled brush, or water from a spray bottle. Then apply paint. This produces a *wash*, or a thin coat of paint, which is good for large flat areas like the sky or ground.

Store all paints and brushes with other art materials on low shelves, easily accessible to children. Demonstrate how to remove their art work from the easel, hang it to dry, and clean up so another child can paint.

## Make painting part of the curriculum

Children move through various stages of painting. At first, they tend to make broad, sweeping

strokes. In the next stage, they move the brush in a circular pattern. Later the circles will sprout legs and arms, and then a head and body will appear. Children will also experiment with shapes, lines, and patterns and create landscapes with a sun at the top and ground at the bottom. By school age, they become more intentional, trying for more detail and realism.

The goal is not to move children to painting landscapes and portraits but rather to help them get comfortable with the materials. Setting standards about what a painting should look like puts too much pressure on children. A house with a chimney is not inherently better than a hodgepodge of lines and circles.

Many teachers plan painting activities as part of a theme or curriculum unit. In a unit on

friends, for example, a teacher may suggest that children “paint how you feel when you’re playing with your best friend.” One child may paint a smiling face, while another may paint purple squiggles. This activity allows children ample room for freedom of expression.

In some units, a painting activity may be used to teach a concept. In a unit on trees, for example, a teacher may ask children to hold a leaf on paper and splatter paint on the page to reveal the leaf’s shape. One child uses an oak leaf, and another, an elm. Children not only learn a concept— that leaves have different shapes— but also enhance their ability to recognize shapes and patterns.

Whatever the objective, the key is that children experience painting as a process. If every painting

activity results in every child’s work looking the same, then painting has become a craft. It has lost its exploratory nature. Instead of constraining children to paint a given object or paint in a certain way, we want children to paint for the surprise, the joy, the discovery.

Ordinarily painting is a self-directed activity. “The paint is in charge. The paint is teaching them” (Beal 2001). Children need time to feel the flow of the paint, to mix colors, and to learn about drips and absorption. The teacher’s role is to follow, observe, and encourage.

Avoid judging a child’s work, even when a child asks you if it’s good. The child is the only one who can evaluate the painting. Avoid trying to identify what the picture represents. Chances are you will get it wrong anyway. Instead, focus on what is happening. Some suggestions:

- Imagine what the child is feeling. “Ollie, you’re having a lot of fun with the finger paint.”
- Talk about the colors, sizes, and shapes. “T.J., you used a lot of red in your picture.” “Wow, what a big yellow circle!”
- Notice what seems to interest the child. “Graciela, you made lots of lines on this side.”
- Encourage the child to reflect on the work. “Chris, tell me about your painting.”
- Acknowledge effort. “Alyssa, you really worked hard on that.”

A curriculum unit may include having children dictate a description of their paintings. If so, write the dictation on a separate sheet of paper. Remember that the child owns the painting. You can write the child’s name and date



on the back for documentation. But never write or draw on the face of the picture, unless the child gives permission. And never suggest how to “fix” a painting to make it “look better.” If Marissa doesn’t like her painting, suggest that she try again tomorrow.

## Display the paintings

Post the paintings where children can see them—on the wall near the floor or on the back of a bookshelf or room divider. You might post them on a bulletin board or place them in cardboard frames and hang them in a hallway or entrance. Displaying their art shows children you value their creations.

It’s important to display the work of all children, not just those pieces you think are the best. If children have produced lots of paintings, you might ask them to choose one that they want everyone to see.

Often children want to take their paintings home, and parents are usually eager to see their children’s artwork. You’ll save some pieces—or photograph them—to place in each child’s portfolio.

Keeping a record of children’s work allows you to monitor their growth and make sure they have experimented with all art materials. Most children need no prompting to paint, but you may encounter a child who lacks interest. You may need to meet this child halfway: “Timmy, I see that you used an oatmeal box to make a tower for your castle. Would you like to paint the box so it’s all one color?”



## Painting empowers children

For preschoolers, painting is a sensory adventure. It’s the joy of squishing finger paint against a smooth table top. It’s the thrill of swabbing a brush loaded with red paint across a sheet of blank paper.

Teachers can offer this adventure by providing a few simple materials and then getting out of the way. Children will use the materials to develop a visual language. They will explore with brush and paint and learn much in the process.

## Painting activities

Simple paint materials—paints, brushes, and paper—offer great possibilities for successful learning. But it’s always fun to inject a little variety, as suggested in the activities below. Be sure to provide smocks and clean-up supplies for each activity.

You can buy paint from educational suppliers or your local crafts store, or you can make your own paint from common household ingredients. Children will enjoy making the paint with you.

### Sidewalk paint recipe

- 1 cup cornstarch
- 1 cup water
- food coloring

1. Combine cornstarch and water in a plastic pint jar. Stir or shake to dissolve.
2. Add several drops of food coloring.

**Yield:** Approximately 1 cup

**Note:** This paint is environmentally friendly because the cornstarch is biodegradable and can be safely washed away with water.

## Sidewalk painting

(Age 3 and older)

### Here's what you need:

- sidewalk paint (see recipe below)
- paintbrushes
- container of water
- sponges

1. Bring paint and brushes outdoors, and invite children to paint directly on a sidewalk.
2. After they finish, wash the sidewalk clean, or let the paint dry for later viewing.
3. This paint is thin and may require several coats on the sidewalk to show up well.

## Watercolor fantasy

(Age 3 and older)

### Here's what you need:

- crayons
- watercolor set and paintbrush
- paper
- sponge or spray bottle
- container of water

1. Invite children to scribble with crayons on a sheet of paper.
2. Dampen the entire sheet with a wet sponge or spray bottle.
3. Apply the watercolor paint with a brush. The paint will fill the blank spaces not covered by crayon. Let it dry.

**Variation:** Have children first make a crayon rubbing of a leaf or a textured surface like a wire screen before painting with watercolor.

## Puff painting

(Age 3 and older)

### Here's what you need:

- puff paint (see recipe below)
- paintbrushes or craft sticks
- construction paper
- sponges
- container of water

1. Invite children to dip paintbrushes or craft sticks into the paint.
2. Paint on the paper and let dry completely. When dry, the paint will puff up.

**Variation:** Spoon the paint into squeeze bottles, and invite children to squeeze out designs on thin pieces of cardboard.

### Puff paint recipe

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water
- food coloring

1. Combine flour, salt and water in a plastic jar. Stir and shake to dissolve.
2. Add a few drops of food coloring.

**Yield:** approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup

**Variation:** Use sand instead of salt.



## Flicker painting

(Age 4 and older)

**Here's what you need:**

- white paper
- watercolor paint set and brush
- sponges
- container of water

1. Take children outdoors with watercolor supplies. Provide a table or other smooth, hard surface where children can paint.
2. Invite children to dip a sponge into water and dampen one side of the paper.
3. Wet the paintbrush and fill it with a color. Let the paint drip from the brush onto the paper.
4. Flick or shake the paper to move the paint around.
5. Wash out the brush.
6. Repeat dripping and flicking with other colors. The colors will blend on the wet paper.
7. Lay the paintings on a flat surface to dry completely.

## Watercolor surprise

(Age 4 and older)

**Here's what you need:**

- white construction paper
- masking tape, torn into varying lengths
- watercolor paint set and brush
- sponges
- container of water

1. Invite children to place tape randomly on the paper.
2. Paint over the entire paper, including the tape. Let it dry.
3. Carefully pull up the tape. Talk about the results.

**Variation:** Children can place the tape strips to form letters of their names.



## Spray painting

(Age 4 and older)

**Here's what you need:**

- heavy white paper
- liquid tempera paint, medium consistency
- paintbrushes
- spray bottle of water
- sponges
- container of water

1. Place the paper on a flat surface outdoors, such as a table or sidewalk, or clip it to a fence. Or place it on a floor indoors that has been covered with newspaper or plastic.
2. Invite children to dip a paintbrush into a paint color and drip the paint onto the paper. They may use more than one color as long as they clean their brushes in between.
3. Spray water onto the paint drips, which makes the paint spread and blend.
4. Lay the paintings on a flat surface to dry completely.

## How to clean paintbrushes

Before using two or more colors for painting, instruct children in how to wash out their brushes. Beal (2001) suggests a two-step method:

1. "Wash, wash, wash." Tamp down the brush in the water container.
2. "Press, press, press." Press the brush into a wet sponge.

Children may need to repeat the two steps until the paint is gone. Instruct children to use this method each time they change paint color and when they clean up.

Show them how to leave cleaned brushes standing in a container to dry. Leaving them standing in water can weaken the glue and loosen or corrode the metal ferrule.

## Window painting

(Age 5 and older)

### Here's what you need:

- newspaper
- tape
- paintbrushes
- liquid tempera paint
- sponges
- container of water

1. Tape newspaper to the bottom edges of low windows to protect the sills and floor.
2. Invite children to paint on the inside of the window. Leave the design on the window for several days.
3. Talk about how the paintings look in sun and shadow.
4. Wash off the painting with soapy water and sponge. Dry with paper towels.

**Variation:** Cover the window with cellophane or tissue paper and paint on these surfaces instead of the glass.

## Color wheel

(Age 5 and older)

### Here's what you need:

- white paper
- paper plate or other circle shape to use as a pattern
- pencil
- liquid tempera or watercolor in red, yellow, and blue
- paintbrush
- sponges
- container of water

1. Have children lightly trace around a paper plate to make a circle on the paper.
2. Invite them to place a blob of yellow paint at the top of the circle (12 o'clock), a blob of blue at 4 o'clock, and a blob of red at 8 o'clock. Wash out the brush before applying each different color. Explain that these are *primary* colors.

3. Invite them to move a bit of yellow and a bit of blue paint into the 2 o'clock space and let the colors mingle to create green.
4. Do the same with red and blue in the 6 o'clock space to create purple, and the red and yellow in the 10 o'clock space to create orange. Explain that these are *secondary* colors. Talk about how all colors (except white and black) can be made from the first three.
5. Encourage children to create more colors such as yellow-green and yellow-orange on the color wheel.

**Extending the activity.** Provide clean Styrofoam meat trays or frozen dinner trays for children to use as a palette for mixing paints when they do their next painting.

## References

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