

## Why The Visual Arts Are Important

In *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*, the authors describe the importance of the visual arts in the following way:



Most young children naturally delight in art. They love the process of applying paint to paper, gluing things together, and pounding a lump of clay.

Working with art materials offers children opportunities to experiment with color, shape, design, and texture. As they engage in art activities, children develop an awareness and appreciation of pleasant sensory experiences-which is the beginning of aesthetic development.

Using art materials such as paint, clay, markers, crayons, cornstarch, and collage materials, children express their individual ideas and feelings. As they view their own creations and those of other children, they learn to value and appreciate differences. For young children, the process of creating is what's most important, not what they actually create.

Artwork benefits all aspects of children's development. As children draw, paint, and make collages, they experiment with color, line, shape, and size. They use paints, fabrics, and chalk to make choices, tryout ideas, plan, and experiment. They learn about cause and effect when they mix colors. Through trial and error, they learn how to balance a mobile and weave yarn.

Through their art, children express how they feel, think, and view the world. Art is an outlet that lets children convey what they may not be able to say with words. Involvement with a rich variety of art materials instills confidence and pride.

Art also offers opportunities for physical development. As children tear paper for a collage or use scissors to cut, they refine small muscle movements. Making lines and shapes with markers and crayons helps children develop the fine motor control they will need for writing. Art is enjoyable and satisfying for young children. It enables them to learn many skills, express themselves, appreciate beauty, and have fun-all at the same time.

The visual arts promote learning and growth in young children by:

- Developing visual-spatial relationships (such as eye-hand coordination) through painting, drawing, and collage making, and using clay. Helps children learn to label shapes and objects. Enhances problem solving ability.
- Helping children discover the nature and complexity of their world. Children learn about the concepts of color and shape, texture, and the effects of their actions on materials and objects. Provides a vehicle to explore the possibilities and limitations of materials, and encourages children's imaginations.
- Creating a non-verbal language for young children to use to express feelings. Children can explore the world, process and reflect on experiences, and understand concepts.

- Building a bridge between the physical world of things and events and the inner world of feelings and meanings. Encourages spontaneous exploration, promotes individuality.
- Heightening a child's perceptual abilities.

Art opportunities are important to children's development. Early childhood professionals help when they:

- Have a variety of art supplies low shelves or tables so children can choose what supplies they wish to use.
- Define spaces within the classroom that are "art spaces" where messes are okay.
- Avoid providing a model for children to copy.
- Demonstrate techniques that help children use materials appropriately. For example how to keep a brush from dripping or how to apply glue.
- Encourage the process of creativity and not the final product.
- Respect and validate a child's effort. Avoid asking, "What is it?" rather ask "Can you tell me about your picture?"
- Value children's art - display it in an honored place, low enough so children can see it; take pictures of children with their art before you send it home; help children see self-expression as fun and valued. Help parents to understand that open-ended art activities, are appropriate for fostering young children's learning.

When adults talk to children engaged in visual arts activities here are some suggestions from *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*:

- Describe what you see – "I see that you used four colors in your painting."
- Talk about the children's actions – "You were really pounding that play dough." "Some of the lines in your painting go up and down and some go right and left."
- Ask children about the process – "How did you make that color?" "What was the best part of making that collage?"
- Ask open-ended questions – "What would happen if you mixed those two colors together?" "How else could you make those pieces fit together?"
- Use words to encourage and support – "You really thought of a lot of ways to use the play dough today." "You've worked long and hard on that painting."

### A Note to Parents

The visual arts are an important way for children to learn about their world. Sometimes it is easier for young children to express themselves through drawing or painting than it is verbally. Providing opportunities for children to engage in visual arts activities at home is important. Here are some things that you might want to try:

- Designate a drawer, shelf, or even a box for storage of markers, pencils, crayons, paper, scissors. You may want to keep a separate box for collage materials.

- Find a safe place where your child can work – whether it is the floor, the kitchen table, or even outside. Doing art can be messy, so choose a place that you won't mind having to clean up frequently.
- Encourage children to use art materials often and let them know that you value this effort.
- Display artwork around the house (on a wall, on the refrigerator) to let them know that you value their efforts.

### Stages of Art Development

Deya Brashears in *Dribble Drabble - Art Experiences for Young Children* describes the sequential pattern of artistic development that children pass through. She writes, "Some go through the various stages more quickly than others; some spend a particularly long time in one stage; and all go back and repeat earlier stages as they progress through this development. Keep in mind that the indicated ages are simply generalizations and not a true guide for all children. Also notice that the ages overlap."

Theme	Age	Description
Scribble	2-3	These scribbles involve vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curving and circular lines. All art is based on scribbles.
Vague Shapes	2-4	Circles, crosses, squares, rectangles etc. are roughly visible. This child does not have the motor ability to master the shape yet
Actual Shapes	3-5	This is a singular outline of a shape. Motor control is now more refined.
Combine Shapes	3-5	These are designs created by combining and repeating various shapes. Shapes within shapes are common.
Mandalas & Suns	3-5	These are so common in children's art that they can be traced back to prehistoric times. The mandalas and suns display perfect balance. This is a turning point in children's art because from this stage we begin to see the emergence of recognizable art.
People	4-5	These first appear as a large head with the arms and legs extending from the head. Later a trunk and more details appear.
Beginning Recognizable Art	4-6	These pictures are now identifiable. You may see several, unrelated objects on a page. These pictures are built upon the figures and shapes mastered during previous stages.
Later Recognizable Art	5-7	The entire page tells a story. You may see birds, trees, people, flowers, suns, houses and kites. This child may still prefer to draw abstract art, however, this is done with good control and intent.

## Materials to Collect for Doing Visual Arts

- Supplies to use as paintbrushes – cotton balls, leaves, Q-tips, sponges, marbles, golf balls, etc.
- Additives such as starch, salt, and sand.
- Containers such as small bowls, plastic bottles, small pans, measuring spoons and cups. Styrofoam meat containers (thoroughly washed or new) are great for art projects.
- Old shirts or T-shirts for smocks.
- Collage materials such as buttons, fabric, wallpaper swatches, glitter, yarn, sequins, felt, and any other materials that you find interesting. Don't forget plenty of scissors, both right handed and left handed.
- Fabric, yarn, macramé twine, shoelaces, fake fur, and large plastic sewing needles.
- Sponges, inexpensive brushes of different sizes, toothbrushes, and pipe cleaners.
- A wide assortment of markers, crayons, colored pencils and chalks.
- Adequate supplies for cleaning up – some for adults and some for children. Old shower curtains have many uses.
- Different types of paper – newsprint, construction paper, butcher paper, sandpaper, corrugated cardboard, wallpaper samples. Make sure to have different sizes, too. Easel paper for painting should be at least 24" x 36".
- All sorts of natural items such as dried flowers, shells, seeds, pinecones, and feathers.
- Kitchen items that might come in handy including coffee cans and egg cartons, paper bags, paper doilies, paper plates, plastic wrap, toothpicks. Dish soap added to tempera makes it easier to clean up.
- A wide assortment of magazines and catalogues for collages and assemblages.

## Visual Arts Activities

Many of these suggested activities are from *Dribble Drabble-Art Experiences for Young Children* by Deya Brashears, and others were contributed by Jude Bond of Burlington City Arts.

- Use cotton balls and powdered tempera to paint. After pictures are completed have children paint entire picture with water and see what happens.
- Anything can be a paintbrush: Q-tips, tree branches, fly swatters, sponges, cut vegetables. Let children experiment.
- Salt painting – It crystallizes as it dries. To make salt paint mixture mix 1/8 cup liquid starch, 1/8 cup water, 1/2 cup of salt and 1 teaspoon of tempera or food coloring together. Paint on a stiff surface such as cardboard, mat board or a paper plate.
- Finger painting – A great sensual activity that also helps children work with colors. See recipe in Resources chapter for homemade finger paint.
- Beautiful Stuff project – Working with found materials, see description below

- Texture painting – Provide sawdust, salt, sand to add to painting materials. Talk about what happens when extra materials are added.
- Use non-standard object to paint with such as marbles, corks, string, vegetables cut into shapes, sponges.
- Crayon rubbings – Use large peeled crayons; have objects such as leaves or sandpaper available; have children put object under white paper and rub with side of crayon to create a simple rubbing.
- Batik – Have children create a crayon drawing on white paper, paint over the drawings with thinned paint (blue works best).
- Make your own crayons (for older children) – Let children choose several crayons; melt pieces in a small pot over a hot plate; let children watch as new colors emerge; pour melted crayons into a plastic candy mold; when cool pop out.
- Posters – Have children look through magazines and cut out or tear out pictures that are about a specific topic such as animals, food, or trees. Children can glue pictures onto cardboard to make a poster. Works best when there are enough pictures so that they overlap on the poster. Talk about the pictures – what do they have in common, how are they different.
- Nature collage – You can use this in conjunction with reading about some aspect of nature or the woods. Collect nuts, pinecones, empty nutshells, lichen, pine needles, etc. Use small blocks of wood (shingles cut into smaller pieces works well) and have children create collages.
- Cornmeal or sand painting – Mix 2/3 cup cornmeal or sand with 1 teaspoon of dry tempera. Children can use paper plates as a base for these paintings. Have children create a design with glue (in squeeze bottles); then sprinkle cornmeal or sand mixture onto the drawing; shake off the excess.
- Wet chalk drawing – Children can wet paper with sponge then use colored chalk to create a drawing. Black paper works very well.
- Gadget printing – You'll need tempera, shallow pie or cake pans, tools for printing, and paper for this activity. Place a small amount of paint into each pan (or put paint on a sponge in the pan). Have an assortment of tools and gadgets to use for printing such as a potato masher, corks, caps, whisks, anything with an interesting design. Children can dip tool into paint and then onto a piece of paper.
- You can also use vegetables (broccoli, potato, carrot, pepper, small cabbage wedges) or sponges (cut into shapes) and make prints this way.
- Roller printing – You'll need liquid tempera, shallow pans, brayers (rollers that are available at art stores), textured pieces of sandpaper, screening, corrugated cardboard, and paper for this activity. Put small amounts of paint into shallow pans. Children can place textured pieces under a plain paper; after rolling the brayer into the paint they can roll it onto the paper. The paint will pick up the lines of the textured pieces.
- Glass printing – You'll need sheets of glass with protected edges or Plexiglas, tempera, brushes, sponges, paper and water for this activity. Children can paint with tempera on the

glass or Plexiglas. When done, take a sheet of paper and press it onto the glass to make a print. Children can use sponges and water to clean the glass and make another print.

- Etchings – For this activity you’ll need Styrofoam meat trays, scratching tools such as a nail, fork, bottle cap or old ballpoint pen, tempera, paper, a brayer and paper at least as large as the foam trays. Children can make drawings using the scratching tools on the Styrofoam tray; then use brayer and paint to cover the surface of the tray; press the paper lightly to create a print.
- Assemblages – You’ll need an assortment of materials (paper, fabric, yarn, buttons, wood scraps, ribbon, etc.), glue and paste, cardboard or heavy paper, scissors. Paste works best when attaching paper to paper. This is a wonderful activity to offer on a regular basis as children will experiment and become adept at creating complex assemblages or collages.
- Stitchery – For this activity you’ll need tag board or burlap stapled to a cardboard or Styrofoam frame, felt, yarn, ribbon and large plastic needles (used in knitting). Children will need to be shown the basics of pushing the needle in and out. You can have hole punchers and children can punch holes to guide their sewing. Older children (4-5 years old) can create their own designs using several layers of fabric, etc.
- Weaving – Chicken wire (with the edges turned down and protected with masking or duct tape), weaving mesh, scraps of pegboard, plastic berry containers, Styrofoam trays punched with holes are good bases for weaving. Children can weave with pipe cleaners, straws, heavy weight yarn, ribbon, or twine. You can wrap the end of the yarn or ribbon with tape to make weaving easier. Until children are ready for smaller needles drill a hole in a tongue depressor or Popsicle stick to use as a needle
- Monoprints – For this activity you’ll need cookie sheets or Plexiglas, water-based block print inks, brayers, medium point ballpoint pens, paper that will fit the cookie sheet or Plexiglas. Squeeze a line of ink on the cookie sheet, use brayer to roll up and down until ink is spread evenly. Ink should be tacky and with some resistance to the roller. Place paper down on ink; and have children draw with pen on the paper being careful not to pierce the paper. When drawing is done, remove the paper slowly by pulling from one corner.
- Toy car painting – For this activity you will need a collection of small cars, tempera paint, small dishes for paint, large paper to cover the table, paper for individual paintings, masking tape, and maybe some good “traveling” music. This is a good activity to start with a story such as “City Noises” by Karla Kuskin. Explain to children that you are going to use the cars to paint with – making tracks on paper. Children can work in small groups and do a large painting together and/or they can do individual paintings. Have them roll the cars in the small dishes of paint and then make tracks on the paper.

### The Beautiful Stuff Project

Cathy Weisman Topal and Lella Gandini have created an exciting book called *Beautiful Stuff! Learning with Found Materials*. In it they describe their work with two preschools in Massachusetts where they experimented and explored the possibilities of found materials. Children possess a natural interest in the potential of materials. When adults become engaged in this process, they become collaborators with



children as they collect, sort, construct, and experiment with found materials. Using found materials brought from home provides an opportunity for children to share objects from their individual culture and environment. If you think that you'd like to work with found materials, we strongly suggest that you purchase the book – it's fascinating reading and full of wonderful photographs showing a classroom of children exploring and creating.

The *Beautiful Stuff* project on working with found materials is very briefly described below:

- Requests for materials were sent out as a note to parents explaining the project. A paper bag was sent along for collected materials. Along with the note and paper bag, information about the types of materials to collect was given to parents as well as some safety tips.
- Examples of found materials that are good to collect include: wire, feathers, beads and buttons, costume jewelry, tape, string, ribbon and yarn, old keys, small machines that don't work, corks and bottle caps, leather remnants, fabric, shells, sponges, small seed pods, white or clear containers for storage, baskets, cardboard, paper of differing weights and textures, screws and bolts, small mirrors, and anything else that might be interesting to work with.
- Specify a date when you will open all the bags of found materials. Let each child open his/her bag and talk about what they have contributed.
- Spend some time talking about what is especially interesting or curious or special about the objects that have been contributed.
- Children may be really interested, at first, in noticing, sorting and categorizing the found materials. This is a good opportunity to work with the children and sort similar materials into containers. Use this experience as an opportunity to label the categories of materials such as balls, paper, metal, wood, sparkly stuff, soft and curly things, etc.
- If you are lucky enough to have extra space in your classroom, you can create a studio area. In the studio space, display the containers with found materials in them. Provide a variety of paper and cardboard, pencils, crayons, and markers. When materials are organized and attractively presented, this space will become an invitation to children to work and explore.
- Your collection of found materials can become important starting points for all sorts of investigations and projects. Children can explore shapes, colors, sizes, textures, design and more.
- Designate a shelf for "work in progress". This will encourage children to continue their work from day to day allowing for more complex working and thinking.

### Working with Three Dimensional Media

Bonnie Stearns, of the Creating with Clay Studio in Brattleboro VT, provided this tool kit for teachers of young children. Bonnie can be reached at [bstearns@sover.net](mailto:bstearns@sover.net). Although the information below is about clay, much of what is said can be applied to working with play dough and baker's clay.



### Where to Get Clay

You might try local potters and offer to take ends of batches or recycled clay that someone doesn't want. It won't matter unless you plan to fire the clay. Otherwise, 5 lb. boxes of self hardening clay are available at craft supply shops. Like any natural clay, pieces are fragile when dry and cannot be used for food and will dissolve when wet. Ceramic suppliers such as Vermont Ceramic Supply in Rutland, offer many choices of clay, such as play clay which might be a combination of ends of batches and cheaper than a specific earthenware or stoneware clay. Another excellent New England supplier is: Sheffield Pottery, Sheffield MA, 888-774-2529 or [www.sheffield-pottery.com](http://www.sheffield-pottery.com).

### How To Store Clay

Keep clay wrapped tightly in sturdy plastic bags to keep it moist. Keep it from freezing (or you'll have to wedge or knead it after it thaws). It's better not to store clay in direct sun where you'll create a mini greenhouse of dryer clay and wetter plastic.

### How to Recycle Clay

Once clay has been used in the air it starts to get drier, especially in warm, dry conditions. If you want to immediately recycle pieces of clay, simply spray them with water, or dip in water to dampen, and put in a sturdy plastic bag for a day. If pieces get completely dry, but you want to later recycle them into wet clay, break into pieces, put in a bucket of water for a couple of days until dissolved. Then spread the "slurry" onto plaster or plywood for a few days until dry enough to get a workable consistency.

### Where to Work With Clay and How to Clean Up

A table surface that can be washed after using clay, or a table covering that can be put away and used only for clay would be best. Working outdoors can simplify clean up.

It's best to clean up work surfaces with a damp sponge and collect stray bits of clay on the floor right after use rather than crunching dry bits into dust under foot. A bucket for rinsing clay off hands before using a sink prevents build up of clay bits in the sink drain.

### Materials to Collect For Working with Clay and Play Dough

- Tools such as a garlic press, Popsicle sticks, tongue depressors, potato mashers, straws, pencils, blunt knives, forks, anything that will score the media or make interesting marks in it. Also large dowels or rolling pins can be used to flatten clay or dough.
- Materials to make impressions such as flowers, peach pits, nuts, sea shells, rocks, pieces of wood with interesting textures.
- Large pieces of cardboard, newspaper, scraps of plywood are useful to put wide or flat pieces to dry. Cardboard will warp when it gets damp so take care.
- Sponges, buckets, oilcloth or plastic tablecloth to protect working surfaces. Aprons or smocks for children.

## Recipes to Try

## Play Dough That Hardens

2 cups cornstarch

1 cup baking soda

1 cup water with food coloring added if desired.

- Mix all ingredients and cook, stirring constantly until a ball forms.
- Knead the dough as it cools.
- Store in a plastic bag in the refrigerator.
- This play dough can be painted after it hardens.

## Baker's Clay

4 cups flour

1 cup salt

1 1/2 cups warm water

- Mix all the ingredients together.
- Store in an airtight plastic container.
- Once this "clay" hardens, it can be painted.

## Books About Clay and Pottery

Look for children's books about clay and pottery at your local library. There are several about the traditions of Pueblo and Native American pottery from a child's point of view. See the Resources chapter section on *Books for Adults* for some suggested books about working with clay.

## Other Sources of Support

Vermont Clay Studio in Waterbury – 802-244-1126 or [www.vermontclaystudio.com](http://www.vermontclaystudio.com) offers classes for adults, preschool (ages 3-6), children and teens, and special story hours with clay for kids, "Once Upon a Mudpie".

## Beginning Explorations with Young Children

Focus on the sensory experience of clay. Explore things you can do such as making textures, connecting pieces, flattening, making balls. Develop vocabulary around the processes. How can you make the clay flat? What does it look like? Can you make a round ball? Can you stick three balls together? How many different ways can you use your hand or fingers to make marks in the clay? Can you smooth out some marks? Can you make bumps? How does the clay feel?

Other activities that children age three and older will enjoy:

- Start with a ball of clay, put your thumb in, press with the fingers together, a little at a time, round and round the pot until it become a pinch pot.
- Flatten the clay into a slab, smooth the outside edges then make patterns. Bend the edges up to form a plate.
- Make a face or a mask out of a flat slab of clay. Add clay for nose, eyebrows, ears, and hair. Make two holes and hang up with cord when dry.

- Make a pinch pot and make it into a basket by adding a coil for the handle. Children can create objects to put in the basket.
- Make a flat slab and then have someone help you shape it around your elbow to make an “elbow bowl”.

The following suggested activities are appropriate for children age five and older.

- Use a slab as the base and make yourself (with balls and coils, as above) doing something you like to do. (sledding in the snow, raking leaves, playing on the beach. Moisten the parts and push them together firmly.
- Read or tell a story while the children make characters or a scene from the story silently.
- Make a more complex scene with your whole family doing something together, or relating to a theme you are studying such as animals in winter, spring flowers, dinosaurs, or houses.
- Make your favorite animal or pet or a dinosaur or a dragon, putting together balls, coils, and a slab for the ground or rug. Add ears, tail, horns, tongue, etc.
- Make a slab. Make coils to form the letters of your name. Place them on the slab, moistening and pressing on firmly.
- Make a slab then press it into a wooden bowl, using it as a mold. When the clay is dry, it will have kept the wooden bowl shape.
- Make a larger pinch pot, smooth it, and then press in things to make patterns around the outside. Make a cereal bowl or flowerpot.
- Pass around and handle things made out of clay and fired. Talk about how these changed from wet clay to dry clay then got fired in a kiln.
- Make a coiled pot: make coils, join them by smoothing them into each other on the inside of the pot, leaving the coiled pattern on the outside.

