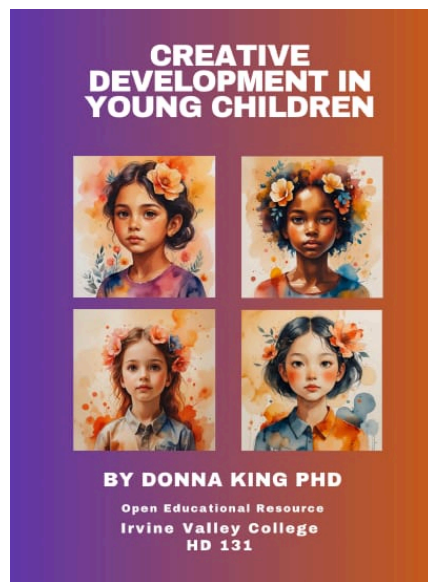


CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILD



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Creative Development in Young Children



Creative Development in Young Child (HD131)

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Human Development Instructor Donna King Masters in Human Development from Pacific Oaks University

About this Book

Teaching Philosophy:

Donna's personal teaching philosophy will go here!

1: Creativity and Creative Thinking

Chapter One: Creativity & Creative Thinking

"Since new developments are the products of a creative mind, we must therefore stimulate and encourage that type of mind in every way possible." – George Washington Carver (Carver & Kremer, 2017)

Terms & Definitions

Creativity

Is there someone in your life you associate with creativity? OR... Can you think of famous people who have significantly contributed to society through their creative minds? History offers numerous examples of creative individuals who have left an indelible mark on our daily lives. One such innovator was American botanist George Washington Carver, a formerly enslaved person and later a leader in the African American independence movement. Carver discovered and taught innovative farming techniques that improved soil and made farming more sustainable. He encouraged farmers to engage in hands-on learning and to "do all common things uncommonly well." He offered advice to other renowned innovators, such as Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, and Henry Ford, designer of the Model T, who sought his expertise in creative thinking (*Retrospective: George Washington Carver*, 2018).

Given this lofty example of creativity, you might be aware of how expansive a definition of creativity might be, and you would be right! There is no single, absolute definition of creativity; it encompasses a wide range of definitions.

Synergy and Serendipity

Creative thinkers often discover connections between seemingly unrelated concepts. Their thought processes can be **synergistic**, merging existing ideas and experiences in new ways. They may also experience **serendipity**, making unexpected discoveries while searching for something else. Both processes can contribute to creativity.

While exploring with watercolor paints and large brushes, Xiao begins experimenting with how colors blend on wet paper. As he paints, he notices that yellow and blue mix to make green and deliberately overlaps different colors to see what happens. **This is synergy in action.** Xiao is combining his previous experiences with color and movement in new, self-directed ways, resulting in a unique and evolving process.

While 5-year-old Gabriela is painting with watercolors, a drop from her brush spills onto a crayon drawing she made earlier on the same page. She notices that the watercolor resists the crayon marks rather than covering them. Surprised, Gabriela starts drawing with crayons again, then brushes over the marks with watercolor to see what else might happen. **This is serendipity:** an unexpected discovery that leads to further exploration and wonder.

Imagine preparing a movement activity for young children. You have recently been learning about child development in one class and rhythm and music in another. While planning, you suddenly realize you can combine ideas from both areas. You create a movement experience in which children hop, spin, and dance in time with music, supporting both gross motor development and rhythmic awareness. **This is creative synergy.** You are merging knowledge from different areas of your studies to create a richer, more meaningful experience for children. What began as two separate areas of learning, one focused on motor skills and the other on music, becomes something new when combined with intention and insight.

Great Thinkers who Taught us how to THINK!

"The creative mind breaks new ground. But the truly creative individual is the one whose innovations are accepted and adopted by others."— Gardner, H. (2007).

Harvard researcher Howard Gardner (1943–2024) explores creativity through the lives of seven influential figures in his book *Creating Minds* (Gardner, 2011). He describes creative individuals as those who regularly solve problems, create products, or pose new questions within a domain that are initially considered novel but eventually become accepted as standard practice. For example, when Sigmund Freud first presented his concept of the subconscious mind to colleagues, he was ridiculed for suggesting that an immeasurable force (the subconscious mind) influenced human behavior. Today, however, most people readily accept the once-unimaginable idea that subconscious processes guide or repress many of our thoughts and actions.

Gardner argues that genuine creativity must contribute something of value to society. In his later book *Five Minds for the Future* (Gardner, 2007), he expands on this idea by emphasizing that creativity should serve a constructive purpose, particularly by helping humanity adapt to new challenges and an ever-changing world.

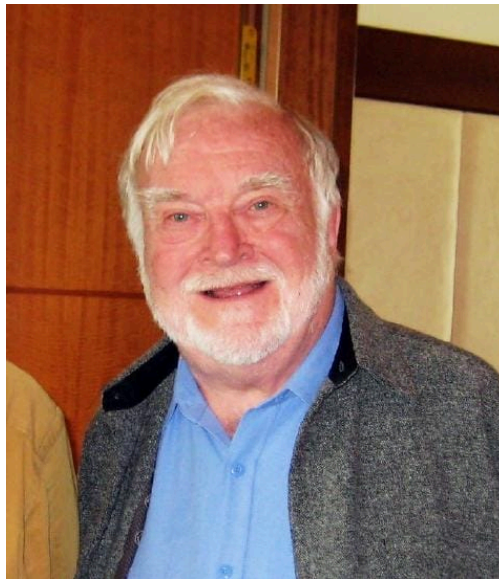
***"Creativity is the production of novel and appropriate ideas in any realm of human activity."* Teresa Amabile, 1996**

In her book, *Creativity in Context* (1996), **Dr. Teresa Amabile**, a leading contemporary theorist who speaks prolifically on creative development as it relates to education and childhood, says, "Creativity is the production of novel and appropriate ideas in any realm of human activity." She states that creative ideas must be both new and valuable in their context, not just original for the sake of originality, and provides guidance on how to nurture creativity through intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and rich environments, which are all key components in Early Childhood Education.

"Most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity" - Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention, 1997).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Creativity, Flow, and Human Potential

Psychologist **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** (1934–2021) (pronounced *cheek-sent-me-high*) challenged the popular belief that creativity appears as a sudden flash of inspiration. Instead, he argued that creativity usually develops through years of curiosity, hard work, and deep involvement in a particular field, such as science, literature, music, art, or architecture (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).



Csikszentmihalyi also reminded us that humans share approximately 98% of our genes with chimpanzees. What makes us unique is our extraordinary capacity for creativity. Humans can invent new technologies, create works of art, compose music, write stories, develop scientific theories, and imagine solutions to problems that have never been solved before. Creativity allows each generation to build upon the discoveries of those who came before, shaping cultures and advancing civilization.

However, Csikszentmihalyi believed that creativity is more than simply having a good idea. One of his most important contributions was his **Systems Model of Creativity**, which explains that creativity does not exist only inside an individual. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of three parts:

Example 1.1 Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model

Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity

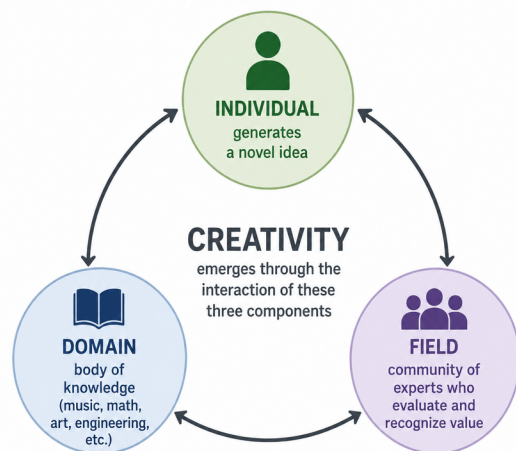


Image created by Donna King using OpenAI's ChatGPT (June 2026).

- **The individual**, who develops a novel idea.
- **The domain**, the body of knowledge to which the idea belongs (such as mathematics, music, engineering, or art).
- **The field**, the community of experts who determine whether the contribution is valuable enough to become part of the domain.

In other words, creativity is both **personal and social**. A new idea becomes truly creative when it is recognized as valuable by others within that field. Most psychologists therefore define creativity as producing something that is both **novel** and **valuable**, whether it is useful, beautiful, meaningful, or all three.

Csikszentmihalyi is perhaps best known for his research on **flow**, a psychological state in which people become completely absorbed in an activity. During flow, individuals are so engaged that they often lose track of time because the activity itself is deeply satisfying. Artists, musicians, scientists, athletes, writers, and even young children can experience flow when the challenge of a task matches their abilities.

Early childhood educators frequently witness flow during children's play. A child who spends twenty minutes constructing an elaborate block tower, becomes completely immersed in finger painting, or enthusiastically invents a pretend world is experiencing the kind of focused engagement that supports learning and creativity. Rather than interrupting these moments, skilled teachers recognize their value and protect uninterrupted time for children to explore, experiment, and discover.

Although young children are not expected to create world-changing inventions or masterpieces, they are developing the habits of mind that make creativity possible later in life. Every time children ask questions, solve problems, invent games, tell stories, test ideas, or imagine new possibilities, they are strengthening the thinking processes that underlie future creative achievement.

Researchers sometimes distinguish between "**little-c**" creativity and "**Big-C**" creativity. *Little-c creativity* refers to the everyday creativity we all use to solve problems, invent games, tell stories, or discover new ways of doing things. *Big-C creativity* refers to groundbreaking contributions that transform a field or society, such as a scientific breakthrough, an influential work of art, or a revolutionary invention. Early childhood education focuses on nurturing little-c creativity because these everyday experiences provide the foundation upon which later innovation can grow.

For early childhood educators, Csikszentmihalyi's message is both encouraging and practical. Children do not need to produce extraordinary works to be considered creative. Through play, exploration, experimentation, and sustained engagement, they are practicing the very processes that support creativity throughout life. Today's imaginative block structure, invented game, or original story may not change the world, but it is helping build the creative thinking that just might someday.

Divergent Thinking

Thinkers who can generate multiple ideas or answers to a single question employ **divergent thinking**. A lack of ideas does not limit them, and they want to take on a challenge.

A group of young children spent 10 minutes attempting to solve the problem of getting a heavy bale of hay from one end of the playground to the other, and their teacher sat quietly nearby as support, but only asked them how they were going to do it and if they needed any tools to accomplish their goal. The children suggested cutting the bale in half, to which the teacher thoughtfully asked, "With what will you do that?" "With a knife!" one suggested, "No way!" said another, "Dangerous!" After several minutes of brainstorming ideas, a child offered, "Maybe we can ask Joe (the master custodian) to pick it up with his handcart!" And off the small group of children ran to find Joe.

This example exemplifies the teacher's skill in supporting and fostering divergent thinking. She did not solve the problem immediately or tell them their ideas were unworkable. She just sat and showed them that the process of solving a problem can be enjoyable and even fun!

Consider the following example of a teacher who wants the children in his classroom to think divergently.

He brought in a large cardboard box that once housed a new dishwasher and asked the children what it could be used for. (A condominium? A fort? A space rocket?) He wanted to ask questions in a way that would show curiosity and interest. "Hmmm, I brought this big box and wondered what we could make of it. Any ideas?"

"The neglect of [creativity] by psychologists is appalling." — J.P. Guilford, *Creativity* (1950).

J.P. Guilford (1897–1987)

Regarding divergent thinking, J.P. Guilford was a notable figure in the field of creativity studies. He believed that divergent thinking is key to being creative.

In 1950, Guilford addressed the American Psychological Association and urged educators and psychologists to take creativity seriously. He presented a model called the *Structure of Intellect*, which explained two types of thinking: **convergent thinking**, which focuses on finding a single correct answer, such as in math problems, and **divergent thinking**, which involves generating multiple possible answers or ideas. For example, one of these creativity test questions was, “What can you do with a paperclip, besides the obvious?”

Guilford argued that young children are naturally good at divergent thinking, but traditional schooling often limits this ability. He identified four crucial parts of divergent thinking:

1. **Fluency** – the number of ideas a person can generate.
2. **Flexibility** – the variety of ideas produced.
3. **Originality** – the uniqueness of the ideas.
4. **Elaboration** – adding richness and detail to the ideas.

Together, these parts show how complex creativity is—something Guilford wanted us to understand better. (Guilford, 1950)

“I have spent my life studying the creativity of children. I have come to believe that the courage to be creative is one of the most important traits a person can have.” — E. Paul Torrance (1915– 2003).

Another notable figure in the field of creativity was **E. Paul Torrance** (1915– 2003). Torrance gave us a measurable way to see what it looks like. He believed that we can nurture, support, and measure creativity. In the 1960s, he developed the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), which are still in use today. (Torrance, 1974)

He defined creativity as a process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on; identifying the difficulty; searching for solutions; making guesses or formulating hypotheses about the deficiencies; testing and retesting these hypotheses and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results.

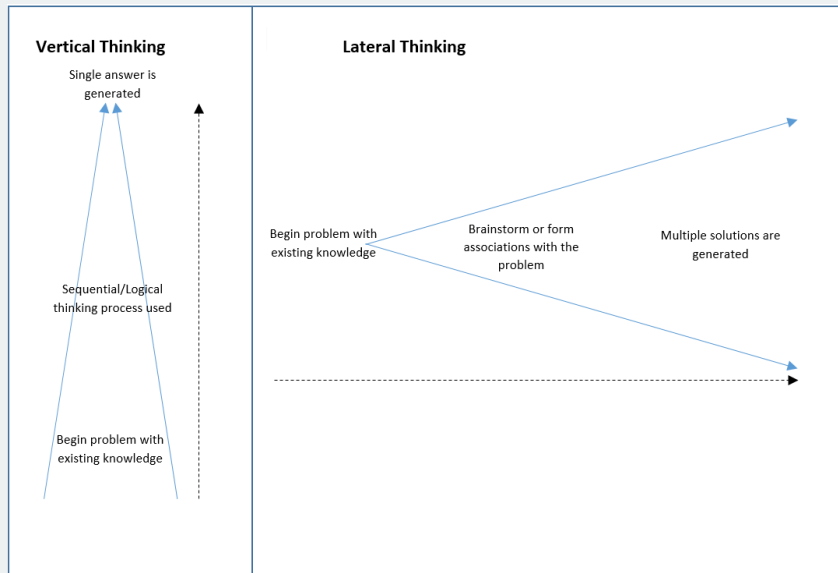
Torrance emphasized the importance of divergent thinking for children. He saw it as key to solving problems creatively. He observed that young children naturally show original thoughts, but standardized schooling often limits their responses as they grow. To help maintain their creativity, Torrance encouraged creative education, including storytelling, imaginative play, and open-ended questions.

His work also suggests that creating an emotionally and psychologically safe environment and offering encouragement is essential for children to express their creativity. (Torrance, 1962)

Lateral Thinking

Lateral thinking refers to solving problems by approaching them in new or unexpected ways. In early childhood, this often appears naturally in play: a child may turn a sock into a puppet or use a hairbrush as a pretend microphone. In adulthood, the same kind of thinking is often described as “thinking outside the box,” meaning stepping beyond familiar or conventional approaches to find creative solutions. This idea was developed by Edward de Bono, who argued that creativity is not an innate talent limited to a few people, but a skill that can be taught and strengthened, even in young children. He described lateral thinking as a way of solving problems by shifting perspective rather than following a single logical sequence. Unlike vertical or logical thinking, which proceeds step-by-step in a linear direction, lateral thinking explores possibilities, often leading to unexpected insights.

De Bono believed that children are especially strong in lateral thinking because they have not yet been shaped by rigid rules of conventional reasoning. They tend to experiment freely, play with ideas, and explore multiple possibilities without worrying about correctness. As he noted, “Children are excellent at lateral thinking because they haven’t yet been trained to think in straight lines” (de Bono, 1970).



You can nurture this capacity in children by using structured approaches to teaching thinking skills, including de Bono's CoRT Thinking Program and the Six Thinking Hats method. While these tools are often used with older students, simplified versions can be adapted for early childhood settings. His goal was to help learners practice shifting perspectives, questioning assumptions, and generating multiple alternatives when faced with a problem (de Bono, 1991).

In our classrooms, de Bono encourages us to intentionally support lateral thinking through everyday interactions. This includes asking open-ended questions such as “What else could this be?” and using imaginative play or role-play to explore different viewpoints. He also emphasized valuing unusual or unexpected ideas, even when they seem impractical at first. Finally, he highlighted the importance of “thinking about thinking,” or metacognition, introduced in developmentally appropriate ways so that young children can begin to notice and reflect on their own thinking processes (de Bono, 1992).

Curiosity-Driven Thinking

Curiosity-driven thinking involves asking questions, exploring “what if” scenarios, and seeking understanding beyond surface-level facts. Teachers who adopt a curiosity-driven approach prioritize asking questions and engaging in in-depth exploration, conveying to children that a desire to learn is a valuable trait that will stay with them throughout their lives. You may have heard those older folks you may admire speaking of being lifelong learners and not simply stopping exploration when the school bell rings. A child may tinker with an odd bit of machinery or ask where the butterfly goes when it rains to fulfill a deep need to find out more about the world. In rat brain studies, pioneering neuroscientist Marian Diamond investigated how environmental stimulation impacts the brain's structure. She found that rich, stimulating environments—full of novelty, challenge, and choice—increase the number of dendritic connections in the brain, particularly in the cortex. Curiosity-driven experiences, like exploring new materials or asking questions, activate the brain and promote neural plasticity. Classrooms that support exploration, questioning, and hands-on learning help develop more complex neural networks in young children. (Diamond et al., 1964).

“Everyone should be interested in understanding children because the future of the world quite literally depends on them” – Gopnik, 2001

Alison Gopnik emphasizes that free play, choice, and child-led exploration activate the brain's prefrontal cortex, enabling planning and engagement in creative endeavors. Gopnik suggests that young children are better than adults at learning because they are open to possibilities, which she attributes to their inherent curiosity. Curiosity is not just a behavior in her view; it's a

core learning mechanism for the developing brain. (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 2001).

Five Conditions for Creativity

Author Robert Schirrmacher (2015) describes five conditions for creativity at any age.

Creativity as a Process

Regardless of age, art and creativity begin as a process. Few have picked up a paintbrush, handled a mound of clay, written a majestic poem, or created a work of fiction without first engaging in some process. Process, as used in this sense, refers to all the sensory exploration that occurs before one becomes familiar with a medium, such as clay, paint, or dance. We must first come to know what this “stuff” can do, so we play. Here’s an example:

3-year-old Kobe is at his new preschool for the first week, and today he has shown interest in the easel situated near the front door of the room. He first looks at the colored paint made available on the easel tray, then tentatively plucks up a paintbrush thick with orange paint. He adds a little blob of color to the paper and notices the drips of color running down the page. He then uses his fingers to catch the drips and seems surprised at the resulting color left on his hand. He looks toward his teacher, who is setting up an art table covered in collage items (sequins, tissue squares, and flower petals). He seems to be expecting disapproval, but instead he hears an encouraging: *“Kobe, I see that you are exploring the orange paint. What does it feel like on your fingers?”* You see, Kobe needs to find out what the paint is all about, capable of and what his impact on it can be before making thoughtful decisions about what to do with it next.

Young children need many opportunities to explore and engage in process learning before progressing to more representational stages (as you will see in chapter two).

Contrast the child’s process of discovery with a common practice among well-meaning teachers: Product orientation. In this case, a teacher has an idea of what the final product will be and lets the children know this by providing a model for them to copy. In your early years, you may have a memory of such a teacher who asked you to complete an “art project” or “craft” by following directions to complete a finished product. If so, how did that contribute to your creative development?

The term “craft” is not used much in early childhood settings because it connotes a vision of skipping the process and going directly to predetermined outcomes that have little to do with how young children interact with creative materials.

Creativity as an Attitude

For young children, viewing creativity as a way of identifying and solving problems may be helpful. Creativity is a different way of viewing the world, with no right or wrong answers, only possibilities. Think of creativity as an attitude rather than an aptitude. Children demonstrate a creative attitude when experimenting with new ideas and diverse problem-solving approaches. They challenge boundaries and explore new possibilities by manipulating and reshaping concepts and materials. Children with a creative attitude may take apart and reassemble objects in innovative ways. If you want to cultivate a childlike, creative attitude, allow yourself to imagine and daydream as you solve problems or figure things out. Do not hesitate to ask questions and challenge conventional thinking and acting. There is a refreshing quality to the thinking of these children—a kind of unstoppable thirst for doing, knowing, and creating.

Creativity as a Skill

Although all children are creative, the potential to create remains dormant without practice. With practice, the potential to create becomes a reality. For example, the skill of playing tennis is quickly lost without practice. The skill of creativity also requires exercise to grow. Without practice, the ability to write, make music, sing, dance, and paint would be lost. Creativity as a potential and a skill requires exercise. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) believe that creativity, like intelligence, is something that everyone possesses in some amount. Moreover, creativity is not a fixed attribute.

It is something almost anyone can develop to varying degrees. In discussions of creativity, many adults will often state, “I’m just not creative.” Everyone knows someone creative, but not everyone believes they are creative. Still, all people exhibit some degree of creativity, whether in writing, sewing, cooking, crafting, decorating, or even teaching. It is crucial to find a creative outlet and practice the skills involved.

Still, why do some adults feel themselves uncreative when, by contrast, young children are considered highly creative? What has happened between early childhood and adulthood? Research suggests that children reach a peak of creative functioning during the early childhood years. Torrance (1965) plots the degree of creative functioning versus age. Creativity often peaks during the fourth year of life and then declines sharply upon entering elementary school. In only a few adults do levels of creativity ever return to what they were in early childhood. The push for conformity and academics in elementary school explains this drop. Yet it's not inevitable. Environmental conditions and practice can keep creativity alive.

Creativity as a Set of Personality Traits

The personality approach identifies the personality profile of highly creative individuals. Researchers have identified personality traits that highly creative individuals commonly share. Many of them are open to the new and unexpected, and they embrace change. These individuals tend to have a high tolerance for ambiguity, allowing them to navigate uncertain situations easily. They are usually willing to experiment and take risks, which fosters creativity and innovation in their pursuits. This willingness is often accompanied by a sense of impulsivity and an innate curiosity that drives them to explore the unknown.

They prefer complexity, often finding beauty in intricate details and multifaceted challenges. Their highly intuitive and sensitive nature allows them to connect deeply with their surroundings and the experiences they encounter. Flexibility is another hallmark of such individuals; they can adapt to new situations with grace and ease.

Individualism, independence, and introversion often define their character, as they value their unique perspectives and the freedom to pursue their interests. A tendency towards nonconformity is noticeable, as societal norms do not easily sway them. Playfulness and a sense of humor often enrich their interactions, allowing them to maintain a light-hearted approach to life. Ultimately, they possess a heightened sensory awareness, which sharpens their perception of the world around them (Gelineau, 2004).

Creativity as a Set of Environmental Conditions

If creativity is an inherent potential, there must be conditions or experiences that enhance or hamper its development. Environmental conditions include people, places, objects, and experiences. Children do not create out of a vacuum. Children need rich experiences to create meaning. Their imagination is fueled by what they see, hear, and feel in the world around them. Just as gardeners need seeds and musicians need instruments, children need experiences to shape their ideas and creativity. They build stories from the world we offer them.

For example, a child who has never visited an airport or been aboard a plane will have difficulty incorporating these concepts into play, movement, art, and other creative activities. By contrast, a child who has visited an airport and flown on a plane will be able to use them as pivots for creative expression. The greater one's background of experiences with people, places, and objects, the greater the range of possibilities to draw from in creative activity. Children's creative acts will incorporate what was previously learned and experienced, as well as new ways of expressing those experiences (Matlock & Hornstein, 2004).

Activities Called ART: fostering creativity in self and others

We must address the proverbial elephant in the room. Many have seen it. The rows of children's "art" fill up a classroom bulletin board. Each one is a copy of a teacher's model done to the best of the child's ability to copy. You may be acutely aware of the difficulties children face when their work is displayed in this manner. They are praised for "Good Work" or silently internalize feelings of inadequacy when they compare their work with the rest of the display, or worse, have their contribution left out altogether, only for a teacher to produce a piece that might fool a parent on family night.

This is an obstacle to creativity. It starts out as an activity named "art," but as soon as the children begin to play with the materials, experiment, and discover what they offer, they are told they are doing something wrong and not following directions. This we call the obstacle of the school.

Schirmacher writes about these obstacles in "Art and Creative Development in Young Children" (2015), stating that a stimulating environment at school and certain family factors can enhance creativity, while unfavorable conditions can restrict it. He lists these potential obstacles to creativity:

1. **Home**—A family's collective expectation for behaviors can be difficult for a creative child to meet. Highly creative children are innately driven to question authority and limits. A parent might view this as misbehavior and see their creative child as odd

or immature when, paradoxically, the child is striving for an outlet for a deep need to create.

Family education nights at the local schools can be useful in educating them about their children's needs.

2. **School** - Too often, the creative child must operate in a classroom based entirely on conformity and convergent thinking. With the current emphasis on academics in early childhood education, little time may be spent on creative activities. It is also possible that some children feel confined in non-creative classrooms and shut down or rebel to protect their creative integrity. It is important for teachers to value and encourage creativity by providing curricular activities that foster it.

3. **Gender Roles**—Another obstacle emanates from society. It says girls must stay clean and color in the lines, and boys should be active and go for adventurous pursuits in the sandbox or monkey bars. Neither of these messages promotes creative expression. There is no gender limitation on creativity, and all children should have equal access to materials that invite exploration and discovery.

Creative functioning transcends gender role barriers. Forcing children to conform to stereotypical gender roles denies them their optimal development as individuals. We do children a disservice when we expect boys to be active, independent, and rugged and girls to be passive, dependent, and gentle. If gender roles were to dictate, boys would be denied access to quieter expressive activities, and girls would be denied access to reactive manipulative experiences. Either way, children lose, because both types of experience are vital to creative processing.

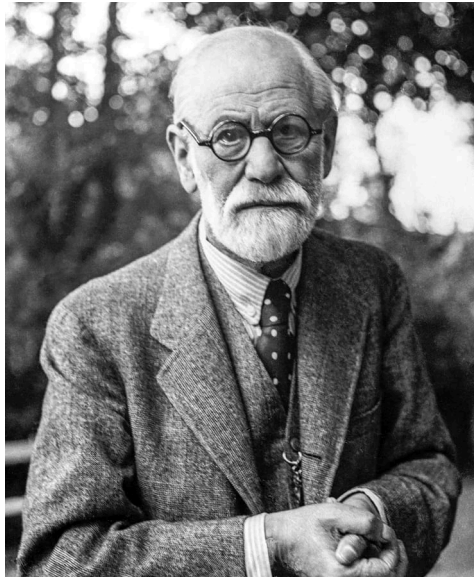
2: General Development in Children

Grand Developmental Theory

When I first started working with children, I was barely an adult myself, and I recall thinking at one point while taking a bird's-eye view of a classroom filled with three and 4-year-olds: "This is like working in an insane asylum." (Which is neither politically correct nor a true description of young children). But I thought, If I didn't know better, I'd think these were all a bunch of crazy short people. But I *did* know better (or at least I was *beginning* to know better), I was learning that there were grand theorists who made it their life's work to understand the pre-logical, ego-centric, autonomy-seeking, little beings that would become my own life's work. Let's review those theorists so no one else has to be as baffled as I was!

Psychoanalytic Theory

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalytic theory and an early advocate for the role of play in healthy childhood development, stated in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* that play serves a therapeutic purpose. It helps children manage negative emotions without alienating them from adults (Elkind, D., 2008). The psychoanalytic theory illuminates why children may pretend to be monsters, act out spanking a doll, or create drawings that could have deeper subconscious significance.



Sigmund Freud, Circa 1930

Children's drawings are a medium for accessing emotions they don't have words for. Drawing is not merely a creative act but a tool that facilitates a child's understanding of their own psychological processes, allowing for new symbolizations and transformations of unconscious structures (Wittmann, 2010).

Imagine a 4-year-old child named Maya who consistently draws a large figure towering over a smaller one, with the smaller figure always positioned in the corner of the page. Over several weeks, the details change; sometimes the smaller figure gains a toy or is placed closer to the larger figure, but the theme of separation remains.

From a surface view, this might look like just a creative drawing, but it is more than that; it is a way for Maya to explore and work through feelings that may not be easy to articulate in words. Perhaps she is adjusting to a new sibling or expressing feelings of power and vulnerability in her environment.

In this case, the drawing serves as a tool for Maya to process her inner emotions.

Another area of creativity in early childhood is socio-dramatic play. Children are driven to don that cape, put on those oversized high-heeled shoes, or run through the yard with a makeshift sword. This form of play allows children to manage internal tensions and developmental pressures. While playing, children express and work through unconscious conflicts. (Gilmore, K. 2011).

Another prominent theorist in the psychosocial field is **Erik Erikson**, who outlined the stages people experience as they develop unique identities. According to Erikson, preschool-aged children (3-7 years) go through a stage called **Initiative vs. Guilt**, which is the third of eight stages. During this stage, children feel a strong urge to make choices about their environment. They seek opportunities to explore materials and their own ideas without too much adult interference. They begin asserting control and power over their environment through directing play and other social interactions. When an ECE classroom is thoughtfully designed with child initiation in mind, opportunities for growth become abundant, and children thrive. Conversely, when they face obstacles to their creative ideas, such as punishment or rigid rules, they experience guilt. Erikson acknowledged that unresolved stages could affect later development, potentially leading to feelings of worthlessness in initiating, due to constant roadblocks like limited child choices or a persistent teacher's agenda that stifles freedom of thought. Children who are encouraged to express their ideas and pursue their drive for exploration and discovery exhibit noticeable psychological growth and embody the virtue of purpose.



As children enter middle childhood (ages 8–11), they transition into Erikson's fourth stage: Industry vs. Inferiority. Children are innately motivated to create and contribute at this stage—they want to see their ideas take shape and feel a sense of accomplishment in the process. Teachers who nurture creativity offer rich opportunities for children to produce meaningful work. Classrooms should provide space for student voice, not only in what children choose to make, but also in how they plan, experiment, revise, and share their creations. A teacher attuned to this developmental need might ask children to talk about their artistic choices, collaborate on projects, or reflect on their process with pride. Without those opportunities to practice in the industry, children are at risk for developing feelings of inferiority. When children feel that their creative efforts are recognized and valued, they develop a sense of industry and begin to embody the virtue of skill—a growing belief in their own abilities as makers, thinkers, and artists.

Behaviorist Theory

From a behavioral perspective, children's creative actions can be explained through reinforcement and modeling. Behaviorists have found that environmental variables and reinforcement contingencies shape novel behaviors. (Krapfl, J. E. 2016).

B.F. Skinner, the founder of Operant Conditioning, wrote about this concept in 1938. He highlights that behaviors are acquired through interactions with the environment, mainly via reinforcement and punishment. (Skinner, B.F. 1938). So, with this theory in mind, we can expect that children will respond positively to reinforcement in the form of teachers praising their creative efforts with statements like "Good job!" or "What a beautiful painting!" However, this would be incorrect. According to scholar Alfie Kohn, we teach children to become dependent on praise and focus them on external motivating factors, which is detrimental to creativity. Children learn to look outward for rewards for their work and lose the natural intrinsic motivation that drives creativity. **Alfie Kohn** is a prominent critic of operant conditioning, especially as it's applied in educational settings. He argues that rewards and punishments undermine intrinsic motivation.

In his book, *Punished by Rewards* (1993), Kohn critiques the use of incentives such as stickers, praise, and grades, all classic tools of operant conditioning. He claims they harm children's natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn or create. Kohn asserts that when children work for a reward, their focus shifts from "What can I discover or express?" to "What do they want me to do?" This shift stifles risk-taking, experimentation, and deep engagement, all essential ingredients of creativity. True learning and creativity emerge from environments where children feel safe, respected, and free to explore without the pressure of external evaluations.

Albert Bandura's **Social Learning Theory** extends the principles of behaviorism by incorporating cognitive processes. According to this theory, children learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others, especially when they see those behaviors being rewarded. This observational learning doesn't require direct reinforcement; instead, vicarious reinforcement (observing others being rewarded) can be sufficient. (Bandura, 1977).

Again, concerns have been raised about behaviorism. Critics argue that observing others receive rewards does not have the impact Bandura suggested. Instead, children may view the reward recipient as competition or feel they cannot match the behavior of the rewarded teacher, leading to disengagement. This study examined the effects of vicarious reinforcement on children's performance. Children who observed peers receiving reinforcement initially improved their performance. However, over time, their performance declined, accompanied by expressions of frustration, such as "There's no use in trying." The authors suggest that observing others being rewarded can sometimes lead to feelings of inadequacy, especially if children perceive the rewarded behavior as unattainable. (Ollendick & Shapiro, 1984)

Humanistic Theory

The humanistic tradition emphasizes the inherent dignity and uniqueness of people, contrasting with lower animals driven solely by instinct. This perspective provides a powerful framework for understanding young children's creativity. According to the *Oxford University Press* (n.d.), **Humanism** is an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems.

In this view, children are not empty vessels to be filled or conditioned beings, but whole persons striving for self-expression and meaning. Creative play and artistic expression are essential because they honor the child's inner life and sense of self. When teachers provide open-ended materials, safe spaces for exploration, and emotional affirmation, they practice humanism.

The humanistic tradition emerged partly in reaction to behaviorism, which treated behavior as a result of external stimuli, and psychoanalysis, which focused heavily on unconscious drives. Humanistic theorists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers wrote about:

- Self-actualization
- Free will
- Individual meaning-making
- The inherent worth of each person

Teachers who take up the humanist project by centering the well-being of young children, listening to their imaginations, honoring their expressions, and creating spaces where they can flourish are providing more than just education; they are engaging in a moral act.

Steven Pinker tells us, "In humanism, we hold out the well-being of men, women, children, and other sentient creatures as the highest good... And if we apply sympathy and reason to making people better off, we can gradually succeed." (Gillespie, N. 2018).

Constructivist Theory

Piaget and the Sensory Motor Infant

Teachers who adopt a Piagetian approach to their work with young children do so because they believe children progress through a series of stages, beginning at birth and continuing through to adolescence. It's a straightforward approach showing how children think at certain ages. The infant is seen as a sensory explorer who innately desires to learn as much as possible about their world through their senses. They touch, taste, smell, and act upon their environments in ways that are not entirely tidy. The teacher who knows this about infants and toddlers allows for rich exploration in a sensory-rich environment. Imagine walking into this caregiver's learning environment:

A basket of sheer scarves is off to one side of the room, a small basin filled with a mixture of cornstarch and water and colored a soft blue (with non-toxic food coloring). A caregiver is on the floor with three crawling infants holding (and chewing on) a couple of board books. She reads a few words and pictures while carefully assessing the infant's interest and playfully engages in a kind of back-and-forth game of vocalizing the images and words. Perhaps elsewhere, a child moves rhythmically to the sound of Afro-Haitian music playing in the background.

If you were a very small child, you would be enticed! You might tentatively poke a finger into the cornstarch and water mixture before diving in, or you might grasp a scarf while developing a neat pincer grasp. By doing all of this, you would be naturally stimulating your mind and building a sense of creativity, an understanding of what the world has to offer, and what their impact on it might be.

Piaget and the Preoperational Young Child

Once children emerge from that first stage of sensorimotor discovery, they continue to hold on to it as they explore more imaginatively. Piaget calls this child "pre-operational," meaning they are not limited by the kinds of logic that get in the way of creativity and discovery. Instead, these children are confident! They believe they can be anything: a sword-fighter, a princess, a dinosaur! According to Piaget's theory, these children need opportunities to explore freely in well-designed environments that take into account their natural efforts to develop knowledge.

Vygotsky (1896 –1934) Imagination: the birthplace of higher thinking

Unlike Piaget, who emphasized the developmental stages through which children naturally progress, Lev Vygotsky viewed creativity as a fundamentally social and cultural process. He believed that children do not simply imitate the world around them. Instead, they actively reconstruct their experiences through imagination. In pretend play, a stick can become a horse, a cardboard box can transform into a castle, and a child can experiment with ideas, relationships, emotions, and possibilities that extend beyond immediate reality. These imaginative acts are not escapes from learning. They *are* learning.



For Vygotsky, imaginative play serves as a bridge to higher mental functions. As children invent scenarios, negotiate roles with peers, and follow the self-imposed rules of make-believe, they practice abstract thinking, language, self-regulation, planning, and problem solving. In other words, creativity is not merely an enjoyable by-product of childhood. It is one of the primary engines driving intellectual development. The imaginative capacities nurtured during early play later become the foundation for scientific reasoning, artistic expression, innovation, and the ability to envision possibilities that do not yet exist.

Lev Vygotsky had a deep respect for the creative potential of young children, and he saw imagination and creativity as essential components of cognitive development, not just fanciful play, but fundamental tools for learning and growth. his ideas about **imagination, pretend play, and creativity** are highly important and influential for early childhood educators.

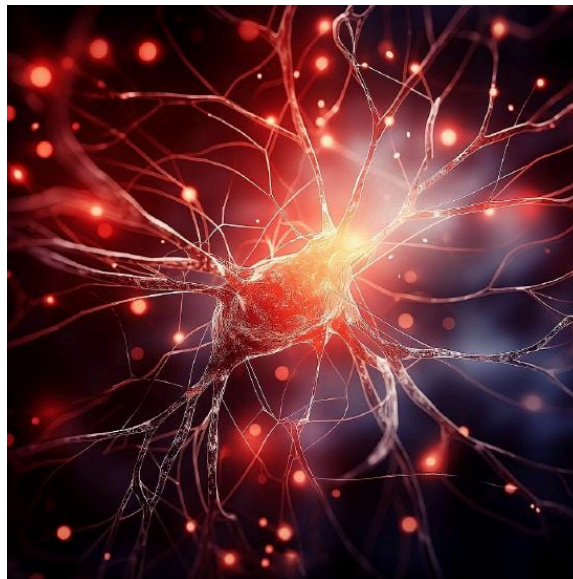
"Play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

In Vygotsky's seminal work *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, he argues that imagination is not the opposite of reality but is instead constructed from children's lived experiences and becomes increasingly sophisticated through play (Vygotsky, 2004). Rather than viewing pretend play as a departure from learning, Vygotsky positions it as one of the primary engines of cognitive development. As children draw upon real experiences and recombine them in imaginative ways, they begin to form new meanings, experiment with roles, and test possibilities that extend beyond the immediate environment. Through this process, imagination is not only expressive but also developmental: it supports the growth of language, symbolic thinking, and self-regulation. In Vygotsky's view, play becomes a space where children practice thinking ahead, following self-imposed rules, and negotiating shared meaning with others. Over time, these imaginative activities lay the groundwork for more advanced intellectual functions, allowing creativity to emerge as a core pathway to higher-order thinking. For Vygotsky, when children pretend, they are doing far more than entertaining themselves. They are practicing the very cognitive abilities that will later allow them to solve scientific problems, write novels, compose music, invent technologies, and imagine better ways of understanding the world.

Vygotsky developed these ideas decades before modern brain imaging made it possible to observe the developing brain in action. Although he described creativity through the lens of cognitive and social development rather than neuroscience, contemporary research has provided biological support for many of his observations. We now know that the experiences Vygotsky believed were so important for imagination and learning are also shaping the developing brain itself.

Brain Development and the Foundations of Creativity

At birth, the human brain contains approximately 100 billion neurons, the raw material for everything we think, feel, and do. But neurons alone are not enough. During the first years of life, children's brains form trillions of synaptic connections through interactions with people, objects, and experiences. This early wiring process is experience-dependent, meaning the brain physically develops in response to the child's environment and relationships (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).



Creative thinking, including problem solving, imagination, and cognitive flexibility, is shaped by the quality of those early experiences. When young children are given time, space, and encouragement to explore and express themselves, they build neural pathways that support learning, emotional regulation, and creative thinking throughout life. How, then, can early childhood teachers create classroom environments that support healthy brain development and creativity? Research consistently points to responsive relationships and meaningful experiences. Children learn best when they feel emotionally secure, are encouraged to explore, and have opportunities to engage with interesting materials and caring adults.

One of the most important ways teachers support brain development is through everyday interactions. Developmental scientists

describe these as **serve-and-return exchanges**. A child points to something, asks a question, or tries a new idea, and an adult responds with attention, conversation, or encouragement. These back-and-forth interactions strengthen the neural pathways involved in language, attention, memory, and flexible thinking, all of which contribute to creativity. This understanding has practical implications for the classroom. Open-ended materials encourage children to experiment, solve problems, and represent their ideas in many different ways. A cardboard box might become a spaceship, a grocery store, or a cave. Clay, blocks, water, light, loose parts, and storytelling materials invite children to test ideas and make discoveries. Teachers support this process by observing carefully, asking thoughtful questions, and offering just enough assistance to help children move beyond what they could accomplish independently. Vygotsky described this as learning within the zone of proximal development.

The emotional climate of the classroom also matters. Children are more willing to take creative risks when they know their ideas will be respected, even if they are unfinished or unexpected. When teachers value the process of exploration instead of rushing children toward a correct answer, children develop confidence, persistence, and a willingness to keep working through challenges. These experiences strengthen habits of thinking that support creativity over time.

As teachers, one of the most valuable questions we can ask ourselves is not simply what we want children to learn today, but what kinds of thinking our classroom experiences encourage every day.

Cultivating Creativity in the Classroom:

- **Create a rich sensory environment:** Sensory input fuels brain development. Consider the soundscape (gentle music, quiet nooks), visual stimuli (natural light, open-ended displays), and tactile materials (sand, clay, fabric, natural elements) that support exploration. Avoid overstimulating or overly themed decorations that may limit imagination.
- **Offer choices and time to reflect:** Children need opportunities to self-select materials and engage in open-ended play. This supports autonomy and encourages divergent thinking. Also allow for mental processing time — children often revisit ideas days or even weeks later. Avoid rushing them through creative tasks just to complete a product.
- **Honor and extend children's original ideas:** When teachers respond with curiosity and encourage children's unique perspectives, it sends a clear message: *Your ideas matter*. Rather than steering a child toward a “correct” outcome, ask open-ended questions, document their thinking, and provide materials that support further exploration.

Reflecting Thoughts

Taken together, the major theories of development offer a shared understanding of childhood as an active, meaning-making process shaped through mind, body, relationships, and environment. Psychoanalytic perspectives highlight the emotional depth of early expression, where symbolic play and drawing provide pathways for children to work through inner experience. Erikson's psychosocial stages extend this view into identity formation, showing how initiative, confidence, and industry emerge when children are supported in their efforts to act on the world.

Behaviorist and social learning theories draw attention to the role of environment, reinforcement, and observation in shaping behavior, while also raising important questions about how external rewards influence curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Humanistic theory reframes the child as a whole person with dignity, agency, and an inherent drive toward growth and self-expression. Constructivist perspectives from Piaget and Vygotsky further deepen this understanding by showing how children actively build knowledge through sensory exploration, symbolic play, language, and imagination.

Modern insights from brain development research add a biological dimension to these theories. Neural growth during early childhood is shaped through experience, relationships, and repeated opportunities for exploration. Each interaction, each material encounter, and each moment of guided play contributes to the architecture of thinking itself. Creativity, in this view, is not an isolated skill but a developmental outcome of rich cognitive, emotional, social, and sensory engagement.

Across these perspectives, a coherent picture emerges. Children develop as thinkers, creators, and meaning-makers through continuous interaction between internal processes and external experience. Their play, drawings, and imaginative acts reflect this integration in visible form. When educators understand development through this layered lens, they are better positioned to design environments that support curiosity, resilience, and flexible thinking across the lifespan.

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3: Artistic Development

One of the most delightful things teachers get to do is be inspired by the creative expression of young children. Whether it's their mighty clay sculptures, their overwhelmingly colorful paintings, or the way they talk about their ideas, adults who pay attention are fascinated by it all. But do we always understand what the significance of their artistic process is? Many do not, and that is where a study of Artistic Developmental Theory comes in. Researchers who have a deep appreciation for the raw creativity of young children have shaped our knowledge and practices regarding the what, why, and how of early artistic development.

Lowenfeld and Brittain

Viktor Lowenfeld (1903–1960) was an Austrian-born art educator and psychologist who emigrated to the United States in the 1930s to escape the Nazi regime. He was a professor at Pennsylvania State University and is best known for his work on children's artistic development. Lowenfeld was deeply interested in how children express themselves through art. He believed that children's drawings are a window into their cognitive, emotional, and perceptual development, not just creative output. His work was influenced by Piaget's stage theory as well as by a desire to advocate for **child-centered education**.

W. Lambert Brittain (1922–1987) was an American art educator who worked closely with Lowenfeld. Brittain was a professor of human development and family studies in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell and was locally well known for supervising the Saturday art classes for children, which were offered at Cornell each year. Many of the activities from these classes formed the basis for new directions in the study of creativity and art for children. Brit (as his friends called him) reflected that:

It is only through children's interactions with adults that positive values are established and reactions to the environment are encouraged. It is this interaction that is crucial in learning; this is particularly true in the area of art expression. It is not the development of transitory skills that is important, but rather the development of a sensitive, creative, involved, and aware child. (as cited in Dodge, Ricciuti, & Bayer, 1960).

Lowenfeld and Brittain sought to understand and document the natural progression of children's art as a developmental process. They were motivated by both psychological insight and a commitment to respecting children's ways of seeing the world, pushing against rigid or adult-imposed standards in art education. Their theory (1987) took into account children's creative and mental growth. Their stages of artistic development are widely recognized and accepted.

Outlined in their seminal book *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947), these stages describe the evolution of children's artistic development as a reflection of their cognitive and emotional growth, not just their motor skills.

1. Scribble Stage (Ages ~1yr–4yrs)

When a child is first introduced to a mark-making tool (Crayon, marker, or paintbrush), they produce **random scribbles**. The infant or toddler begins with no intention to represent objects. This emerges as an exciting early exploratory mark-making, in which the child is discovering the physical relationship among hand, tool, and surface. Next in the progression comes **controlled scribbling**, when the child's marks begin to show direction and rhythm, often with many vertical or horizontal lines and loops or swirls. Marks at this stage are more about the joy of movement than meaning, as children repeat gestures to explore variation, pressure, and flow. At the end of this stage comes **named scribbling** as children begin to name their drawings after they are made or even during the process. During this process, the child engages in an internal dialogue while creating a story that may bear no resemblance to the thing it represents, yet it reflects the child's emerging capacity to link movement, imagination, and meaning-making.

2. Preschematic Stage (Ages ~4yrs–7yrs)

After many months of enjoyment with scribbling, the first recognizable shapes emerge as children begin to include human figures, often with large heads and simplified limbs, marking an early shift toward symbolic representation. At this stage, art is more symbolic than realistic, as children are not yet focused on proportion or visual accuracy but on meaning and recognition. Nothing is to scale. There is little logic in spatial organization, and objects often appear to float in space, reflecting a world where placement is guided by emotional importance and narrative intent rather than physical realism.

3. Schematic Stage (Ages ~7yrs–9yrs)

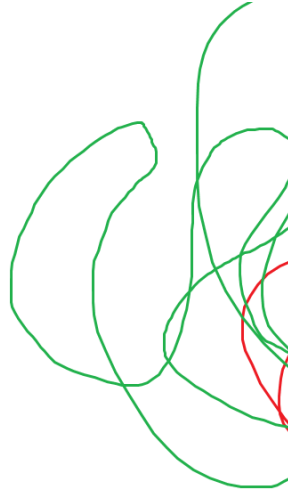
Many adults who may not have understood the preceding stages might find this stage satisfying now that the child is producing images that can be interpreted more easily. It is during this stage that we see the **development of a consistent schema** as children begin to represent objects such as houses, trees, and people in a stable, repeated way, drawing them in a similar manner across multiple images. The emergence of **baseline and skyline** marks an important step in spatial organization, as children begin to create a sense of ground and sky to support their visual narratives. At this stage, art reflects the child's internal logic rather than a realistic perspective, revealing how meaning, order, and structure are constructed from the child's own understanding of the world rather than external visual accuracy.

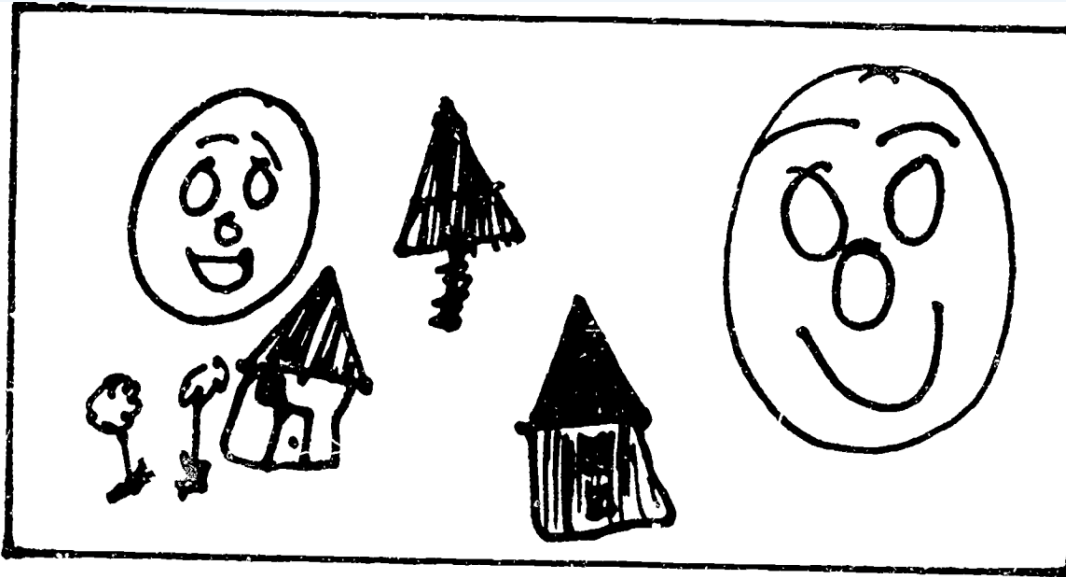
4. Dawning Realism / Gang Age (Ages ~9yrs–12yrs)

Increased awareness of **proportion, details, and spatial relationships emerges** as children begin to attend more closely to how parts of their drawings relate to one another within a whole composition. Children become more self-critical of their art, often comparing their work to others and noticing differences between intention and outcome. Desire for more realism also develops at this stage, which can sometimes lead to discouragement if children feel they “can’t draw,” marking an important emotional shift where confidence and comparison begin to play a larger role in artistic expression.

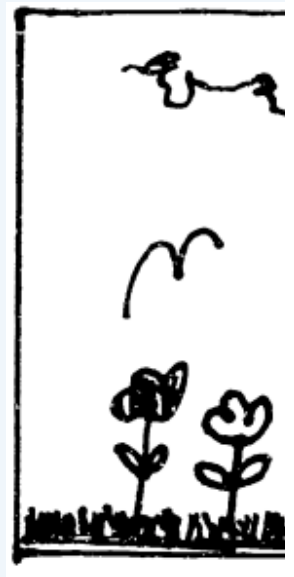


Random Scribble Stage 1yr. 10mos. child





Pre-schematic stage (Note free floating symbols; not to scale)



Schematic stage (Note an

How Their Work Is Used Today

Lowenfeld and Brittain's stage model continues to play an important role in art education curriculum, where it is used by educators to design developmentally appropriate art activities and to assess children's artwork in context rather than by adult standards of realism or technical skill. In teacher training programs, the theory is often introduced to help educators understand how children's art reflects cognitive, emotional, and perceptual development, and how these domains are expressed through visual form. Their work also supports a strong advocacy for creativity, grounded in the belief that every child is naturally creative and that pressuring children toward realism too early can limit or hinder authentic self-expression. Overall, Lowenfeld and Brittain helped shift art education toward a more child-centered philosophy, moving the focus away from copying and perfection and toward nurturing imagination, exploration, and emotional expression as central purposes of children's art-making.

Rhoda Kellogg

Rhoda Kellogg was a psychologist and nursery school teacher who studied over one million children's drawings from around the world, aged 2 to 8. Her observational and comparative research focused on identifying universal patterns in young children's art. She classified these patterns into stages and forms, believing that children's drawings express an internal need to organize and communicate their experiences, rather than merely imitate the external world.

Kellogg collected artworks from more than 30 countries as part of her large-scale study, aiming to understand early artistic development. She led the Institute of Child Study in San Francisco, where she and her team systematically sorted, categorized, and documented the drawings using her own classification system. Her structured approach organized drawings into scribbles, shapes, and symbols, which she viewed as universal stages of graphic development.

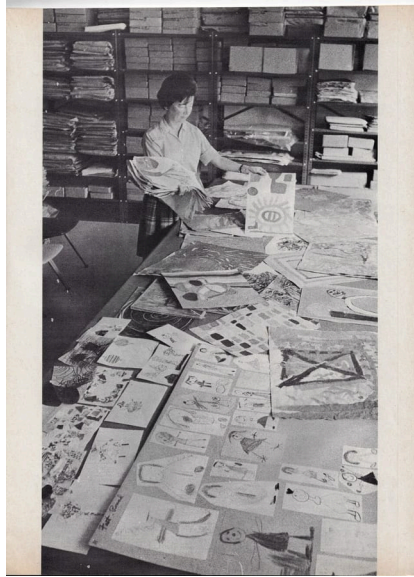


Figure 3.1: 1967 Rhoda Kellogg prepares an analysis at the Golden Gate Kindergarten in San Francisco

Kellogg's Key Ideas

Scribbling Is Purposeful

Kellogg demonstrated that what adults often dismiss as "scribbles" are, in fact, the early foundations of artistic and cognitive development. These marks reflect motor control, repetition, and joy in movement, as well as the child's growing awareness of space and form.

Basic "Form Patterns"

She identified 20 basic scribbles (variations on circles, lines, and loops) and 17 "designs" (combinations of these forms) that appear universally. These patterns represent a visual language that children invent naturally, much like babbling in speech development.

Art Reflects Inner Growth

Kellogg believed that children's drawings reveal inner mental and emotional processes, rather than attempts to copy real-world objects. Her work emphasized developmental self-expression over realistic representation.

Artistic Development Is Universal

By comparing drawings from children worldwide, Kellogg concluded that the progression of artistic forms follows a common developmental path, regardless of culture or environment. This supported her belief in an innate visual language of early childhood. (Kellogg, 1970)

How Her Work Is Used Today

Kellogg's work (1970) has direct application in the Early Childhood Classroom. Teachers with an eye to the work and insights of Kellogg:

- **Value All Stages of Drawing:** Teachers can respect and celebrate scribbles and abstract art as meaningful developmental steps, avoiding the pressure to push children into representational drawing too early.
- **Provide Open-Ended Materials:** Offer crayons, markers, paint, and paper without giving directions. This encourages free exploration of lines, shapes, and forms.
- **Observe, Don't Judge:** Educators can observe children's drawings to better understand their developmental stage and emotional state, using artwork as a window into the child's thinking and feelings.
- **Honor Artistic Voice:** By providing space for self-directed drawing, teachers foster creativity, problem-solving, and self-expression—all essential for cognitive and emotional growth.

Brain Development and the Foundations of Creativity

At birth, the human brain contains approximately **100 billion neurons**, the raw material for everything we think, feel, and do. But neurons alone are not enough. During the first years of life, children's brains form **trillions of synaptic connections** through interactions with people, objects, and experiences. This **early wiring process is experience-dependent**, meaning the brain physically develops in response to the child's environment and relationships (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

When children experience moments of curiosity, neurons in their limbic systems, a part of the brain beneath the cortex that processes emotion, begin to fire. This activates a dynamic exchange of neural signals between the brain's higher-order areas, such as the prefrontal cortex, and the lower, more reactive regions involved in emotion and instinct. Because children's prefrontal cortices are not yet fully developed, they have limited capacity to regulate impulses. As a result, they may respond to curiosity in ways that seem unpredictable to adults—gleefully splashing water out of a sink, painting a red streak on a sibling's shirt, or expressing themselves in other unfiltered ways. While such behavior is typical, it's not universal. When impulsivity does emerge, adults can support healthy brain development by using thoughtful language and expressive facial cues to help strengthen neural connections and guide self-regulation.

Here is an example: In a Transitional Kindergarten classroom exploring life science, children have been engaged in planting and tending a class garden. One day, 4.5-year-old Yanyan discovers a snail slithering along a leaf. Bursting with excitement, she quickly plucks it from the plant and runs toward her teacher, accidentally knocking over little Elliott in the process. "Look, teacher! I have a baby snail to share at circle time!" she exclaims. Her teacher, Ms. Estelle, considers herself a brain-based educator and understands that Yanyan's curiosity and excitement signal active learning at the neural level, engaging both the lower emotional centers and the higher reasoning areas of the brain. This is a wonderful sign of development. What's not ideal, however, is removing the snail from its habitat and accidentally knocking over another child in the process. With calm presence, Ms. Estelle kneels beside Yanyan and says gently, "Yanyan, this *is* exciting! I see that you found this snail in our garden." While speaking, she softly places an arm around Yanyan's waist to offer grounding and support for emotional regulation. "Yanyan," she continues, "when you got excited about the snail, your body bumped into Elliott, and he got hurt. Do you see his face? He looks upset. Let's check on Elliott first. Then we can talk more about the snail." Later, during circle time, Ms. Estelle returns to Yanyan's discovery with an open heart and an open mind. She might ask, "What do you think the snail wants to eat?" or "Where do you think the snail sleeps at night?" These open-ended questions encourage Yanyan to reflect, hypothesize, and build new neural pathways, fostering deeper cognitive development through the joy of curiosity.

This kind of behavior is typical in classrooms with children under the age of seven. The brain's higher-order centers—responsible for impulse control, empathy, and reflection—take approximately seven years to reach early maturity. Because of this developmental timeline, young children depend on adults who can guide them with patience, empathy, and consistency, without resorting to shame or punishment. When adults respond in this way, they help children build the neural foundations for emotional regulation, social awareness, and lifelong learning. Creative thinking (problem solving, imagination, and flexibility) is shaped by the quality of those early experiences. When young children are given time, space, and encouragement to explore and express themselves, they build brain pathways that support **lifelong learning, emotional regulation, and original thinking**.

So, how can early childhood teachers create brain-based environments that **foster creative minds**, both now and for years to come?

Cultivating Creativity in the Classroom:

- **Allow for child voice and problem-solving** The example above illustrates this.
- **Create a rich sensory environment**
- Sensory input fuels brain development. Consider the **soundscape** (gentle music, quiet nooks), **visual stimuli** (natural light, open-ended displays), and **tactile materials** (sand, clay, fabric, natural elements) that support exploration. Avoid overstimulating or overly themed decorations that may limit imagination.
- **Offer choices and time to reflect**
- Children need opportunities to **self-select materials** and engage in **open-ended play**. This supports autonomy and encourages divergent thinking. Also allow for **mental processing time**. Children often revisit ideas days or even weeks later. Avoid rushing them through creative tasks just to complete a product.
- **Honor and extend children's original ideas**
- When teachers respond with curiosity and **encourage children's unique perspectives**, it sends a clear message: *Your ideas matter*. Rather than steering a child toward a "correct" outcome, ask open-ended questions, document their thinking, and provide materials that support further exploration.

Reflecting Thoughts

For those who take children's creative expression seriously, there is a joy and excitement in watching children's early marks, looping scribbles, symbolic figures, and dawning realism emerge through the open-ended materials we offer them. Artistic developmental theory invites us to shift the question from "*Can the child draw well?*" to "*What is the child discovering through drawing right now?*" When we view children's art this way, our role is not to shape or train artists, but to honor the development of thinkers in their earliest form. My hope is that this chapter has inspired in you a reverence for those named and unnamed scribbles, along with a commitment to continue offering children abundant opportunities for mark-making with a wide variety of tools and materials.

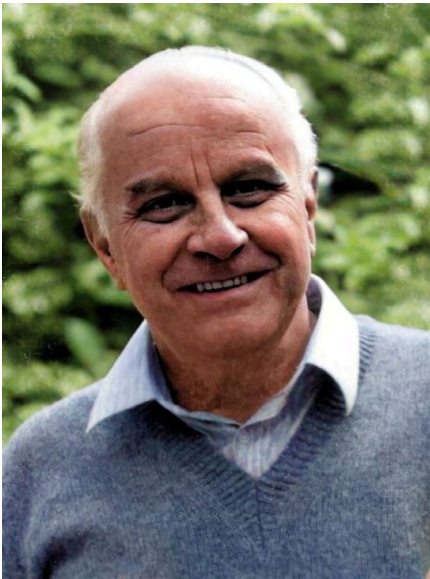
4: Providing Creative Experiences

Before creating an artistic environment for young children, it is crucial to consider those who have made significant contributions to the field. The three thought leaders in this chapter will help you shape your work for best practices in creativity. There are many voices in the field of creativity who aim to inspire teachers and because of this vastness, we will focus on the three voices below, all of whom speak directly to our work with young children.

Thought Leaders in Early Artistic Development

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994): The Reggio Emilia Approach Rooted in Respect

A continually emerging contribution to artistic development comes from the work of Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian educator who helped develop the **Reggio Emilia approach**, an inspiring educational philosophy. After World War II, families in the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy, wanted to build new schools that supported peace, democracy, and the full potential of children. Malaguzzi joined their efforts and worked with teachers to create schools where creativity, self-expression, and collaboration were central to learning. He and his colleagues saw children as strong, capable, and full of ideas, and that artistic materials, namely clay, paint, and drawing, help them explore their thinking in deep and meaningful ways. The Reggio Emilia approach encourages us to see creativity as a way of thinking, communicating, and learning rather than the completion of a craft or activity that has a predetermined outcome. (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012).



The Reggio Emilia approach is guided by a set of principles that support creativity, exploration, and collaboration. Early education programs around the world, including many in the United States, have been inspired to apply these principles in their classrooms. "Reggio-inspired" schools, as they are typically called, uphold the following values:

- **Children are capable and wildly creative thinkers.**

Educators in Reggio-inspired settings believe that children are strong, competent individuals with powerful ideas. This belief influences every aspect of teaching, from how intently teachers listen to children to how dynamic materials and learning spaces are prepared (Malaguzzi, 1996).

- **The environment is seen as the "third teacher."**

Classrooms are carefully designed to invite exploration and communication. Natural light, living plants, mirrors, and neutral colors help create a calm, focused atmosphere. The goal is not only aesthetic beauty but also to support relationships and discovery. A well-designed environment encourages children to collaborate, problem-solve, and express themselves (Gandini, 2012). The environment's aesthetics is also of interest to educators in Reggio Emilia Schools. If you ever find yourself in one you will note it's well-lit and nature based elements such as large windows and live plants with furniture that does not

compete for attention with all the activity of the space, rather the furnishings and walls take on a muted or neutral tone and the color comes from the children themselves as well as their work and the live plants often found in these spaces.

- **The teacher is the “second teacher” and the child the “first teacher”.**

In Reggio Emilia classrooms, a term used to highlight the educator's role as a co-learner and co-researcher is “second teacher”. This teacher listens closely, observes and documents children's thinking, and helps extend their ideas through dialogue and further documentation rather than delivering fixed or disconnected lessons like you might see in a published “curriculum guide”.

- **Families are active participants in the learning process.**

Parents are seen as partners in education. Communication is open and ongoing, and families are invited to contribute to curriculum decisions and classroom life. This value creates a sense of community and shared responsibility for the child's development (Edwards et al., 2012).

- **Art and creativity are central to learning.**

Reggio Emilia programs typically include an **atelier** (art studio) and an **atelierista** (a trained art specialist) who collaborates with teachers and children. The atelier provides a dedicated space for children to explore a wide range of materials and media. Projects often unfold over days or weeks, encouraging deep thinking, thoughtful elaboration and multiple forms of expression. Malaguzzi referred to this as “the hundred languages of children” — a belief that children express themselves in many different ways, including drawing, movement, sculpture, and storytelling (Malaguzzi, 1996).



Exercise

Can your classroom become "Reggio-Inspired"?

1. Do you see children as capable and creative? What is one change you can make so that your classroom reflects that and, in doing so, subsequently engages learners in more robust ways?
2. Is your classroom filled with an aesthetic beauty with natural light flowing in, plants, mirrors and, neutral colors. Not all schools are built for this kind of aesthetic. (Some teachers find an alternative to large open windows by bringing in soft lamp lighting. How does the aesthetic support discovery and relationships?
3. How is children's thinking documented to extend their ideas and build the curriculum?
4. Do parents enjoy a partnership in your classroom with ongoing communication and invitations for their contributions (some may be great in the classroom, and others may opt t build or sew for the classroom. Do parents feel like a vital part of what goes on in your room?

Tara Govender: How culture affects artistic development

Tara Govender is an educator and researcher who highlights the vital role that culture and social context play in children's artistic expression. Her work encourages teachers to move beyond traditional ideas of artistic "development" and recognize that what children create is often shaped by their families, communities, and cultural stories. Govender reminds us that children's art reflects their lived experience. For example, a child who sees henna patterns at family celebrations might draw spirals and symbols that carry meaning in their home life. Another child might use bold colors or create images inspired by stories passed down through oral tradition. These expressions are valid and meaningful, even if they don't follow a typical developmental sequence seen in Western art education. In early childhood settings, teachers need to create inclusive spaces that honor this diversity of artistic voice. This means offering materials, books, visuals, and conversations that reflect a wide range of cultures and ways of making art, and avoiding the idea that one way of drawing or representing is "better" or more advanced than another.

Exercise

How can teachers recognize and support the cultural identities children bring into their artwork? Think about your own cultural background and experiences with art growing up. How might those influence the way you interpret children's artwork today? What steps can teachers take to make sure all children's creative expressions are honored and understood?

Govender's work supports the idea that cultural identity and artistic development are deeply connected, and that educators have a responsibility to make room for every child's story to be seen and heard through art.

Exercise

Explore & celebrate cultural influences in children's art.

1. Using a wide range of collage materials that reflect diverse cultures (patterned papers, magazines, photos of textile designs, symbols, cultural art pieces, natural materials, etc.)
2. Create a collage inspired by your own culture or one you would like to learn more about.
3. As you work, reflect on how these materials and images tell a story.
4. Present your collage to friends or family telling them:
 - What inspired your choices
 - How you think children might respond to the materials
 - How an activity like this can promote a feeling of inclusion for children in group settings

Christine Marmé Thompson: Children's visual storytelling

I have heard many of my students worry about what to say when a child has produced a work of art. If simple praise or asking "what is it?" is frowned upon, what should the caring teacher say?

Christine Marmé Thompson's work on children's visual storytelling gives us a deeper understanding of children's meaning-making through visual languages. Her research positions young children as active narrators (not passive scribbles) who use visual forms to explore and communicate meaning. Thompson challenges traditional developmental checklists and instead emphasizes the relational, imaginative, and narrative aspects of children's art making. Thompson urges educators to view children's art as a form of storytelling, not just as a stage in their developing realism. Children's visual storytelling is symbolic and deeply personal. According to Thompson, children draw to explore, explain, and connect with their world.

Drawings as Narratives, Not Simply Representations

“Children’s images do not arise merely as representations of what they see, but as responses to what they know and imagine.”
— Thompson.

The Importance of Dialogue: Art as Conversation

Drawing is not always a solitary experience. Thompson emphasizes the social and conversational nature of art making. Children’s art becomes more meaningful when they engage in conversation with peers, adults, and materials. Below is an example of the visual storytelling Thompson’s invites:

Instead of the teacher focusing primarily on identifying the subject (“It’s a whirlpool?”), the conversation can begin with careful observations of the visual elements and then invite the child to reveal the narrative that already exists within the artwork.

For example:

Adult: I notice you’ve made lots of sweeping blue lines that move across the page. Some are thick, some are thin, and they all seem to swirl toward this large circle. You also added these small red shapes around the outside.

Child: They’re boats!

Adult: The way you’ve arranged them makes me wonder if something is happening. Can you tell me the story your picture is telling?

Child: The boats are trying to get away because the water is spinning really fast.

Adult: What made the water start spinning?

Child: A giant sea dragon went under the ocean and made a whirlpool.

Adult: I hadn’t thought about a sea dragon. What happens to the boats next?

Child: One gets stuck, but the others throw it a rope. Then everybody escapes before the dragon comes back.

Adult: It sounds like your picture tells a whole adventure. I can see how the swirling lines help show all the movement in your story.

This interaction reflects that the adult values the child and their work. Instead of applying praise or judgment, “That’s beautiful”, the adult begins by noticing the artwork’s visual language, such as line, color, shape, composition, and movement, rather than trying to identify what the picture represents. Instead of asking, “What is it?” the teacher assumes that the artwork already contains a meaningful narrative and invites the child to share it. The child’s story unfolds naturally, revealing that the drawing is not simply a representation of objects but a vehicle for imagination, memory, and meaning-making. In this way, the artwork becomes a visual narrative, illustrating the belief that children are active storytellers who use art to explore, construct, and communicate their understanding of the world.

Multiple Modes of Expression (100 Languages)

In line with Malaguzzi, Thompson supports the idea that drawing is one of many languages children use. She expands this idea to highlight that visual storytelling includes gesture, voice, sequence, texture, material choice, and movement. and symbolic integration (Example to follow)

Example

Althea's Monster Story: 4½-year-old Althea is drawing at an easel. She's using mixed media: crayons, collage scraps, and paint. A teacher sits nearby, observing and occasionally asking open-ended questions. Let's take a look at Althea's Process:

Gesture & Movement

As Althea draws sharp zigzags for monster teeth, her hand movements become fast and jagged. She stomps a little and widens her eyes, mimicking the monster's energy. *"These teeth are going CHOMP CHOMP!"* she exclaims, moving her arms like jaws.

Voice

She narrates the story as she draws: *"The monster is hiding in the dark cave... but it's not scary. He's just lonely."* Her voice softens during the lonely part and gets louder and more dramatic during the chase.

Visual Sequence

She moves to another page and continues the drawing, adding a "next scene" with a girl giving the monster a cookie. *"Now he's happy and not chasing anymore."*

She's not just making random pictures—she's building a visual sequence of events, like panels in a comic.

Texture & Material Choice

She glues cotton balls around the monster to create a "fluffy fog in the cave," choosing materials that reflect the atmosphere and emotion. The texture helps set the scene, not just decorate it

Symbolic Integration

The colors and shapes she uses are symbolic: Red for the monster's anger; Blue swirls for calming friendship. She later adds a tiny heart above the girl's head.

Althea isn't just "drawing a monster." She's using a blend of expressive modes to:

- Tell a multi-part story
- Externalize emotion through movement and voice
- Use materials meaningfully to support atmosphere and narrative
- Shift from fear to empathy in her story arc

Practical Applications

Teachers should provide a variety of materials such as collage, markers, paint, and digital tools. *They should allocate plenty of time and space for children to express themselves through art. They should also create opportunities for children to share and discuss their artwork, like peer storytelling circles, portfolios, and documentation walls.* Listening to and interpreting children's visual stories *encourages* a responsive *curriculum* focused on the child's interests.

Discuss

If you only looked at the final drawing, what would you miss?

Cultural Contexts and Individuality

Like Govender, Thompson underscores how children's storytelling is shaped by culture, experience, and identity. Culturally responsive practices are paramount to her approach. Example to follow below:

Thompson's emphasis on cultural contexts and individuality is a powerful and essential thread in her work. She insists that children's artistic storytelling cannot be separated from their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal identities. She urges educators to listen for the *meaning behind the marks* and to recognize how stories are shaped by the world the child inhabits.

Example

Amir's Family Feast: Five-year-old Amir is part of a diverse, urban class and is invited to "draw a favorite memory with your family." Amir draws a large table filled with platters of rice, oranges, flatbread, and chicken. Around the table in his drawing are several small figures. He carefully adds a moon in the top corner and dots in the sky. When the teacher suggests, "Tell me about your drawing," Amir replies: "This is after the last Ramadan day. We stay up late and eat and eat. Gramma makes the chicken. We all sit together, and even my baby cousin eats with his fingers. The moon is full, see? That means it's Eid." He adds small details like sparkling dots to show decorations and family members with different skin tones, saying, "That's my uncle from Sudan—he comes to our feast, too."

Analysis Through Thompson's Lens

- **Culture:** The drawing reflects a specific cultural celebration—Eid al-Fitr—and shows how Amir connects food, ritual, and family through his art.
- **Experience:** Amir draws what matters to *him*—the tactile experience of food, the social gathering, and the emotional joy of celebration.
- **Identity:** He identifies who belongs (even babies and distant relatives), affirming his sense of family, belonging, and heritage.
- **Narrative and Symbol:** The moon isn't just decoration—it's a religious and cultural symbol, full of meaning in Amir's world.
- Therefore, culturally responsive teaching means:
 - Valuing children's lived experiences as valid and worthy of artistic exploration.
 - Inviting open-ended prompts that let culture and individuality shine.
 - Listening and documenting the child's story, not just evaluating the drawing's quality.

"The image, even in its simplest form, must be considered in relation to the child's world, and in the presence of that child's voice." (Thompson, 2006)

Note

What assumptions might we make if we only look at Amir's drawing without hearing his story? What shifts when we understand the cultural context? Next time you find yourself in a creative environment with children, unobtrusively observe a child as they draw, and then, if the opportunity arises for discussion, ask the child to tell the story behind their drawing. Reflect on which parts of the drawing were narrative, decorative, or symbolic.

Major Contributions of Thought Leaders

Thought Leader	Core View of Child	View of Art/Visual Expression	Role of the Adult	Cultural / Social Emphasis
Loris Malaguzzi	The child is competent, full of potential, and an active co-constructor of knowledge	One of the "100 languages"; art is a thinking tool, not just a product	Listen, observe, document; co-construct meaning with children	Socially and culturally embedded; children express experiences from their world
Tara Govender	The child has a sense of agency rooted in culture, shaped by a unique identity	Art is a reflection of cultural narratives and family life, and validates the funds of knowledge children bring	Build bridges between school and home; affirm cultural identity	Emphasizes diversity, inclusion, and anti-bias education through creative expression

Thought Leader	Core View of Child	View of Art/Visual Expression	Role of the Adult	Cultural / Social Emphasis
Christine Marmé Thompson	The child is a storyteller, sense-maker, and expressive narrator using visual language	Art is narrative and exploratory; drawing is a dialogue with ideas, materials, and others	Create space for dialogue and storytelling through art; interpret meaning, not just assess skills	Recognizes the individual and social dimensions of visual storytelling

All three of these thought leaders prompt us to think beyond “Is it a good drawing?” and instead reflect thoughtfully: “What is the child expressing, imagining, or exploring through this image?”

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Now that you have a solid foundation of theory and practical ideas, it's time to begin learning how to create developmentally appropriate experiences for young children that foster their creative development.

DAP encourages children to explore and play in ways that match their current developmental stage. While understanding what is age-appropriate is vitally important (and will be discussed shortly), DAP also includes two other key components:

1. Individually Appropriate Experiences

A teacher who uses DAP takes into account the *unique needs, preferences, and temperaments* of each child, not just their age. For example, consider 5-year-old Sadie. While most children in her classroom enjoy sensory play—such as running their hands through a bin of birdseed or exploring a cornstarch-and-water mixture (commonly known as “oobleck”)—Sadie reacts with caution and avoids touching these materials. She may be experiencing strong sensory sensitivity. Does this mean Sadie should be protected from all sensory experiences? Not necessarily. A developmentally appropriate response involves noticing her hesitation and responding with sensitivity and flexibility. A thoughtful teacher might offer Sadie a pair of gloves or invite her to watch first and join in later, when she feels more comfortable. The goal is not to force participation, but to gently support her engagement by meeting her where she is.

By tuning in to each child's individual responses and needs, teachers can adjust the classroom environment to support *inclusive, meaningful participation* for every learner. This approach fosters trust, autonomy, and a sense of belonging—core elements in healthy early development.

2. Culturally Appropriate Practice

Just as teachers use a child-centered approach when applying DAP, they must also consider each child's cultural background. Minh, for example, has been encouraged by her father to “be good at school” and to “listen to her teachers.” At home, Minh is expressive and creative, but at school, she appears quiet and reserved. This concerns her teacher, who notices that Minh doesn't participate in large group activities where children are invited to share their feelings through movement and play. Although Minh smiles and seems happy with her peers, she remains silent during these moments. One day, the teacher shared her concerns with Minh's father, explaining that she thought Minh might be struggling to adjust to school because she often “shuts down” during group time. Minh's father looked surprised, and even a bit amused. He explained that Minh had been taught that respectful behavior in school means staying quiet and following the teacher's lead.

This conversation helped the teacher see that Minh's behavior wasn't a sign of struggle, it was a reflection of her cultural values. Understanding this allowed the teacher to respond with greater sensitivity and support.

Learn How to Engage in Perspective Taking

After reading Minh's story, discuss the following questions with a partner or small group:

- What assumptions did the teacher make about Minh's behavior?
- How did speaking with Minh's father change the teacher's understanding?
- What might have happened if the teacher had never learned about Minh's family's cultural expectations?
- Have you ever seen a child's behavior misunderstood because of cultural differences? Share an example if you feel comfortable.

Then, consider a classroom scenario in which a child's behavior is influenced by family or cultural values (such as avoiding eye contact, preferring to work independently, or participating differently during group activities).

Discuss:

- How might the behavior be misinterpreted?
- What questions could a teacher ask before making assumptions?
- What culturally responsive strategies could help support the child?

Reflection: How has your own cultural background shaped your expectations of children's behavior? What assumptions will you be mindful of as you work toward becoming a culturally responsive educator?

Optional: Include your written reflection in your professional teaching portfolio.

DAP, as a general term, refers to having a comprehensive understanding of typical child development across multiple developmental domains:

- **Social:** How the child learns to cooperate, contribute, and belong in society
- **Emotional:** The innate nature and disposition of the child, as well as their learned emotional coping skills
- **Cognitive:** The way the child relies on thought to manage their world; problem-solving, risk-taking, and more
- **Language:** The stages of linguistic development and early literacy growth
- **Physical:** The development of both large and small muscle groups and their coordination. Materials like clothespins and tongs and work with clay support wrist stability and intrinsic hand muscles.
- And in some cases, **Spiritual:** The child's willingness to accept the unseen and find depth of meaning through a spiritual connection.

Teachers must be skilled at anticipating what is typical for the age group of the children they serve. This is why it is crucial to study child development closely. Through stories and vignettes, I will attempt to illuminate some of the expected behaviors, abilities, and tendencies of young children within these domains. However, it is essential to remember that children are not made from a cookie cutter. You must always be aware of the cultural and individual differences that influence the child's expression.

What are Children Capable of?

Creativity includes more than paint and paper. Children explore, express themselves, and interact with the world through various forms of art. Below are a few things young children can be expected to do between ages 3 and 6. (California Department of Education, 2025)

Art Domain	Typical Abilities	Examples
Visual Art	1.0 Notice, Respond, and Engage	Notices a friend painting with bright colors and says, “I like red too!”- Points to a picture and says, “That looks like a rainbow!”- Watches a teacher draw and tries to copy the motion.
	2.0 Develop Skills in Visual Art	- Uses crayons to draw circles and lines.- Glues pieces of paper in a collage.- Begins to use scissors with one hand to cut shapes.
	3.0 Create, Invent, and Express	- Draws a family using favorite colors.- Paints a picture of a favorite place.- Makes a sculpture out of clay “because it’s a dinosaur cave.”
Music	1.0 Notice, Respond, and Engage	- Claps along with a song’s beat.- Smiles when a favorite song begins.- Hums part of a familiar melody.
	2.0 Develop Skills in Music	- Uses rhythm sticks to tap steady beats.- Explores loud and soft sounds with instruments.- Sings simple phrases from familiar songs.
	3.0 Create, Invent, and Express	- Makes up a song about snack time.- Changes the words of a familiar tune to make it silly.- Sings made-up lyrics while drawing.
Drama (Theatre)	1.0 Notice, Respond, and Engage	- Laughs and follows along in a pretend play game.- Watches peers act out a story.- Imitates facial expressions during storytelling.
	2.0 Develop Skills in Drama	- Uses voice to pretend to be a fire truck.- Uses a scarf as a cape in dramatic play.- Acts surprised or scared in response to story events.
	3.0 Create, Invent, and Express	- Pretends to be a chef in a restaurant.- Acts out a story with classmates using props.- Makes up a story about a superhero puppy.
Dance	1.0 Notice, Respond, and Engage	- Watches others dance and begins to join in.- Moves arms or body to the music.- Reacts with excitement to changes in tempo.

Art Domain	Typical Abilities	Examples
	2.0 Develop Skills in Dance	- Balances on one foot.- Moves fast or slow based on the music.- Spins or jumps in time with the beat.
	3.0 Create, Invent, and Express	- Creates a dance to show how rain feels.- Pretends to move like different animals.- Expresses happiness by twirling with arms wide.

As teachers, our role is to draw on all three forms of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) to understand the interests and capabilities of the children we serve and to design learning experiences that meaningfully align with those interests and capabilities.

The Basics: Tools, Spaces, Media, and Safety

When setting up a creative environment, give careful thought to the types of tools, the allocation of space, and the media children may access. The following is a list of very basic materials children should have access to, including a variety of mark-making tools and materials for art-making daily. Art is not just for special occasions.

Paintbrushes of different widths, some suitable for delicate watercolor work and wider ones for large strokes, on a painting easel or for a group mural project. Some teachers, informed by the principles of occupational therapy—which aims to promote “digital grasp,” finger isolation, and wrist movement—follow a stage-like progression in the use of a paintbrush. They provide thicker brushes for children new to artistic activities and transition to thinner brushes as they develop their fine motor skills.

Crayons and markers of various shapes. Karen Cox, a teacher of 4–5-year-olds for over 20 years, says: “Occupational therapists recommend using thin crayons broken in half or triangular crayons for children aged 4–5 to improve fine motor skills and development.” Broken or short crayons (about 1” long) help children develop a proper tripod grip (thumb to index and middle finger). They encourage correct finger positioning and build hand strength. (Therapy & Wellness Connection, n.d.) Cox explains: “I saw many fellow teachers use the thickest paintbrushes, but their students never progressed as far as developing beyond painting blobs of color on paper throughout the school year.” (K. Cox, prekinders.com, personal communication, May 27, 2025)

At least one standing easel in the classroom—especially near a sink and the art shelf—encourages children to experiment freely with a variety of materials. Having the easel positioned close to water and supplies makes it easy for children to add paint, glue, or other textures to their work as they build and revise their ideas. This setup not only supports artistic creativity but also contributes to physical development. Research shows that working on vertical surfaces, such as easels, engages children’s bodies in different ways than working on flat tables. For example, Portnoy et al. (2015) and Flatters et al. (2014) found that vertical tasks increase postural demands and activate different muscles, helping children develop shoulder stability, wrist control, and coordination. These are all foundational skills that support handwriting and other fine motor tasks. By offering a vertical workspace, educators give children opportunities to strengthen their bodies while expressing themselves creatively.

Vertical and angled surfaces, such as easels and slanted boards, do much more than support art-making—they also support the domains of physical and cognitive development. Barbara A. Smith (2025) emphasizes that working on vertical surfaces develops foundational skills closely linked to handwriting readiness, fine motor control, and spatial awareness. For example, when children stand at an easel, they’re naturally encouraged to maintain an upright posture, use larger arm movements, and engage muscles in their core, shoulders, wrists, and hands. These kinds of “anti-gravity” movements help build strength and stability. In addition, vertical work promotes wrist extension, which is key for proper pencil grasp, and it helps children coordinate both sides of their body as they stabilize paper with one hand and work with the other. Finally, it reinforces concepts like direction, space, and position—skills that support both writing and early math understanding. Offering children opportunities to work vertically supports the whole child: body, brain, and creativity.

A **“Help-Yourself Shelf”** encourages independence, choice, and creativity in young children. This easily accessible shelf can be stocked with open-ended materials such as paper, scissors, glue, collage items, and extra paint—perfect for moments when a child decides they need “something different” to bring their ideas to life. Using recycled and repurposed materials (like fabric scraps, bottle caps, or cardboard pieces) not only keeps the shelf exciting but also models environmental responsibility, sending a powerful message that creativity and sustainability can go hand in hand. When children know they have the freedom to gather what they need, they’re more likely to take initiative, explore materials more deeply, and express their unique ideas with confidence. This setup fosters both artistic expression and important life skills, such as problem-solving, self-regulation, and care for the planet.

Note

Even in the smallest of spaces, room for creative expression is possible. I have worked in rooms that boasted 950 square feet as well as those with a miserly 300 square feet, and each provided experiences that support DAP.

The Freedom-of-Childhood Approach

Childhood is a unique and fleeting stage in the human lifespan. It is a period rich with curiosity, imagination, and a natural drive to learn. These qualities that often fade as children learn of the high-stakes nature of education and more adult-like responsibilities take over. Childhood can feel like a thing of the past at times. Honoring creativity during childhood and beyond respects the wonder and magic of early life and supports joyful, meaningful learning. In his seminal work, *The Hurried Child*, first published in the 1980s, David Elkind (2007) cautioned against the increasing pressure placed on children to grow up too quickly. He described a societal shift toward emphasizing early academic achievement and performance at the expense of developmental readiness and individual interest.

When children are expected to perform tasks for which they are not developmentally prepared or emotionally invested, they receive a troubling message: who they are right now—as curious, playful, expressive young learners—is not enough. Instead, they are rewarded only for demonstrating skills or behaviors beyond their natural stage. This pressure not only undermines their intrinsic motivation but can also lead to long-term consequences such as anxiety, burnout, and disengagement from learning. As Elkind (2007) writes, *“When we pressure children to grow up too fast, we rob them of the very experiences that prepare them for the future.”*

A freedom-of-childhood approach centers the child’s current needs and interests, trusting that authentic growth emerges best through play, creativity, and exploration.

Fear of mess

Childhood is often delightfully messy. In the process of exploring, creating, and testing their ideas, young children may not always achieve tidy or precise results. A few stains on their clothes and some tousled hair might be what a parent notices at pickup time. But excellent teachers who embrace the Freedom of Childhood approach understand that these outward signs of mess are also evidence of deep engagement and learning. These educators take care to communicate their philosophy with families long before the school year begins. Parents and caregivers need to know that in a high-quality early childhood classroom, there will be messes, but there will also be meaningful learning.

Trusting the child’s mind

Another key trait of an excellent teacher who values childhood is their deep trust in the child’s mind. These teachers understand that not every child needs constant direction in the learning environment. What children often need more of is the message that they are capable thinkers and initiators of their own ideas. Trusting the child means creating a space where independence, curiosity, and choice are not only allowed but celebrated. Teachers support this by designing rich, creative environments full of possibilities and by engaging in conversations that include the child’s voice. In these classrooms, you might hear teachers say, “What’s your plan for this morning?” or “I wonder how you can keep your paint from dripping?” Open-ended prompts invite reflection, problem-solving, and agency. When teachers step back and listen, they make room for children to step forward and lead.

Closing Reflection

Each thought leader you've just read about encourages teachers to slow down, listen carefully, and most importantly, trust in children's 100 languages of expression. Malaguzzi emphasizes that creativity is a vital way of thinking and engaging with children. Govender urges us to reconsider what we might hastily label as DAP, instead recognizing the culture embedded in children's marks and symbols. Thompson draws our focus to the narrative element of children's artwork, where drawing, conversation, imagination, and meaning unfold together in real time. Now, it's your turn as an emerging thought leader in this field to develop your own ideas about the purpose and process of creativity! Good luck!

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5: Music and Movement, Gathering and Singing

One morning, while I was observing in an early childhood classroom, something seemed a bit off. Two co-teachers had gathered a group of children for circle time, but when it came time to sing, one of the teachers hesitated. Her voice was low and soft, and the joyful energy that singing can bring never quite emerged. At the same time, her co-teacher sat corralling the children, imploring them to pay attention and sing along. This is not altogether uncommon in the world of ECE. In my work, I have witnessed teachers avoid music and movement experiences with children altogether or defer to a video recording of some "kids" YouTube celebrity, highly produced, splashed with bright primary colors, and filled with directive movements shouted into the microphone by an overly chipper young songstress or a trendy "kiddy" pop group that would probably sell out the multipurpose room if they ever came to town. Incidentally, for a deeper dive into the developmental issues posed by both large and small screens in ECE, see the note at the end of this chapter.

It was not hard for me to understand what the hesitancy was all about. In my early years of working with children, I also felt nervous about circle time. The idea of engaging musically with a lively group of young children, who often act impulsively and with unpredictable energy, struck fear in my heart. Might I lose control? How will I manage all of these little people? Frankly, it was more than my ECE training had prepared me for. Add to this my reserved temperament, along with a slight embarrassment at acting "silly" in front of any nearby adults, and you have the ingredients for avoidance. It can seem much more civilized to have children sitting on their carpet squares, raising their hands to speak, and moving through the familiar routines of counting the days on the calendar and noting the day's weather, albeit in a way that is much less engaging and creatively robust.

What I once avoided for fear of losing classroom control, I now see as my misunderstanding of the shared rhythm between teacher and child that can emerge in a group. In circle time, I learned that a child's energy is something to be understood and moved *with*, not something to be managed *away*. I learned that children can *and do* help guide the direction of circle time. We teachers gently restore balance whenever it is needed.

Example 5.1

It was the fourth rainy day in a week, and the stress of being cooped up inside for most of it was getting on the nerves of more than a few children and adults in the room. Although teachers in this particular classroom were highly skilled at ensuring there were just the right number of choices in various areas of the room for exploration and play (Science Discoveries, Literature Provocations, Dramatic Play settings, Sensory and Art materials, etc.), the space was becoming, as their director David said, "emotionally itchy." Lucy, a co-teacher in the classroom with 24 four-year-old children, was overwhelmed by children whose budding coping skills were wearing down and whose whining skills were ramping up in equal measure. Lucy decided she needed to pull out some of the stops and invite the children into a refreshing creative movement experience.

Lucy: (*loudly, yet with an expression that signals fun, interrupting a couple of squabbling children each tugging on a coveted chef's hat in the play restaurant*) I see that you both want that hat! That's a problem! How can we solve that?

Two children: (*talking over one another*) I had it first! He took it from me! No! You stole it from me! (*An errant hand swipes at the hat, ripping it dramatically.*)



Lucy: *(Lucy's expression communicates concern and curiosity while maintaining calm engagement.)* Oh... something... is... not... working. We cannot hurt others or the things in our school. I am going to help you. Let's put this chef's hat in the workshop so it can be repaired after naptime. Then I am going to bring my magic singing hat so we can do some dancing and singing together.

As Lucy begins a playful, child-directed song, it ripples through the room, drawing a few more children in its wake. A small group gathers, becoming movers and groovers in the shared rhythm, while others remain deeply absorbed in their own explorations, the room holding both movement and quiet focus at once.

This vignette highlights a teaching style that will be discussed in greater detail later in this book. It is not a style I recommend for children's day-to-day classroom experience. When children have access to a thoughtfully prepared environment with developmentally appropriate materials across curriculum areas, they are primarily engaged in child-initiated learning. The style illustrated here is used selectively, in moments when the group's emotional climate requires a shift. Lucy temporarily moves into a more directive role, not to suppress children's energy, but to redirect it and reestablish shared rhythm through movement and music.

The Why and What of Circle Time

Circle time is a daily gathering routine commonly used in early childhood classrooms. It is a time when children and teachers come together as a group, typically sitting in a circle, to greet one another, sing songs, read stories, discuss the day's events, and build a sense of community. The practice supports both social-emotional development and early academic learning by helping children feel seen, heard, and part of something larger than themselves.

Despite the hesitation I described earlier, there is a reason circle time remains such a central practice in early childhood education. The "why" is rooted in the understanding that young children learn best through connection, repetition, and routine. Learning, as Lev Vygotsky (1978) reminds us, is inherently social. Activities like circle time allow children to practice language, self-regulation, and turn-taking within a meaningful shared context. Through songs, stories, and group conversations, children expand their vocabularies, strengthen listening skills, and learn how to express ideas in a group setting.

Jean Piaget's work (1964) on cognitive development also helps illuminate its value. As children move from egocentric thinking toward greater awareness of others, circle time offers daily opportunities for perspective-taking and empathy. Singing together, noticing who is absent, or hearing a peer's story helps children begin to understand that others have thoughts, feelings, and experiences different from their own.

Howard Gardner's theory (2011) of multiple intelligences further expands this view, reminding us that children enter the group with many ways of learning. A well-designed circle time can offer varied modes of engagement: songs and rhythms for musical learners, storytelling for verbal learners, movement-based greetings for kinesthetic learners, and shared discussion for interpersonal learners.

Circle time is about more than just teaching teacher-directed content. It...

- develops a shared rhythm among children and their caring adults
- builds social connections and fosters a sense of community among adults and children.
- fosters whole child development (socially, emotionally, cognitively, physically, and linguistically).
- becomes a predictable routine that fosters trust in the environment when approached with warmth, structure, and intention.

Cultural considerations

Circle time is an important part of the daily experience in ECE. It is an opportunity to build a sense of community, share ideas, and introduce concepts through songs, stories, and movement. However, it is essential to recognize that circle time is not a “one-size-fits-all” experience. Children come to the classroom with diverse cultural backgrounds that influence how they engage in group settings, respond to authority, and participate in expressive activities.

Some children may quietly observe before joining in, while others may come from families where group participation is more animated and collaborative. As Loris Malaguzzi (2012) reminded us, children have “a hundred languages” for expressing themselves, not all of which may emerge during traditional group routines. Thoughtful teachers consider these nuances by offering multiple ways for children to participate during circle time, such as movement, visual expression, or small-group sharing. As early childhood specialist Louise Derman-Sparks (2010) emphasizes, culturally responsive teaching encourages educators to acknowledge each child’s background while promoting a sense of belonging. Circle time, when approached with flexibility and cultural sensitivity, becomes a meaningful practice of inclusion and respect that honors diversity.

Singing: from direct instruction to wild abandon

When I began working with children in the early '80s, I was struck by how my mentors encouraged a joyful freedom in their students during circle time. The teachers whom I looked up to took singing and movement seriously, and by that I mean they saw children’s connection to song as imperative to their later conceptual and intellectual development (not to mention the emotional and physical benefits that were also the outcome).

One of my mentors, Maggie, took me aside one day after I expressed a disdain for the part of my job that required getting children to sit down for any amount of time. Since it was my turn to do circle time that day, I had asked if we could skip it. Maggie denied my request and informed me that she wanted me to learn how to do circle time with children that would allow for their “wild abandon.” I was intrigued, but still nervous.

She explained that I needed to meet the children at their level of energy and that the group would have a collective energy I would need to learn how to read. If they were “rascally,” I was to match that energy and be ready with songs, movement, and a book that would fit the moment. If they were irritable, especially just before lunch or naptime, I was to draw on my “soft” songs and a more soothing voice. It was not always easy for me to read this collective energy, but eventually I learned. I have since come to believe that circle time is not only something to prepare for in advance, but also something to approach as an art. No one could tell me exactly how to do this part of my job, but I could develop my skills and work with children at their level of need. This shift removed much of the hesitancy I once felt about circle time. It took me a while to embrace Maggie’s ideas around “wild abandon,” but I have since come to define it for myself. By “wild abandon,” I mean the way a bird sings without worrying who is listening, or how a child spins in circles for the giggle it produces. It is freedom with intention, not chaos. To me, wild abandon is something deeply valuable. It is the kind of open, natural movement that helps children learn about themselves and the world through music and motion.

Creative Movement: Expanding the Language of the Body

One of the most helpful ways I have come to understand movement in early childhood is through the work of Susan Griss (1998), who describes creative movement as a language of learning. In her view, movement is not simply physical activity added to the day, but a symbolic system through which children construct and communicate meaning. Much like spoken or written language, movement carries intention, interpretation, and expression. Children are not just moving their bodies; they are using movement to think. Griss emphasizes an important distinction between imitative movement and creative movement. In imitative forms, children follow a model and reproduce prescribed actions. In creative movement, children are invited to generate their own

responses. This shift matters because it moves the child from repetition into interpretation. Instead of simply complying with a sequence of actions, children begin to make decisions, experiment with possibilities, and represent ideas through their bodies in personal ways.

What stands out to me in this framework is how closely it aligns with symbolic development. In the Piagetian sense, children are not only learning how to move, they are learning how to represent. A gesture can become a character, a shape can become an emotion, and a sequence of movement can become a story. In this way, movement becomes a bridge between lived experience and abstract thought. Griss also reframes the role of the teacher. Rather than directing every movement or correcting toward uniformity, the teacher becomes a facilitator of possibility. The teacher offers prompts, themes, or starting points, and then steps back enough to allow children to explore their own interpretations. This requires a different kind of attentiveness, one that is less about control and more about noticing how meaning unfolds in real time.

Over time, I have come to see how this approach connects directly to what I once experienced as uncertainty or fear in circle time. What I interpreted as the possibility of losing control was often a moment where children were entering their own symbolic systems, moving beyond imitation into invention. Griss's work helped me recognize that these moments are not disruptions to learning, but expressions of it.

Structured Songs and Shared Movement: A Balanced View

Within early childhood classrooms, there is also a long-standing place for structured songs and coordinated movement activities, such as “Hokey Pokey” and similar group routines. These experiences offer children valuable opportunities for group participation, memory, sequencing, and social synchronization. They can create a strong sense of belonging, particularly when children are learning to participate in a group for the first time.

From a developmental perspective, these kinds of activities support important skills such as listening, following multi-step directions, and moving in coordination with others. They also provide predictable frameworks that many young children find comforting and engaging.

At the same time, when viewed through the lens of creative movement theory, structured songs tend to emphasize imitation and uniform response. The movement is typically predetermined, and the range of expression is intentionally limited so that the group can move together in a shared pattern. This does not diminish their value, but it does place them in a different category of learning than open-ended creative movement.

Susan Griss's (1998) framework helps clarify this distinction. In creative movement, children are not primarily practicing a correct sequence of actions. Instead, they are constructing meaning through individual interpretation and embodied symbolism. When both approaches are present in the classroom, they can serve different purposes: one supporting cohesion and shared rhythm, the other supporting imagination, agency, and symbolic expression.

In this way, the question is not whether structured songs or creative movement should exist in early childhood settings, but how they are balanced. A rich music and movement curriculum makes space for both collective experience and individual invention, allowing children to move between shared rhythm and personal expression as part of their daily learning.

Guided Imagery & Creative Visualization

One of the most powerful aspects of music and movement in early childhood is its ability to generate imagery. A simple song or prompt can become an entire internal world for a child. A story about a ball bouncing can shift into a shared experience of rhythm, space, and embodiment. Children naturally translate language into movement and movement into meaning, often without needing explicit explanation. In my own practice, I have found guided creative imagery to be a particularly effective way of supporting this process. In these experiences, I might invite children to imagine themselves playing with a ball, noticing how it moves, how it feels, and how it travels through space. Over time, the experience can shift so that the children imagine themselves becoming the ball, moving with its qualities and exploring what it might feel like to roll, bounce, or pause.

Guided creative imagery in early childhood classrooms draws on contemporary understandings of embodied learning and cognitive development. Elliot Eisner emphasizes that children make meaning through multiple forms of representation, not only language but also image, movement, and sensory experience. From this perspective, when children are invited to imagine a ball and then imagine themselves becoming the ball, they are engaging in a form of representational thinking that extends beyond

verbal explanation and into embodied meaning-making.



This kind of guided imagery also connects to current understandings of how children regulate attention, emotion, and physical readiness for learning. Daniel Siegel's work highlights the importance of integration between mind and body, suggesting that learning is supported when children are able to organize their internal states in ways that allow for focus and engagement. In classroom terms, movement and imagery activities can help children settle their bodies while also activating their attention in a purposeful way.

Jean Ayres' sensory integration theory further supports the role of movement in learning by describing how sensory input from the body helps children organize their responses to the environment. When children move, imagine, and shift roles within a guided experience, they are not only engaging in play, but also developing the capacity to coordinate perception, action, and attention in meaningful ways.

Within this framework, the use of creative imagery serves a dual purpose. It supports children in developing symbolic representation through imaginative transformation, and it also supports their ability to regulate their bodies and attention so they can participate more fully in group learning experiences. In this way, imagery is not an add-on activity, but a core practice that connects cognition, movement, and engagement.

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What becomes especially interesting is how quickly this inner world of imagery wants to move outward again. Children rarely keep their imagination still for long. Once a story or image takes hold in the mind, it often seeks expression through the body. A bouncing ball is no longer only something to picture, it becomes something to enact. An internally imagined transformation naturally invites movement, gesture, and shared physical experience.

This is where creative movement becomes an extension of creative imagery rather than a separate practice. The imagined world begins to take shape in space, and the child's body becomes the medium through which meaning is explored, tested, and expanded. In these moments, movement is not simply following instruction, but responding to an internal idea that is seeking expression.

Over time, I have come to see that transitioning from control to movement also reshapes the teacher's role. Rather than guiding children toward rigid behavioral patterns, the focus shifts to supporting their expressive development. What I initially experienced as unpredictability (and yes, sometimes chaos) now appears as creative intelligence in action. Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is to trust children's capacity for imagination and expression. Music and movement flourish when we make room for both.

Note

Digital Screens in Early Childhood Classrooms: Context, Not Hub

In transitional kindergarten and preschool classrooms across California, large digital screens are increasingly part of the daily environment. Their presence is most visible during whole-group instruction and morning routines.

See this! A Morning Group Routine Around the Big Screen

In a transitional kindergarten classroom, children gather on the rug facing a large wall-mounted screen as part of the morning routine. A streamed video introduces a literacy concept through animated characters and rapid visual pacing. The teacher intermittently pauses to ask recall questions, though most interaction remains oriented toward the screen rather than between children. During the viewing period, children's participation is primarily visual and rigidly receptive, with limited movement, dialogue, or peer exchange, with some children appearing uncertain about the appropriate focus of attention between the teacher and the characters on screen. When the video concludes, the class transitions to related table activities, though the shift from shared viewing to individual work produces uneven continuity in engagement and understanding.

The following discussion is grounded in classroom observations from preschool and TK settings in California and is offered as a contextual interpretation rather than a universal description of early childhood classrooms.

Presence in Practice

Large digital screens are increasingly visible in early childhood and transitional kindergarten classrooms. In many settings, they are used to stream video content intended to support instruction, engagement, or classroom routines. Their pedagogical significance is not determined by their presence, but by the role they play in shaping attention, interaction, and participation.

Within early childhood education, learning is consistently understood as a process grounded in **active engagement with materials, sustained social interaction, embodied sensory exploration, and teacher-mediated dialogue**. Across the work of Lillian Katz (1993) and David Elkind (1981) as well as the position statements of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020), learning is not viewed as the passive reception of information but as participation in meaning-making, in which children come to understand the world through movement, interaction, and shared negotiation with others in real time.

From this perspective, classroom materials and media are never neutral. They help organize the conditions under which participation becomes possible. When large screens become a dominant instructional mode, they may concentrate attention toward a shared visual field, reduce opportunities for sustained peer interaction, narrow space for spontaneous dialogue, and displace hands-on exploratory activity. The concern is not the presence of digital tools in itself, but the way in which they may reorganize the structure of participation in the classroom, subtly shifting it from **reciprocal engagement** toward sustained visual consumption.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a complementary framing in its guidance on children's digital media environments, emphasizing that developmental outcomes are shaped not simply by exposure, but by the **quality of content**, the **context of use**, and whether media supports or replaces relational and active experiences. This perspective reinforces the importance of examining how digital tools function within the broader ecology of classroom life, rather than treating them as inherently beneficial or harmful.

At the same time, digital screens may support learning when they are embedded within teacher-led dialogue, shared documentation of children's work, collaborative reflection, or intentional revisiting of classroom experiences. In these instances, the screen operates as one element within a relational and interactive learning environment rather than as the primary source of instruction. Its pedagogical limitations become most visible when it functions primarily as a continuous stream of externally produced content for group viewing, with limited interruption, dialogue, or co-construction of meaning.

Professional Orientation

For teachers, this distinction is vital. You may enter classrooms where digital screens are already established features of the learning environment. Your charge is not to reject these contexts, but to interpret them: to notice when tools displace **relational pedagogy** and when they can support it.

In practice, this means paying attention to what children are doing with one another, not only what they are looking at. You begin to ask, "Who is doing the talking?" "Who is doing the thinking?" "Where is meaning being constructed in this moment?"

And perhaps most importantly, you learn to see that the presence of a screen does not determine the quality of learning. It's the structure of relationships in the room that does!

Reflecting Thoughts

The most important lesson I've learned about music and movement is that teaching young children isn't always about leading them into our rhythm and ways. Sometimes, it means listening carefully enough to identify the rhythm and ways that already exist within them. Children may be restless, exuberant, quiet, curious, or anywhere in between. Our task is to observe, respond, and foster an environment where their energy can be expressed, connected, and meaningful. I once thought that a successful circle time depended on keeping children focused and still. Now, I realize that a successful gathering can take many forms. It might be children singing together, a single child moving while others watch, or a spontaneous burst of laughter that shifts the group's energy. The teacher's role isn't to suppress these differences but to understand what they reveal. By making space for music, movement, imagery, and creative expression, we encourage children to communicate through many languages. We also become more responsive teachers, willing to loosen our control and trust in children's bodies, minds, and imaginations. Ultimately, the key question isn't whether children participate as we expect, but whether we have created a space where their participation is meaningful to them.

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6: The Art of Play

*...a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become his **average** level of real action and his morality.* - Lev Vygotsky



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At this point in your studies of creativity, you may find it indisputable that creativity promotes the development of the whole child—emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially. I would wholeheartedly agree and suggest that play is one of the most natural and accessible forms of creative expression. Play influences all of the aforementioned areas of growth, and when it is collaborative (take LEGO building, for instance), children learn foundational logical-mathematical concepts indirectly, while also learning how to read social cues, negotiate roles, share resources, solve problems together, and navigate the complexities of human interaction while building side by side. These are known as soft skills and are crucial for becoming part of a compassionate and thriving society.

At its core, play is defined by its joyful nature. Children play simply because it is fun. It is not something they do to earn a reward or meet an external goal; it is intrinsically motivated. As Garvey (1990) noted, play is spontaneous, voluntary, and empowering. It gives children a chance to make their own choices, direct their own actions, and stay actively engaged. Though play might seem separate from “serious” academic work, it is deeply linked with other areas of development, including literacy, math, science, and emotional regulation. In fact, much of what we label as “learning” happens in these playful moments.

Our culture often feels rushed and overly structured, even for young children. But young minds need unstructured time to explore, create, and imagine. Berk (1995) synthesized decades of research and emphasized that make-believe play strengthens many mental skills, including concentration, analysis, and flexible thinking. Language development, in particular, flourishes through play. Children in imaginative roles invent dialogue, test out new vocabulary, and learn to express abstract ideas. When we encourage fantasy play, we are also encouraging creativity. Berk (1994) found that children who frequently engage in pretend scenarios tend to score higher on measures of imagination and creative thinking.

Think about some of the inventions we take for granted today: smartphones, microwave ovens, debit cards, and air travel. At one point, each of these ideas would have seemed absurd or impossible. In *Mind in Society*, Lev Vygotsky (1978) suggests that in play, a child often “behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior,” becoming “a head taller than himself” (p. 102). In play, children experiment with the impossible, and in doing so, they develop the flexible, imaginative thinking they will need to thrive in a changing world.

Vygotsky's observations have been echoed by contemporary developmental researchers who continue to investigate why play occupies such a central role in childhood. Modern studies suggest that children do much more than entertain themselves during

play. They actively seek experiences that challenge their thinking, extend their abilities, and deepen their understanding of the world. This growing body of evidence reinforces the view that play is an essential context for learning rather than a break from learning.

Play as a Core Feature of Educational Practice

In a study by Chu et al. (2025), researchers from Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, discovered that "playing for fun" represents a unique motivational context that differs fundamentally from "playing to win." When children between the ages of five and ten were asked to design a game, they consistently made different choices depending on whether their goal was enjoyment or victory. Children who were trying to win selected easier game settings that increased their chances of success. When their goal shifted to having fun, however, they intentionally increased the level of challenge. Rather than seeking the quickest path to success, they chose more difficult tasks that required greater effort and persistence. These findings suggest that children recognize that enjoyment often comes from engaging with meaningful challenges rather than simply achieving an easy outcome.

This distinction carries important implications for early childhood education. Adults sometimes assume that children prefer activities that guarantee success or minimize frustration. The research suggests a far more sophisticated picture. When external rewards such as prizes or competition are removed, many children willingly embrace challenges that stretch their abilities. They appear to value the experience of exploration, experimentation, and discovery even when success is less certain. In many ways, children become active designers of their own learning experiences, adjusting the level of challenge to match their curiosity and engagement. This also aligns with what has been discussed earlier in this text: children naturally seek the "optimal challenge" that Csikszentmihalyi argued produces flow. Additionally, Vygotsky would be in agreement!

These findings align closely with decades of developmental research emphasizing intrinsic motivation. The satisfaction children experience while solving a difficult puzzle, constructing an elaborate block structure, or experimenting with art materials often comes from the process itself rather than from external recognition. As children encounter manageable challenges, they develop persistence, flexible thinking, and confidence in their own abilities. They also learn that mistakes are part of learning rather than signs of failure. This willingness to engage with uncertainty creates opportunities for deeper cognitive growth because children remain focused on the experience instead of the outcome.

For early childhood educators, these findings offer an important reminder that effective learning environments should include opportunities for children to make meaningful choices, test their own ideas, and encounter appropriate levels of challenge. Learning experiences become more engaging when children have ownership over their exploration and enough freedom to modify materials, ask questions, and pursue their interests. A classroom that values play is not one without purpose. Instead, it is a setting where curiosity drives learning, challenge is welcomed, and children experience the joy of mastering increasingly complex ideas through active engagement.

Language, Play, and the Child's Inner Genius

In the early childhood classroom, language play is especially delightful. Children often invent words or apply language rules creatively. For instance, a child might say "goed" instead of "went" or "mouses" instead of "mice." These so-called "mistakes" show that children are actively constructing the rules of English in their minds. Rather than correcting them, teachers can express interest and curiosity. This builds children's confidence as language learners and shows respect for their creative process.

Creative expression through language is not only acceptable—it's deeply valuable. Children who are allowed to explore language freely tend to become stronger communicators and more confident speakers. One famous quote about children is that they "see what others do not," as illustrated in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. A child sees the obvious truth—"He's not wearing anything!"—even when adults won't say it aloud. This fearless honesty and perceptiveness is part of what makes children such brilliant observers of the world. Similarly, in *The Ugly Duckling*, we see the journey of becoming one's authentic self. Through play and storytelling, children explore identity and self-worth.

The Art Within Dramatic Play

Dramatic play is a powerful engine for learning and development. When children engage in dramatic play, they're trying on roles, practicing language, and expressing emotions. There are many forms of dramatic play, including **role play** (such as pretending to be a parent, teacher, or superhero), **object play** (using everyday items or symbolic props), **thematic play** (acting out a restaurant

or space adventure), and **persistent, ongoing play scenarios** that stretch over days or weeks.

Sara Smilansky, a respected researcher in child development, viewed **socio-dramatic play** as a particularly advanced and meaningful form of dramatic play. In socio-dramatic play, children create a shared world with a consistent theme—like a hospital, a grocery store, or a family camping trip. They take on specific roles, use props, and develop a storyline together. Smilansky identified six essential qualities of this kind of play:

1. **Role Play** – Children say things like, “Let’s say I’m the baby and you’re the doctor.”
2. **Props** – They use objects (real or pretend) that support the theme.
3. **Actions** – Each child behaves according to their role.
4. **Talking** – Language is used to organize the play, negotiate, and stay in character.
5. **Two or More Players** – Socio-dramatic play is always social.
6. **Elaboration** – The play develops in complexity, with storylines and challenges.

As educators, we can **facilitate** socio-dramatic play by offering open-ended materials, setting up themed play areas, and observing quietly while allowing children to direct their own play. Occasionally, stepping in to introduce new vocabulary or props can extend and deepen their learning.

Woodworking: Empowerment Through Challenging Skill Building



"Woodworking day at Mayport Child Development Center" by Petty Officer 3rd Class Mark Hays / U.S. Navy is in the **Public Domain**. Available via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

While woodworking may seem like an old-fashioned or risky activity, it can be an incredibly valuable and empowering experience for young children. It engages the senses in a rich and calming way—children feel the texture of the wood, hear the sounds of sanding and hammering, and even discover what happens when they add water to wood. It’s a deeply satisfying form of play that supports:

- **Perceptual-motor coordination**
- **Emotional release**
- **Concentration and persistence**

To ensure safety and success in woodworking areas, follow a few key guidelines:

- Introduce **one tool at a time**, modeling how it works.
- Maintain **close supervision**, especially with younger children.
- Limit the group to **four or fewer** children at a time.

- Require **safety goggles** and use clear rules.
- Store tools neatly with **outlined shapes** to support independence and care for materials.

Woodworking also supports risk assessment and confidence building—children feel proud when they complete a real, tangible project with their own hands.

Visual Art as Communication

In early childhood classrooms, **visual and tactile art** should be everywhere. For children who are still developing their verbal skills—or for those who are nonverbal—art becomes a **first language**. It allows them to express feelings, thoughts, and experiences that they might not have words for yet.

A well-equipped art space should include:

- **Two-dimensional materials** like drawing tools, paint, and paper
- **Three-dimensional materials** like clay, recycled boxes, wire, and natural items
- An accessible “**help-yourself shelf**” where children can choose materials freely

Remember, **the process matters more than the product**. Instead of focusing on what the final creation looks like, pay attention to the decisions, discoveries, and emotions children express while they’re working.

Physical Play: Building the Body and Brain

Young children are wired to move. Physical play is not just a break from learning—it *is* learning. Movement supports the development of gross motor skills (like running and climbing) as well as fine motor skills (like stringing beads or working puzzles). When children move their bodies, they are strengthening their muscles, coordination, spatial awareness, and balance. They’re also learning to manage risk, collaborate with others, and regulate their energy.

Classrooms and playgrounds should be filled with opportunities for physical activity. Here are just a few examples of rich, developmentally appropriate physical play:

- **Gross motor:** running, climbing, sliding, jumping, pedaling tricycles, navigating obstacle courses
- **Fine motor:** lacing cards, pegboards, puzzles, parquet blocks, sewing cards, and table toys
- **Natural sensory play:** water tables, sandboxes, gardening
- **Constructive movement play:** climbing structures, carpentry tools, building large forts or dens
- **Creative movement:** dancing to music, acting out stories, and engaging with scarves or instruments
- **Daily routines:** feeding pets, watering plants, helping set the table

These experiences provide opportunities for autonomy, joy, and skill building.

Constructive Play: Solving Problems with Hands

Constructive play happens when children use materials to build or make something. It often includes engineering, planning, and trial-and-error. Whether they’re stacking blocks, creating a house out of cardboard, or building a ramp for a ball, they are learning critical thinking skills.

Here’s an example:

“I know. The higher ramp will make the ball go faster,” Alexia announced, “but the lower ramp will make it go farther.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because balls speed up from higher up. And the lower ramp slows balls down so it rolls longer and goes farther.”

Another child had a different idea: “The lower ramp makes balls faster because it’s closer to the ground,” Jonathan said.

Notice how both children are testing theories, explaining their thinking, and engaging in scientific inquiry—without a worksheet

or a lab coat in sight!

Environments That Support Play: Time, Space, and Materials

A rich play environment is thoughtfully planned. Children need:

- **Ample time:** Play should not be rushed. Long, uninterrupted blocks of time allow ideas to evolve and deepen.
- **Ample space:** Children need room to move, build, and spread out—both indoors and outdoors. The space should feel physically and psychologically safe.
- **Ample materials:** A mix of open-ended and themed materials invites exploration. This includes:
 - **Props:** dress-up clothes, pretend food, puppets
 - **Loose parts:** buttons, bottle caps, cardboard tubes, sticks, fabric
 - **Art supplies:** markers, paint, glue, recyclables
 - **Found treasures:** free “creative junk” like movie theater poster boards or packaging materials

Most importantly, children need **adults who notice and value their play**. Educators can comment on what children are doing, interpret their ideas, and extend their thinking with questions or new materials without taking over.

Reflecting Thoughts

Across all domains of development, play serves as a powerful medium through which children grow and learn. In play, children explore the boundaries between reality and imagination, transforming ordinary objects into exciting possibilities. A cardboard box becomes a spaceship, a cluster of blocks becomes a city, and a pile of dress-up clothes becomes a shared social world. While these moments may appear simple to adults, they represent some of the most important work of childhood. A teacher whose pedagogy is informed by Vygotsky's ideas understands that the classroom should be a place where children experiment with new roles, test ideas, solve problems, and imagine possibilities before they exist in the real world. Through these experiences, children are not only acquiring knowledge and skills. They are developing the habits of mind that will serve them throughout life, including curiosity, persistence, flexibility, empathy, and imagination.

As future educators, your responsibility is not simply to provide opportunities for play. It is to recognize its value, protect the time and space it requires, and thoughtfully design environments where it can flourish. Some of the deepest learning you will ever observe will not happen during a lesson you carefully planned. It will happen when children are fully engaged in play that they have chosen, directed, and sustained themselves. The children in your classroom today will inherit a world that is changing in ways none of us can fully predict. Facts and technologies will continue to evolve, but the ability to think creatively, collaborate with others, solve unfamiliar problems, and imagine new possibilities will remain essential. By protecting play, you are nurturing those capacities. You are not simply helping children prepare for school. You are helping prepare them for life.

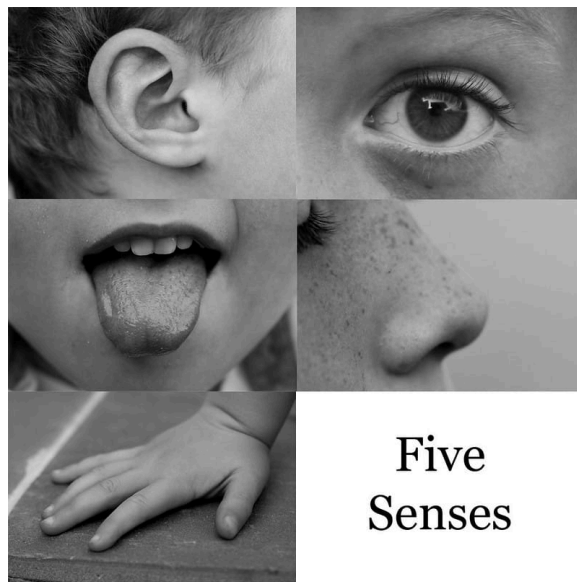
7: Sensory Experiences

In ECE, sensory experiences are those fun, messy happenings that involve some kind of fluid or flowing substance like wet sand, a mixture of cornstarch and water, or birdseed that children can delve into with their hands to observe cause and effect, physical properties, and the changes caused by adding wetter or drier elements.

Sensory tables are used in classrooms and on playgrounds where teachers value this type of play. You will notice that children at the sensory table enjoy filling cups, funnels, and strainers of various sizes and can learn a basic form of physics while grappling with the reactions they encounter. Smart teachers enhance this play by offering scoops of different materials (metal kitchen spoons, cupcake tins, and disposable plastic containers with punched holes that create the surprise of rain or fluid loss when used).

Sensory Experiences

Sensory experiences are fun for sure, but one of the more compelling reasons for providing them is to foster the ability to receive **sensory information** from one's surroundings and relate it to what one already knows. For example, I know that sand is moldable when wet, or that a coarse piece of sandpaper is less pleasant to touch than a furry cat. These are *aesthetic experiences*—moments when we respond to what something looks, feels, or sounds like in a way that brings up both thoughts and feelings. (Aesthetic means having to do with beauty, sensory qualities, or how something makes us feel through the senses.) These are basic perceptual bits of knowledge, and perception grows more complex as children grow and develop. There are at least 10 human senses that we know to nurture in our work with young children, they are:



"Five Senses" by Nicki Dugan Pogue is licensed under CC BY

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1. Visual – Looking/seeing

This involves a thorough **visual exploration** rather than a passing glance or quick look. Children learn to use their eyes by purposefully tracking movement, noticing differences, and visually investigating their environment. **Visual perception and discrimination**, such as being able to distinguish between similar letters or shapes, are foundational skills for learning to read and write.

2. Auditory – Hearing /listening

This sense involves two very different processes: **casual hearing** and **focused, active listening**. Children who can hear do not always listen. From a young age, they're bombarded with auditory input and quickly learn to tune out what's not immediately relevant. While casual hearing is appropriate much of the time, moments such as listening to music, engaging with a read-aloud, or following a teacher's instructions require focused, active listening. A key teaching goal is to help children know when and how to shift from passive hearing to active listening.

3. Tactile – Feeling/touch

Touch may work closely alongside the visual sense. Activities that involve **handling objects, exploring textures, and feeling differences in shape, weight, or temperature** are all categorized as tactile. Through tactile play, children build body awareness, safety awareness, and emotional regulation.

4. Olfactory – Smell

While animals rely heavily on their sense of smell, people tend to underuse it, yet young children often respond more sensitively to smells than adults do. For example, a child may **refuse to try a food solely based on its smell**, even if it looks appealing. This sensitivity makes smell an important consideration in early learning environments.

5. Gustatory – Taste

Taste experiences help children navigate the world, often in connection with culture, emotion, and safety (e.g., tasting something bitter or sour and learning what's edible). Exploring taste encourages curiosity and often brings social interaction—sharing snacks, describing flavors, or reacting to new foods.

To this, Dr. Maria Montessori (1967) added five more refined sensory capacities—senses that extend beyond the five and help children make even more nuanced discoveries:

6. Chromatic – A broader sense of vision

This refers to the **ability to recognize, match, and discriminate among colors**, noticing subtle differences in hue, brightness, and saturation. Experiences such as using a light table, arranging color gradients, or observing how sunlight affects color perception help children sharpen this sense.

7. Thermic – The perception of temperature

Children explore how things feel to the touch: **hot, cold, warm, tepid, or chilled**. This is crucial for comfort, safety, and physical awareness. Think about the learning involved in deciding whether water is too hot or if it's safe to touch a metal object on a sunny day.

8. Stereognostic – Tactile-muscular recognition of objects

This sense allows a child to **recognize and identify objects without seeing them**, using only their hands and muscular feedback. For example, reaching into a mystery bag and pulling out a familiar object like a spoon or pinecone builds both confidence and sensory memory.

9. Baric – Perception of weight

Children develop this sense as they compare **heavy and light objects** and begin to detect **gradations in weight**. Carrying, lifting, or balancing items helps children build not only muscle strength but also an internal sense of mass and density.

10. Kinesthetic – Whole-body, sensorimotor awareness

This is the awareness of movement and muscle control. It includes balance, coordination, posture, and knowing where one's body is in space. Running, dancing, climbing, and crawling all support the development of this vital sensory system.

All ten of these senses are honed through hands-on, open-ended sensory exploration...so yes, it's time to get messy! Teachers may hesitate to offer sensory-rich play due to fear of mess or uncertainty about its purpose. Still, these experiences are essential to how young children organize knowledge, regulate their emotions, build language, and make sense of the world around them. Let's honor and support sensory play... for growth in all areas!

Sensing, perceiving, thinking, and **developing concepts** are all connected. It's much easier for a child to form a concept when they have experienced it firsthand through their senses. The image below shows how this process works:

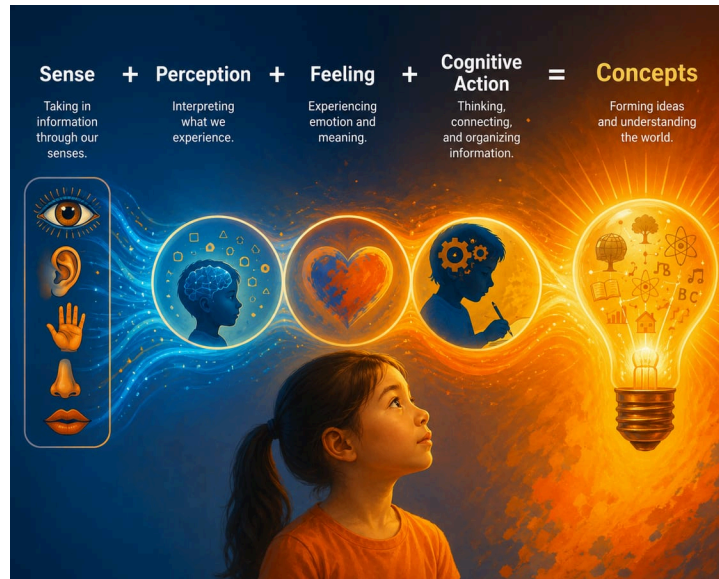


Image created by Donna King using OpenAI's ChatGPT (July 2026).

The Affective-Cognitive Pathway to Concept Development

Each sense brings in different information. As children *look, listen, touch, smell, and taste*, they are reacting and thinking while enjoying the process. Below is a sample of how some sensory experiences in the classroom can foster feelings and cognitive actions and develop an understanding of concepts. The chart is to be used fluidly; feelings and cognitive actions are interchangeable, and concepts developed are many. While children are playing or exploring with sensory materials, they engage in an aesthetic experience in which thinking, feeling, and perception work together. **Cognitive understanding** and conceptual learning emerge naturally from their **affective responses** to the experience. Those emotional responses are often what draw children back to explore again and again. This is not simply messy play for the sake of making a mess. It is meaningful sensory play that engages the whole child. Their senses, emotions, and thinking processes are all actively involved, creating rich opportunities for learning and brain development.

In other words, children are thinking and feeling at the same time. Aesthetic experiences weave together cognition and emotion. Every child responds differently to beauty, novelty, and sensory experiences. If a group of children sees a kitten (or, for adults, someone they have a crush on), each person will have a unique emotional reaction. Those individual responses are part of the rich relationship between how we perceive the world, what we think about it, and how we feel about it. It is this integration of perception, emotion, and cognition that helps children construct meaningful concepts about the world around them.

Key Definitions

- **Affective Response:** The emotional reaction a child experiences and expresses while engaging with people,

materials, or events. An affective response may be seen in facial expressions, body language, vocalizations, enthusiasm, curiosity, surprise, frustration, or delight.

- **Cognitive Understanding:** The knowledge or understanding that develops through thinking, questioning, remembering, comparing, and making sense of experiences. During sensory play, children may discover cause-and-effect relationships, learn new vocabulary, recognize patterns, solve problems, or form new concepts.

Bodily Sense	Avenue for Perception	Possible Feeling	Possible Cognitive Action	Possible Concepts Developed
Visual	Look	Enjoy	Compare	Color/Line/Pattern/Movement
Auditory	Listen	Inspired	Contrast	Tone/Volume/Pitch
Tactile	Touch	Joy/Amusement	Analyze	Texture/Porosity/Temperature
Olfactory	Smell	Delight/Disgust	Classify	Scent/subtle notes
Gustatory	Taste	Amazed/Pleasure/Satisfaction	Describe	Flavor

(Adapted

from Schirmacher, 2018).

Try This! Print a copy of the chart above for teachers and other adults in the classroom as a quick reference for ideas to pursue while children are exploring with sensory substances. After looking at the chart, a teacher might say, "Savita, your rock sank quickly to the bottom. Let's **compare** that to the feather, then we can **analyze** why that happened and write down our ideas in our concept book"

Sensory Experiences and Recipes

Infants/Toddlers, preschoolers and school-age children ... adapted from Schirmacher)

Reflecting Thoughts

As teachers, it can be easy to fall into the trap of focusing on what children can recite, label, or demonstrate on a worksheet. Sensory experiences remind us that true learning begins much earlier, in the body. Before children can explain a concept, they often need to feel it, hear it, see it, move through it, and compare it with something they already know. A child pouring water between containers, noticing that wet sand holds its shape, or identifying an object hidden in a mystery bag is building the foundation for later reasoning, language, and problem-solving. What may look like "just play" is often a child organizing the world through the senses. Sensory exploration helps children develop perception, attention, self-regulation, and confidence. It also invites wonder. Children naturally ask questions, test ideas, and revise their thinking when materials respond in surprising ways.

Your role is not simply to provide sensory activities, but to create environments where meaningful sensory exploration can happen safely and respectfully. Offer time, space, and open-ended materials. Observe carefully. Listen to the language children use. Notice what captures their attention and what they are trying to understand. When we honor sensory play, we honor the way young children learn best: through active engagement with the world around them. The goal is not a perfectly clean classroom. The

goal is a classroom where children are curious, capable, and deeply involved in making sense of their experiences. And, that's a classroom that will never be forgotten!

Caution: A Word on Waste and Sensory Materials

With the exception of specific baking ingredients used in homemade playdough or other sensory bases, please refrain from using food items or plastic-based materials in the classroom. Using food as a play material can unintentionally send the message that food is disposable, which can be especially troubling or even offensive for children who experience food insecurity. We want to model respect for food as a vital and shared resource. Similarly, plastic items—such as manufactured beads or trinkets—not only pose safety risks (children have been known to place them in ears or noses) but also contribute to environmental harm due to their overuse and non-biodegradable nature. Whenever possible, lean toward natural, sustainable, and abundant materials that invite rich sensory exploration while aligning with values of safety, respect, and environmental care.

8: Integrating Art Across the Curriculum

Some educators think of curriculum as a set of academic goals chosen by adults and planned without considering what children are curious about or what they are wondering about. When curriculum is viewed primarily as content to be simply transmitted, with little attention to learners' interests or experiences, it reflects a longstanding tradition within formal schooling. John Dewey (1938) argued that traditional education emphasizes externally imposed subject matter and adult-defined goals, often separating curriculum from children's interests and lived experiences. He contrasted this with education that begins with learners' experiences while still being guided by knowledgeable teachers.

Notable exceptions to systems in which children are subjected to a rigid, teacher-directed curriculum include schools that embrace an emergent, child-responsive curriculum, particularly those inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, in which teachers intentionally build learning experiences from children's ideas, questions, and investigations.

At this point in your reading, you have likely come to appreciate the many developmental benefits of integrating art throughout the curriculum. You have seen how the whole child is supported when classrooms provide rich opportunities for creative, flexible, fluent, and elaborative thinking through artistic expression.

Review of Developmental Values of Artistic Processing

Social

Children develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others as they create, collaborate, share ideas, negotiate, and appreciate the artistic expressions of their peers.

Emotional

Art provides a healthy outlet for expressing and regulating emotions. Creative expression, along with the sensory qualities of materials such as clay, dough, paint, sand, or water, can promote relaxation, reduce stress, and foster a sense of emotional well-being.

Physical

Working with a variety of artistic tools and materials strengthens fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, finger dexterity, and perceptual-motor development while encouraging increasing control and precision.

Cognitive

Exploring art media invites children to investigate, experiment, and solve meaningful problems. They naturally observe, compare, classify, predict, test ideas, and revise their thinking as they discover how materials behave. With thoughtful teacher questioning, these experiences become opportunities for deeper reasoning, language development, and conceptual understanding.

Elliot Eisner (2002) understood these values and criticized curricula that privilege predetermined content and standardized outcomes over students' interests, imagination, and meaning making, arguing that education should cultivate flexible thinking rather than merely transmit information.

We invite you to think about the curriculum more broadly, as **everything that happens in the program**. This includes all the experiences children have throughout the day, from morning hellos to outdoor play to focused moments of flow while exploring something new. Teachers still must plan, but those plans should be flexible and rooted in an understanding of what children are curious about and developmentally ready to explore. This way of working is often called **emergent curriculum**.

Emergent Curriculum

Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo (1994), the foremost voices on emergent curriculum, remind us that curriculum is not something teachers simply deliver. Rather, it is something they thoughtfully construct alongside children through careful observation, intentional planning, and responsive teaching. In *Emergent Curriculum*, Jones emphasizes that children's questions, interests, and investigations provide the foundation for meaningful learning experiences. The teacher's role is not to abandon planning but

to plan with purpose while remaining open to the unexpected directions children's curiosity may take.

In classrooms where children's interests help shape what happens next, and teachers thoughtfully guide learning in response, we tend to see more engagement, joy, and deeper learning than might be achieved through a rigid or predetermined plan.

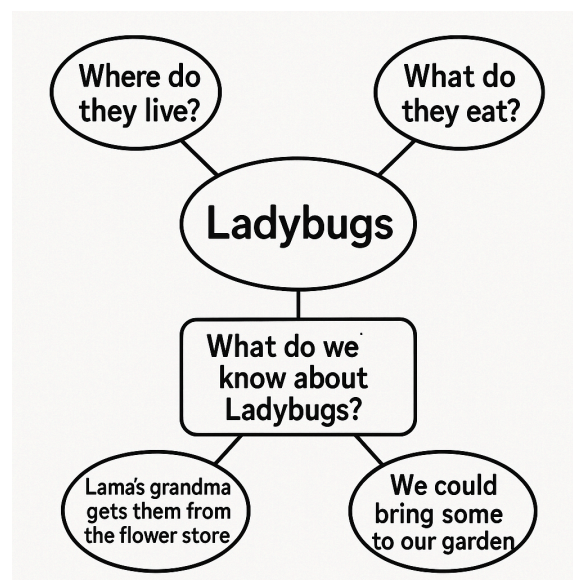
Go into the connection b/t emergent curriculum and art as a language for inquiry.

Ladybug Learning

One morning, while working at a school with a group of 4½-year-olds, Mai enthusiastically ran up to me and exclaimed, "Look! I have ladybugs on my shoes!" Indeed, she did! Her white canvas shoes had cute little beetles embroidered on them. My co-teacher, Mark, and I valued emergent curriculum, and I briefly deferred to him to model curiosity. I said, "I wonder if we have any pictures of ladybugs in the classroom..." to which he replied, "I'm not sure, but I do have a book about ladybugs. I'll bring it to circle time today."

This small moment sparked several days of joyful exploration and discovery. In an emergent curriculum approach, learning isn't confined to a single week or predefined theme. A topic might last a few days or extend across several weeks, depending on the children's interest and engagement. The goal is to explore deeply and meaningfully across multiple areas of the curriculum before moving on.

Mark and I used our planning time to search the school library and prop bins for materials that could support this budding interest. Then, together with the children, we created a topic web to brainstorm ways to build on Mai's excitement about ladybugs. The **topic web** below is what we came up with:



In a topic web, teachers record children's responses to things like:

- What do the children already know?
- What would they like to find out?
- Who do they think they can talk to?
- What places could they visit to learn more?

CURRICULAR AREAS INFLUENCING AND INTERACTING WITH ART

In the ladybug example, we see how different parts of the curriculum interact with and influence art. When children work with open-ended materials and ideas inspired by real moments, like Mai's ladybug shoes, the experience becomes layered and meaningful across many curricular areas.

Visual Art

Example Prompt (Teacher): “Hmmm, I wonder if we could use this red and black paint to do something that reminds us of ladybugs?”

Children might respond by painting dots, wings, or creating a design. Be careful not to limit their choices—while red and black may be relevant, children should have access to a variety of materials with different colors, textures, weights, and forms. The focus is on modeling curiosity and divergent thinking. Provide the materials, ask thoughtful questions, and then step back to observe what emerges.

Mathematics

Children naturally quantify and categorize as they engage in art.

Example:

“How many black dots should go on this ladybug wing?”

“What shape is a ladybug’s body?”

Children might begin to sort, count, compare sizes, or make patterns using dots, wings, or materials. These are foundational math concepts like one-to-one correspondence, patterning, and spatial awareness—all embedded in playful, meaningful work.

Life Science

Children learn scientific principles as they develop scientific thinking. The opportunities to hypothesize, predict, observe, question, discuss, and explain are endless.

Example:

As children create ladybugs, they might ask:

“Why do ladybugs have spots?”

“What happens if we mix red and white paint—can we make pink ladybugs?”

You might bring in real ladybugs or books, prompting questions like: “What do they eat?” or “Where do they live?” These moments allow children to make hypotheses and test ideas through observation and exploration.

Language Arts

Art provides children with a way to show what they know before they have the words to express it fully. Since young children often lack the words to describe their ideas and thoughts, art allows them to represent what they know nonverbally or visually. With encouragement, they may also choose to talk about their creations. Children interpret their artwork just as adults read words from a book. Sometimes, children enjoy having their titles or storylines printed on their pictures.

Example: A child draws a ladybug on a leaf and tells a story: “This one is flying to find its family.” You might scribe their words underneath their artwork or invite them to dictate a story. Children can “read” their pictures and each other’s, engaging in narrative building, sequencing, and vocabulary expansion.

Social Studies

Art helps children explore their identity, relationships, and the world around them. Creating self-portraits and human figure drawings enhances their awareness of themselves, their body parts, and others. Children take on and identify with the role of artist. Art introduces history and culture because artists and their various styles have existed since prehistoric times. Different cultural groups have their own unique art forms.

Example: When a child shares, “Lama’s grandma gets them from the flower store,” it opens up space for discussion about families, gardens, stores, roles, and community.

You might also explore how ladybugs are understood or symbolized in different cultures, or examine how different artists represent insects or nature in their work.

Through role play or art-making, children take on the role of “artist” and develop a sense of belonging and cultural awareness.

Technology

Technology can enhance creativity when used thoughtfully and with a focus on the human touch.

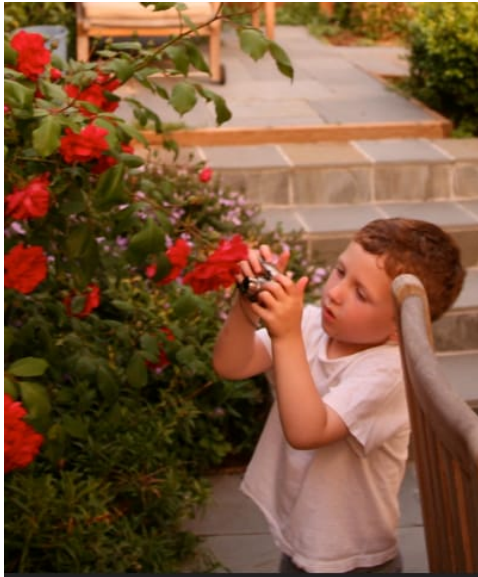
Example: Children might use a digital magnifier to look closely at a real ladybug's body, then use a drawing app or digital pen to recreate what they saw.

Teachers might project a photo of a ladybug for close study or use a tablet to photograph children's work and document the process.

In each case, the emphasis is on technology as a tool for reflection and representation—not a replacement for hands-on experiences.

It is no surprise that many educators are deeply concerned about the use of technology not only among young children but in society as a whole. Many concerned individuals, from parents to politicians, have attempted to shed light on the dangerous outcomes of the overuse (even abuse) of social media, internet addiction, and violent gaming. They cite: the inorganic development of ADHD, emotional issues resulting from unrealistic beauty standards, the drastic need to replicate an impossible aesthetic, desensitization to human suffering, and nature deficits, among other concerns. (Citations coming)

One thing we must do as educators is avoid the "sky is falling" mentality is to make change in our own way. Some things other teachers have done to contribute to a less electronic media-dependent childhood are:



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9: Talking With Children About Artistic Media

What do you say when a child shows you their artwork? It is human nature to lavish praise on the young artist with words like, “*Oh! That’s beautiful!*” or we might see this as a moment to correct a child’s representation of a beaming blue sun by saying, “*Nice, but the sun should be bright yellow.*” Though adults are often well-meaning in their responses to the child’s attempt at connection, these comments tend to halt a richer and more elaborate conversation between child and adult. Some of the more common responses children hear from adults, which can lead to a stoppage of verbal exchange, are outlined in the section below. Elliot Eisner (1982) emphasized the role of art in developing children’s ability to think and perceive, encouraging educators to recognize children’s artistic activity as a way of exploring aesthetic experience and expressive form. Rather than focusing only on whether a child’s artwork represents a recognizable object, adults can also attend to the formal qualities of children’s art, such as shape, line, color, and form. Just as adult artists work with the basic building blocks of visual expression, young children also experiment with these elements in their art. Learning to observe and talk about these formal components is essential in supporting children’s developing aesthetic awareness (a topic that will be discussed further in Chapter 10).



Photo by [Jerry Wang](#) on [Unsplash](#)

When adults take the time to listen closely and engage in meaningful conversations about children’s artwork, they communicate that children’s ideas, choices, and ways of seeing are valued. Such conversations can support oral language development while also affirming children as capable contributors and meaning-makers. Over time, these experiences can help children develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of art (Thompson, 1990; Eckhoff, 2013; Chang & Cress, 2014). In her extensive review of the literature on talking with children about their art, Christine Marmé Thompson (1990) supports the understanding that young children often combine drawing with descriptive, reflective, and social conversation as a way to verbally monitor and share their progress. Her review highlights research supporting the fact that language is vital for early artistic development and that it influences visual expression. The developmental importance of children’s talk about their art suggests that appropriate adult-child dialogue in art contexts can help understand and support early artistic activity.

The Elements of Art

Even very young children can begin to understand and use artistic vocabulary such as shape, pattern, line, design, and color. But simply introducing these terms is not enough. As teachers, we can use the elements of art as a framework for responding to children’s creative work in meaningful and respectful ways. You do not need to be a trained artist to do this well.

While there are many ways to categorize and describe the elements of art, Hardiman and Zernich (1981) offer a developmentally appropriate approach for talking with young children. Their ideas help teachers become keen observers who foster self-

expression and personal reflection on the part of the child. They teach us to notice and name what children are exploring in their artwork. Here is what discourse with children might sound like when using the elements of art in everyday conversation:

Color: "I see black here, and a bit of blue over here..."

Line: "I see a zigzag here, a curve here, and a right angle..."

Pattern: "There's a green, blue, green pattern here..."

Shape: "I see a triangle here and a circle right here..."

Texture: "It's smooth here and bumpy here..."

Force/Pressure: "It looks like you colored lightly here and pressed hard on the crayon here..."

Balance: "You put something on each side. It feels even." or "This part feels heavier with color. Was that on purpose?"

Space: "You left this space open here and filled in this whole corner. What were you thinking about?"

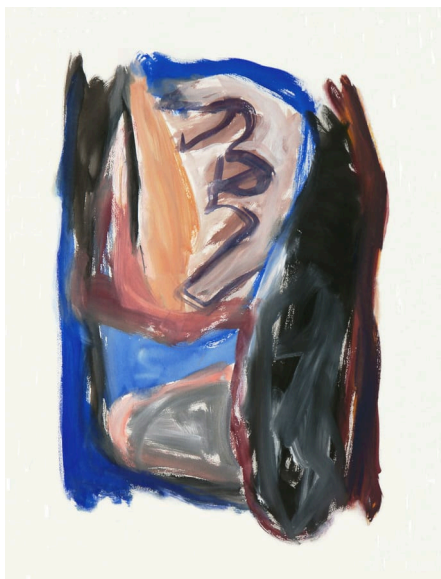
Overall Design or Composition: "It looks like everything connects and fits together, like a whole scene."

Mass or Volume: "This clay figure is really thick and chunky. Look how much space it takes up!" or "You rolled the clay really thin here and made a big ball for the head. Your sculpture has big and small parts!"

Time and Effort: "You spent a long time working on this artwork. I can tell you were really focused."

Avoid beginning your comments with "I like..." This can send the message that a child's creative work is meant to please the adult rather than being a genuine expression of the child's own thoughts and ideas. Instead, focus on what you see, what the child did, and how they did it. You can encourage children to share more about their thinking by following your observations with an invitation, such as **"Can you tell me more about it?"** This approach gives children an opportunity to interpret and expand on their creative choices while fostering richer conversation. What's more, it communicates to children that their ideas and choices are worthy of attention. The adult is not simply judging the finished product; the adult is joining the child in looking closely, noticing, and wondering.

It can also be helpful to avoid asking, "What is it?" When a child's artwork is abstract or difficult to interpret, this question may unintentionally communicate that the artwork needs to represent something recognizable in order to be meaningful. Instead, begin by observing what you see and inviting the child to share their thinking if they wish. You might say, "I see lots of lines and colors here. Can you tell me about what you were thinking?" This allows the child to decide what their artwork means to them and how much they want to share, while keeping the conversation open to their own interpretation.



A wonderful example of this approach comes from writer Kelsey McKinney (2024), who describes watching a curator engage a group of elementary school children in a small museum gallery. The curator invited the children to look carefully at approximately fifteen paintings and then stand beneath the one they liked best. She then asked each child, "Why that painting? Why choose this one over all the others?" (McKinney, 2024). The children's responses went beyond simply saying that they liked a particular painting. They talked about contrast, line quality, shape, negative space, and color. In other words, they were able to articulate the elements and principles of art that contributed to their personal responses. Their comments demonstrate the value of giving children opportunities to look closely, develop a vocabulary for what they see, and explain their own aesthetic choices. When adults invite children to notice and reflect rather than simply telling them what to see or asking them to identify what a work of art represents, children can become active participants in conversations about art and develop greater confidence in their own ways of seeing.

Conversational Guide for Working with Young Children

When talking with children about their art, keep the following **four principles** in mind:

1. **Speak only when you're "invited".** Children need time and space to create art. Hovering over them while they work with materials is one of the "creativity killers." Amabile (1997) says that children who feel they are being watched won't develop their ideas creatively. You will know you are invited by watching their body language. If the child makes eye contact with you for more than just a moment, you can bet they want your company. Go ahead and engage verbally. On the other hand, if the child is deeply involved in their work and their concentration appears intense, please refrain from interrupting. Instead, wait until a later, more appropriate time for conversation.
2. **Understand Developmental Levels.** For toddlers and young preschoolers, keep your comments brief, clear, and related to what they're doing. For example: "Look how fast your arm is moving the crayon," or "I see thick dots where you pressed hard."
3. **Connect your comments to the artistic elements, but don't quiz them.** Use visual vocabulary to build children's awareness: "Look at all the colors! Let's name them—red, blue, and purple," or "I see big squares that make rectangles at the top of your paper." If you choose to "quiz" children, it sends the message that they are being evaluated. So, try NOT to say "what color is this?" (They know you know what color it is!) Children can learn colors, shapes, and other concrete concepts through natural conversation, rather than relying on oral quizzes.
4. **Encourage rather than praise.** Words that reflect effort and feelings help children internalize a sense of accomplishment: "I can tell you felt proud when you cut that paper all by yourself," rather than saying, "Good job" or "You're so good at art." A comment like, "The smiling sun in the sky matches your happy face," shows that you've noticed something personal and expressive, which affirms their work without judgment.

When we notice rather than evaluate, we help children stay connected to their own ideas, feelings, and sense of creativity.

Guidelines on What to Steer Clear Of

Below are common approaches to avoid. Though it might be a challenge given the fact that habits can be hard to break. Make a mistake? That's okay. Try again next time.

Avoid being....

- **Complementary:** "*That is so pretty.*" Yes, most will agree that a compliment feels great in the moment, but it can also feel like a dismissal. Or it can feel inauthentic.
- **Judgmental:** "*Very good.*" Judgments are often thought of as negative commentary (That's no good"), but positive judgments are also something to be concerned with when it comes to children's artistic sharing. When a child learns that an adult judges something as "*good*," they are more likely to edit their future work in accordance to what adults seem to deem as good.
- **Valuing:** "*I like that a lot.*" Similar to judging artistic work, valuing sends the message that children should do what others like and not honor their own creativity. Because children are still developing their sense of self, they rely on the opinions of those they trust, and this can stifle their natural creativity.
- **Questioning:** "*What is it?*" When a child is asked this question, they may feel confused because they may not have a "*what*" in mind. Recall that children are in any number of artistic stages, and many of those stages have little to do with producing a representational display.
- **Correcting:** "*Nice, but spiders have eight legs; you only drew six.*" Unless we are specifically asking for an outside opinion,

most of us do not enjoy being corrected. Children, when corrected, are likely to avoid sharing creative work when they know they will likely be assessed and fall short of expectations.

- **(Exception) Probing** can be a good strategy! *“What can you tell me about your artwork?”* This is a welcome statement and one that a child may find open-ended enough to elaborate. A teacher might ask, *“May I write some words down about your drawing?”* When we gently probe, we are saying we are interested in the child’s work, but we will not judge, correct, or even compliment it. We honor the work, and in doing so, we encourage conversation and further artistic processing.

Reflecting Thoughts

When a child shares their artwork with us, we get a glimpse into how they see, think, feel, and make sense of the world. Our response can either close that window of insight or invite the child to open it a little wider. When we slow down, look closely, and respond with true curiosity rather than judgment, we create space for children to talk about their ideas, explore their choices, and build confidence in their own ways of seeing. We may not always understand what a child has created, and we do not need to. Our role is not to determine what the artwork means or whether it is good, beautiful, or correct. Our role is to be present, to notice, and to wonder alongside the child. In doing so, we communicate: I see what you are doing. I am interested in how you see the world. Your ideas matter.

10: Fostering Aesthetic Appreciation

Defining Aesthetics

The term aesthetics refers to the sensitive perception, appreciation, and creation of beauty. In early childhood education, aesthetics involves the way children experience beauty and sensory richness through materials, nature, art, culture, and thoughtfully designed environments. (Fox, 2018)

Below are just a few things you might notice in an ECE program that values aesthetic development.

- Children perusing beautiful picture books, like *Watercress* by Andrea Wang (2025), and later using magnifying glasses to explore growing plants during a nature walk. (develops a sensitive perception and appreciation of beauty)
- A teacher who grows wildflowers in a small plot on the children's play yard and allows the children to pick a few each day for *Ikebana at lunchtime. (Develops a perception and appreciation of the natural world)
- Music from various cultures and regions of the world is playing, with guidance to listen with intention. (Develops appreciation of beauty within diversity)



- Children's individual artwork is displayed thoughtfully on a complementary mat board (The environment facilitates and encourages artistic expression)
- Unit blocks are displayed in an inviting way to encourage creative building and may include photos of great works of architecture or engineering as inspiration for children's block-building explorations. (The environment encourages attention to the aesthetic of the manufactured world)

What can you add to this list? What have you seen in ECE environments that supports the sensitive perception and appreciation of beauty?

Aesthetic Sensitivity Is Individual, but It Can Be Cultivated

People pursue aesthetics with varying levels of interest for a multitude of reasons, influenced by their personal experiences and innate tendencies. Some individuals possess a heightened sensitivity to the sensory richness of the world around them. For instance, they might find themselves captivated by the fragrance of a blooming rose, pausing to fully engage their senses and appreciate its beauty. These individuals often have a natural inclination to explore their environment more intimately; they may struggle to resist the urge to touch various displays in a museum, even when signs discourage interaction, or they might unconsciously run their fingers over the smooth, luxurious fabrics while shopping for clothes, savoring the tactile experience.

In contrast, there are others who may not have developed the habit of recognizing and appreciating these moments of beauty. This could be due to limited exposure to art, nature, and other aesthetic experiences during their upbringing. Alternatively, their

attention may be more inclined toward practical matters, such as utility and functionality, causing them to overlook the beauty that surrounds them.

For many, these moments of beauty remain unnoticed, perhaps because they lead busy lives focused on daily responsibilities, which diminishes their awareness of such sensory experiences. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that actively seeking beauty can significantly enrich one's life, leading to greater satisfaction and a deeper connection with the world.

This is where early childhood education (ECE) teachers play a crucial role. They are uniquely positioned to introduce the concept of beauty to young children and cultivate an appreciation for the aesthetics in their environments. By incorporating music, art, nature exploration, and sensory play into their curriculum, ECE teachers can help children cultivate a sense of wonder and a habit of noticing the small, beautiful moments in everyday life. In doing so, they contribute to the children's overall emotional and social development, enriching their experiences and fostering a lifelong appreciation for beauty.

Challiyān, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Aesthetic awareness is not just an optional addition; it is essential for the holistic development of a child. This aligns with the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the well-known Waldorf Schools, who stated, **“Only when our sense of beauty enters the fullness of life are we able to experience the practical realm in a right and balanced way”** (Steiner, 1922, para. 22).

Steiner believed that nurturing children's aesthetic sense is not about frivolity or ornamentation but about allowing beauty to permeate their experience of the world. This leads to a balanced development of all human faculties. For those of us who are interested in building aesthetic appreciation, we must do all that we can to teach children to see the world and all its beauty with all of their senses!

Why Are Aesthetics Important in ECE?

Aesthetic Awareness Is Part of Being Human

The inclusion of aesthetics supports an age-old humanistic philosophy of education. Unlike other animals, humans possess a unique capacity to recognize and appreciate beauty. Just as we nurture physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth, it makes sense to intentionally foster aesthetic development as a vital domain of the human experience.

Appreciation That Deepens Learning: Children who marvel at the beauty of the world around them develop a sense of appreciation that extends beyond nature and art. This sensitivity transfers to the beauty of letters, words, numbers, stories, poems, formulas, books, and symbols. It can even foster greater empathy and curiosity toward people of other cultures. This is the **aesthetic of learning that lasts**.

Concept Development and Focus: Aesthetic experiences sharpen children's powers of observation and support the development of concepts. For example, when a teacher invites a child to notice “the tiny green flecks on the butterfly's wing,” the child is not only drawn into the moment—they are learning to focus, compare, and describe. These are foundational skills for both scientific thinking and creative expression.

Enriching Lives and Environments: Being surrounded by beauty and engaging in beautiful experiences contributes to a child's overall well-being and sense of wonder.

A thoughtfully designed aesthetic environment is pleasant and calming for both children and educators. Such environments support self-regulation, reduce stress, and encourage positive behavior in subtle yet powerful ways. Cultivating aesthetic awareness in early childhood enhances the child's lifelong ability to experience joy, find meaning, and express creativity. Throughout history, educational philosophers have recognized the relationship between beauty, meaning, and human development. This connection is particularly visible in the Reggio Emilia approach, where aesthetics is woven into the very foundation of children's learning environments.

Caution

Excessive visual and sensory stimulation, such as overly bright colors, visual or cartoonish clutter, constant noise, or an abundance of competing displays, may compete for children's limited attentional resources, making it more difficult to sustain focus, regulate behavior, and engage deeply in learning. In contrast, thoughtfully designed environments with balanced colors, natural materials, intentional organization, and a calm atmosphere support children's emerging capacity for self-regulation.

How Reggio Emilia Approaches Aesthetics

The Reggio Emilia schools, founded in northern Italy after World War II by educator Loris Malaguzzi, are internationally admired for their unique and deeply respectful approach to young children's learning. Inspired by influential thinkers like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, Malaguzzi believed that children are strong, capable, and full of potential, not empty vessels waiting to be filled.

This image of the child is the foundation of everything that follows in Reggio Emilia. When children are viewed as capable thinkers, creators, and meaning-makers, the role of the teacher changes. Rather than simply delivering information, teachers create environments, provide materials, observe carefully, and support children's ideas as they unfold.

One of the most striking elements of a Reggio Emilia classroom is its **intentional aesthetic**. The learning environment is often called the "third teacher," following the child and the adult. This means great care is taken to create spaces that are beautiful, orderly, and inspiring. Classrooms in Reggio are not flashy or overly decorated but calm, inviting, and filled with natural light, natural materials, and children's own work. Plants, mirrors, soft lighting, wooden furniture, and documentation panels featuring photos and children's words create a space that feels more like an artist's studio than a typical preschool. In Reggio Emilia, the environment is not decorated for children; it is designed *with a theory of childhood in mind*. Every color, material, image, pathway, and invitation communicates an image of who children are and what they are capable of becoming.

Aesthetics in Reggio is not about making things "pretty" for the sake of appearance. Rather, it's about cultivating an atmosphere where beauty supports thinking. When materials are arranged with care—loose parts thoughtfully displayed in baskets, paints in glass jars, a light table set up with translucent colored shapes—children are more likely to slow down, notice details, and become deeply engaged. This is part of a larger belief in the power of **aesthetic sensitivity** to awaken wonder, curiosity, and joy in learning.

Art in Reggio Emilia schools is not confined to a corner or reserved for certain times. It flows throughout the day and across all areas of the curriculum. Children use drawing, clay, wire, sculpture, collage, painting, shadow, light, movement, and sound to explore ideas, pose questions, and communicate their understanding.

CHILDREN are encouraged to revisit their work, refine it, and express their thoughts in what Malaguzzi called the "**hundred languages**" of children.

100 Languages

*The child
is made of one hundred.

The child has
a hundred languages

a hundred hands

a hundred thoughts

a hundred ways of thinking*

of playing, of speaking.

A hundred always a hundred

ways of listening

of marveling of loving

a hundred joys

for singing and understanding

a hundred worlds

to discover

a hundred worlds

to invent

a hundred worlds

to dream.

The child has

a hundred languages

(and a hundred hundred hundred more)

but they steal ninety-nine.

The school and the culture

separate the head from the body.

They tell the child:

to think without hands

to do without head

to listen and not to speak

to understand without joy

to love and to marvel

only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:

to discover the world already there

and of the hundred

they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:

*that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.*

*And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.*

*The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.*

Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)

This belief reflects one of Malaguzzi's most influential ideas: that children possess many ways of expressing their thoughts and making meaning. In his famous poem *The Hundred Languages of Children*, Malaguzzi challenged the idea that language exists only through spoken or written words. Children think and communicate through countless forms of expression, including art, movement, construction, music, dramatic play, mathematics, relationships, and scientific exploration.

Each school has an **atelier**, or studio space, and an **atelierista**, an artist who works closely with teachers and children. The atelier is not simply a place to make art, it's a space where thinking becomes visible through aesthetic expression. The atelierista helps make connections between children's ideas and expressive materials, documenting the evolving process of their projects and investigations.

Just as importantly, teachers in Reggio schools view themselves as researchers. They pay close attention to children's words, gestures, and actions, using this information to co-construct curriculum alongside the children. Projects often emerge from a child's passing comment or spontaneous observation—like the shadow a leaf makes on a wall—and evolve into deep explorations involving science, storytelling, and collaborative artwork. You don't have to recreate a Reggio classroom exactly, but you can draw inspiration from its aesthetic values. Reflect on how your environment conveys messages to children. Is it calm or chaotic? Does it invite exploration? Do children's creations have a place of honor on the walls? Can you offer materials in a way that sparks interest and respect?

Remember: when we treat children as artists, thinkers, and designers, and when we craft spaces that reflect beauty, care, and intentionality, we invite children to bring forward their most thoughtful, expressive, and creative selves.

Thought Leader: Vea Vecchi

Vea Vecchi (1935-2020) promoted a kind of beauty in the classroom that transcended simple cuteness. When Vecchi used the word *aesthetics*, she was not talking about making classrooms 'Pinterest pretty.' She was referring to environments that stir up wonder and curiosity, respect children's intelligence, and encourage careful observation by both children and adults.

She was the first atelierista (studio/art specialist) at the Diana School in Reggio Emilia and worked closely with Malaguzzi. Her work explores the **aesthetic dimension of learning**, not as decoration, but as a way children construct meaning. Vecchi talks about:

- Beauty as a vital condition for learning
- Careful arrangement of materials (see note on providing "provocations")

- The relationship between light, color, texture, and children's thinking
- Teachers as designers of environments
- The idea that classrooms communicate values before teachers ever speak

A common misconception in children's classrooms is that aesthetic environments are about cuteness and coordinated colors. Instead, take a look at your environment while asking this deeper question: **"What does this environment allow children to think, feel, notice, question, and create?"**

The Environment Has a Voice

A well-designed classroom communicates the teacher's beliefs about children. Rather than thinking of the space as a place that dispenses facts and controls learning, Vecchi encouraged us to make environments that invite children to explore, wonder, collaborate, and create meaning.

One way Reggio-inspired teachers act as researchers is through the use of provocations. Rather than directing children toward a predetermined outcome, teachers offer thoughtful invitations that encourage curiosity, exploration, and deeper thinking.

What is a provocation?

Provocations are deliberate, thoughtful curricular decisions made by the teacher in conjunction with children's ideas. They extend children's ideas. Teachers provide materials, media, and general direction as needed, but children take the ideas where they want. These provocations happen whether you are a Reggio Emilia-inspired teacher or not. They have to do with the questions we ask, the materials we put out, and the music we play; even we, as teachers, sometimes act as a provocation. Curriculum never gets old or stale when provocations are involved. It is important to note that children take the ideas where they want.

A teacher who implements a Reggio-inspired classroom in Auckland, New Zealand, was asked by a volunteer, "Do your provocations always work?" The teacher was taken aback by this; thinking what did she mean by "work"? Then the volunteer said, "I haven't seen the children drawing crosses here."

Provocation Example

A teacher placed a printed photograph on a wooden easel stand near the art shelves to artistically inspire the students. The photograph depicted a scene related to a recent discussion another child had about their trip to Lake Lucerne (Vierwaldstättersee) in Central Switzerland.



Photo by Hugo Fergusson on Unsplash.

What the volunteer missed was the conversation that took place.

Jayden: Hey Kalen, that's an X, aye?

Kalen: Yeah, I don't have an X, I have a K.

Jayden: Oh, I have a J and an A and a Y and a D and an E and an N.

The two boys then began searching for letters around the room, looking on the walls, in the artwork, and in the documentation panels displayed throughout the classroom. The boys did not see a cross; they saw an X. They did not feel compelled to draw the cross. Instead, the symbol became a point of curiosity and discussion. The discussion could be further elaborated on by the teacher, who might ask the children to look for additional symbols that represent the letters in their names. (Never a dull moment with provocations!)

The teacher talked with her volunteer about the importance of respecting the child's agenda. She explained that this is a vital consideration when setting up environments or asking questions of children. Teachers should avoid preempting an experience by deciding what they think will happen. When adults enter an interaction with a predetermined agenda, they may unintentionally restrict children's thinking, exploration, and expression.

It may be helpful to remind new teachers that children express themselves through a hundred languages. Take a moment to observe how children communicate, create, question, and make meaning. Their ideas may be expressed in ways that are different from what adults expect, but those expressions are often where the deepest learning begins.

Activities to foster aesthetic appreciation

Examine the illustrations present in picture books.

- You can determine the artistic media, the technique the artist may have used or the overall style of the illustrations in children's books
- Visual literacy skills can be developed by prompting emergent readers to carefully examine illustrations in the following ways:
- Encourage children to discuss what they see in the illustrations.
- Identify and discuss the type of artistic media used.
- Identify the artistic style used by the illustrator. Illustrators also use different artistic styles. (photography, impressionism, pointillism, etc.)

Artist Visitors

Consider polling your student's loved ones. Find out if you have anyone who plays an instrument and could bring it to a circle time one day. Does anyone have an artist, dancer, or craftsperson in their family who would like to share their work? Sharing their skills, products, and processes can be thrilling for young children and adults alike!

Read books that you appreciate for their beauty

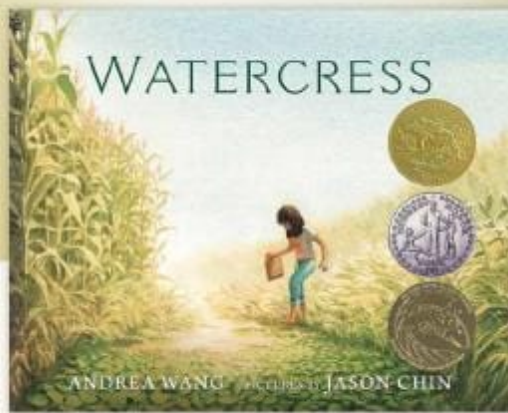
Watercress by Andrea Wang is a beautifully illustrated, semi-autobiographical children's book about a young Chinese American girl. The book has received universal acclaim, earning the Caldecott Medal for its watercolor illustrations by Jason Chin and a Newbery Honor citation.

Note: Include Rich Provocations

Walk into Mariners Church Preschool Unee Kim's classroom on any day of the week, and it will be hard to miss the children's deep engagement in well-designed, playful learning experiences (science, literacy, logical-mathematical, etc.). Among the many experiences available for exploration are a few "provocations" meant to evoke thought and further discovery. "What will happen if white paint is added to these primary colors?" or "Can you draw what your face looks like when you feel happy, sad, lonely?" or...

Thoughtful elaboration is one of the goals and outcomes of provocations.

-Credit to Unee Kim (Personal communication July ... , 2026)



Look for "unusual beauty" during nature walks

Children can be encouraged to ferret out items that challenge the traditional view of beauty. A twig with undefinable bumps? Beautiful! A shell that is serendipitously broken into the shape of a heart? Surprising! When children look for beauty in the unbeautiful, they learn to see the world with a much bigger lens.

Reflecting Thoughts

Aesthetic growth starts with noticing. When we encourage children to pause and observe a painting, listen to music, explore a tiny detail in nature, or ponder the potential of an ordinary material, we help shape their way of engaging with the world. We show them that beauty isn't confined to museums, special events, or professional artists' work. Instead, it can be seen in a patch of sunlight, the texture of stone, a song's rhythm, the arrangement of materials, or a spontaneous idea during play. As teachers, we foster this sensitivity by creating environments and experiences that prompt them to notice, wonder, question, and decide independently. By honoring their 100 languages we demonstrate that their perspectives are valuable. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest gift we can give young children is not *just* teaching them to recognize beauty but helping them develop the eyes, ears, hands, and hearts to discover it on their own.

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11: Teaching Styles That Support Lateral Thinking

One thing you've probably noticed, if you've spent any time in the field of early childhood education, is that teachers use a wide variety of approaches in their daily work with children. It can feel overwhelming at first to navigate all the different styles and methods—but remember, you don't need to “become someone else” to be effective. Stay true to your own personality and teaching style while remaining open to the range of approaches you can integrate into your unique way of working.

In this chapter, you'll explore three distinct approaches to working with young children. What matters most isn't doing things exactly the way someone else does—it's letting your values shine through. If you value healthy child development and creativity, you'll naturally gravitate toward one of the approaches discussed, while still honoring your own voice and strengths as an educator.

Teachers Who Value Creativity Foster Lateral Thinking

Lateral thinking, as defined by Edward de Bono, is a type of divergent thinking that enables children to explore unusual, creative, or surprising ideas rather than seeking a single correct answer. It leads to new inventions, playful problem-solving, and unexpected discoveries. While many teachers focus on helping children find the right answer, some of the most effective learning occurs when children think in unexpected ways. In lateral thinking, instead of moving straight up (vertical thinking) toward a solution, children are asked to look sideways, exploring different angles and ideas that others might not consider. De Bono believed that we can **teach** children to think this way.

When we value lateral thinking, we show children that there are many ways to approach a problem. We help them feel safe to try new things, take risks, and express their ideas without fear of being “wrong.” Over time, this kind of environment builds confidence, flexibility, and imagination—all essential skills for a happy and productive life!

Continuum of Approaches

Schirmacher and Fox (2014) describe a range of approaches to working with young children that influence creative outcomes.



Teacher-Directed (Direct instruction)

The teacher has a clear idea of what the children will create and how they will approach it. They often give specific instructions to ensure a recognizable product. There is little input from the children. This is sometimes referred to as **Direct Instruction**. **It involves structured** approaches that sit at the far end of the continuum. The teacher-directed strategy is one in which the adult defines the learning goals, leads the lesson, and typically predetermines the expected outcome. There is a focus on lessons that are often tightly planned, with the teacher as the formal authority, offering step-by-step guidance and reinforcing correct responses

Why Heavy Teacher Intervention Isn't Ideal in Early Childhood Art

Heavily guided, teacher-directed instruction—where the adult models every step, offers praise or stickers, and expects children

to produce specific, predetermined results—may have its place, but it doesn't align with developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood. Research suggests that direct instruction often limits creativity and can hinder the early development of critical thinking skills, which serve as a foundation for later academic pursuits (Hattie, 2009).

Critics also argue that this approach overly relies on the teacher as the primary source of knowledge, leaving little room for children to explore or take initiative. It can stifle independent thinking and make the learning environment feel rigid and one-dimensional (Lopez, 2023).

Constructivist Alternatives for Young Learners

By contrast, constructivist and play-based approaches suggest that children learn best when the teacher acts as a *facilitator* rather than an authoritarian (Vygotsky, 1978). In this model, the teacher provides materials, poses open-ended questions, and steps back to let children discover and experiment. This type of guidance nurtures *active engagement*, fosters creativity, and supports deeper learning (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989; Rogoff, 1990).

Do Crafts Have a Place in Early Childhood Education?

Not exactly... The Oxford Dictionary defines a *craft* as “an activity involving skill in making things by hand.” Unlike open-ended art experiences, crafts usually involve specific steps, patterns, or outcomes. They require children to have both familiarity with the materials (such as papier-mâché or weaving) and the fine motor coordination and sustained focus skills to complete them successfully. These skills typically emerge around age seven or eight, when children enter Jean Piaget's *concrete operational stage* of cognitive development and Erik Erikson's stage of *initiative versus guilt* in the psychosocial domain.

Before these more mature skills are in place, children under eight benefit most from open-ended exploration with a wide variety of materials: crayons, markers, paint, glue, collage items, clay, and more. Developmental science supports the practice of offering such exploratory art experiences in early childhood. These experiences help build foundational skills—physical, emotional, and cognitive—through play and creative discovery, rather than structured, product-driven tasks.

There may be times when a teacher feels the urge to have children “make something”—perhaps for a holiday or special calendar occasion. But in truth, these kinds of crafts are often more meaningful to the adults who receive them than to the children creating them. While it may be difficult to completely avoid these moments in early childhood education, it's wise to minimize them. A better approach is to create a classroom environment rich in open-ended art materials and experiences, where the focus is on the process rather than the product.

Craft projects can also raise other concerns. For example, when teachers display identical finished products on a bulletin board, it can unintentionally set up a sense of visual comparison or competition. In other cases, a child may want to add personal touches (such as extra beads, tissue paper, or paint) but feel restricted because the craft is pre-planned and deviations aren't allowed. These moments send the message: art is not for the artist, but rather something done to please adults. Over time, this may cause a child to hesitate or even avoid engaging in artistic expression and creative thinking altogether.

However... There is Value in Craftwork

In many contexts, crafts hold deep artistic and cultural value. Skilled craftspeople devote time, practice, and patience to their work, often creating items that are both beautiful and functional. Traditional crafts, such as candle-making, jewelry, weaving, pottery, and wind chimes, reflect cultural heritage and personal expression. These art forms are passed down through generations and are often embedded in meaningful rituals, storytelling, and everyday life (Edwards, 2006).

In early childhood education, the question isn't whether crafts have value—it's when and how they are developmentally appropriate. Craft projects can be meaningful for older children who already have a strong foundation in open-ended artistic exploration and who are motivated to learn specific techniques. These children are often ready to follow multi-step processes, appreciate aesthetic details, and take pride in creating a functional or decorative object. Introducing crafts at this stage can support goal-setting, focus, and hand-eye coordination, while also nurturing cultural awareness and appreciation (Schirmacher & Fox, 2019).

When introducing young children to cultural crafts, the experience should be hands-on, respectful, and adapted to meet their developmental stage. For example, rather than copying an intricate design, children might explore similar materials (like fabric, beads, or clay) in an open-ended way, or contribute to a simplified version of a craft inspired by the cultural form. This allows

them to connect with the essence of the cultural tradition without being pressured to replicate a polished product.

Teacher-Guided (Facilitation)

The teacher-guided approach offers a thoughtful blend of structure and freedom. It sits in the middle of the teaching style continuum, balancing teacher input with significant child choice and creativity. In this facilitative role, the teacher observes closely and intervenes only when needed—supporting rather than directing. Schirmacher and Fox (2019) describe this as the role of a guide: someone who sets the stage for learning without taking center stage.

In practice, this might look like a teacher introducing new materials at the art center or posing an open-ended suggestion rooted in a shared experience. For example, a teacher might say, *“I brought this big cardboard box from home, and I wondered if we could turn it into a fire truck like the one that visited us yesterday.”* This gentle invitation is not controlling but helps to spark ideas and elaborate on the children’s recent experiences.

In the teacher-guided approach, there is no pre-set outcome unless it connects meaningfully to something the children have seen, felt, or wondered about. Children are free to take the idea in their own direction, using paint, crayons, markers, or clay to represent their thoughts. This approach supports creativity, initiative, and decision-making while still providing a nurturing structure that fosters exploration.

One child said while taping a rope to a hole on the side of the cardboard box, ***“I’m making the firetruck’s hose right here...’cause ‘member, it sprayed water to help people?”***

This kind of comment shows how teacher-guided art experiences allow children to connect memory, imagination, and materials in their own meaningful way.

Child-Centered (Non-intervention / Unstructured)

At the opposite end of the continuum is the child-centered, unstructured, or non-intervention approach. In this model, children initiate and direct their own learning experiences while the teacher takes a more observational role. Rather than directing the outcome, the teacher creates a supportive environment where creativity can unfold naturally. These classrooms tend to be rich with open-ended materials and opportunities for imaginative play, child-led art, and collaborative work (Schirmacher & Fox, 2019).

Schirmacher and Fox (2019) emphasize that when adults do engage with children’s creative work, they should do so with care and intention. This means using reflective art dialogue that highlights elements of art like color, shape, or texture, while resisting the urge to judge, correct, or compare. Asking open-ended questions like, “Can you tell me about your drawing?” and responding with curiosity rather than praise encourages children to remain the authors of their own creative narratives. This kind of respectful engagement fosters intrinsic motivation and a strong sense of artistic identity.

That said, children also benefit from a gentle structure that gives their day a sense of rhythm and security. Knowing what to expect helps many young children feel safe and confident. For that reason, a fully child-directed approach is often best reserved for particular times of the day—such as early morning arrivals or the quieter wind-down period before pickup—when a looser structure can comfortably support independent exploration.

Summary of Approaches

Position on Continuum	Approach Type	Teacher Role	Characteristics
Teacher-Directed (Left)	Direct / Structured	Formal authority, highly directive	Pre-planned lessons, specific outcomes, structured reinforcement
Teacher-Guided (Middle)	Facilitation	Observer, subtle intervener	Questions and scaffolding, support without dominating, responsive fluidity
Child-Centered (Right)	Unstructured / Non-intervention	Minimal intervention, listener	Child-initiated projects, open-ended materials, creative autonomy

These distinctions draw a clear line across the continuum from **complete teacher control** to **total child freedom**, with the **guided or facilitative position** offering a flexible middle path. Schirmacher & Fox (2019) emphasize that good teaching often resides in this middle space, where structure meets creativity and children are neither overwhelmed nor overly directed.

Reflecting Thoughts

Teaching young children through creative experiences doesn't rely on a single perfect method or strict formula. Instead, it involves reading the situation and responding appropriately to the children present. Sometimes, children need an invitation, new materials, a thoughtful question, or gentle guidance to deepen their thinking. At other times, we should step back to let their ideas develop freely. The most effective teachers skillfully navigate this spectrum, providing structure without control and offering freedom without leaving children to figure everything out alone. By trusting children's ability to think, imagine, and create, we shift from directing them on what to produce to creating environments where they can explore and discover on their own. Ultimately, the goal may not be to choose between teacher-led and child-centered methods, but to develop the wisdom to support them when needed and give space for their budding leadership.

12: The Therapeutic Value of Art

Start with Yourself: The Power of Self-Reflection

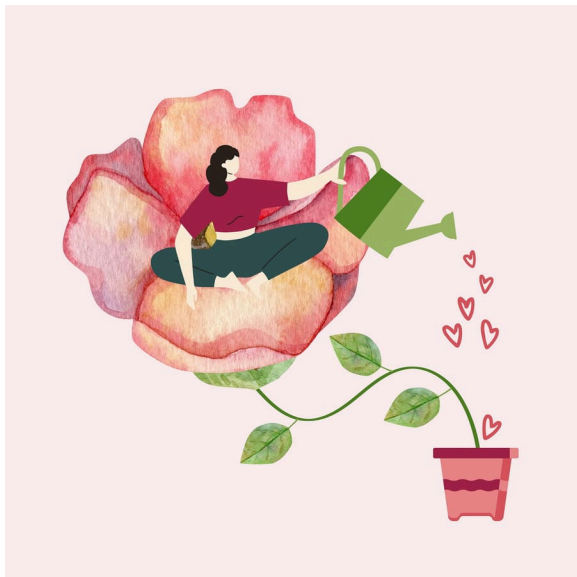
Those of us who choose to work with young children may not have realized just how much emotion and heart the work would demand. The kind of support we offer can shape a young life in ways that reach far beyond what we see.

When I realized the magnitude of the job, I wondered whether I was capable of providing the security, understanding, and emotional support young children need. Although we cannot claim the title of therapist, we can support children in therapeutic ways, helping them understand their feelings and build confidence through artistic experiences.

At first, I thought my job would be about crayons, singing, and dress-up, then sending children home after a few hours of fun and frivolity. Later I discovered it was much more than that. In my early childhood education classes, I learned that my role included planning developmentally appropriate experiences, guiding children with care and respect, and nurturing their creativity. All of that was true. But what I hadn't anticipated was the depth of emotional support these young children would need, or how complex their inner worlds could be.

Children come to us with a wide range of emotions, from fear to frustration, and many struggle to make sense of what they feel. Part of our responsibility is to offer gentle, everyday forms of emotional support: helping children name and understand their feelings, express them safely, and work through difficult moments. We may not hold certificates in therapy, but in practice, we often serve as therapeutic guides. We ensure that sensory experiences invite calm, such as a few quiet minutes at the water table. We give language to "big feelings." And perhaps most importantly, we communicate to children that they are valued and worthy of care, even in their loudest, wildest, most challenging moments.

To do this, we must first be honest with ourselves. We need to look inward. Self-reflection is like holding up a mirror to our feelings and beliefs. It's a valuable tool for teachers and caregivers who want to do their best with children and families because when we take time to reflect, we become more aware of our emotions and habits. This awareness not only helps us grow but also makes us more insightful about what triggers frustration, fear, or other negative emotions. For example, if you gain clarity about why you tend to get upset when a child makes a mess or ignores you, you might find it easier to be patient with the child. Essentially, you can separate your inner negative feelings, which often were shaped by your early experiences with others, from those you observe in the child in front of you. I experienced a lot of criticism as a child and learned not to accept parts of myself that weren't "perfect." When I first started as a preschool teacher, I was afraid that my frustrations would spill over into my work with young children, so I began to explore what was rational and what wasn't about my expectations. By learning about child development and pursuing a passion for respectful, healthy, and effective care, I held up that mirror and started examining who I was and what made me tick. You can do the same!



Some people find self-awareness through journaling; others by making art

or sitting quietly; still others find that talking to a good friend helps them reflect and find a new state of calm, self-esteem, and efficacy. When you hold a mirror up to yourself, you gain insight into how to respond with patience and care when working with children because you have come to know and accept yourself more.

Research supports the value of mindfulness in helping teachers manage stress and emotional well-being. A 2026 systematic review and meta-analysis of 13 randomized controlled trials involving 2,119 participants found that mindfulness-based interventions were associated with significantly lower perceived stress, increased mindfulness, and fewer negative emotions among teachers. The authors concluded that mindfulness-based interventions may be an effective tool for reducing teachers' perceived stress and supporting their well-being, although they cautioned that differences among the studies warrant careful interpretation (Yan et al., 2026).

For teachers, developing self-awareness and self-love can be an important first step toward recognizing what we need to remain emotionally healthy and present in our work. Self-love can mean giving ourselves the same compassion we so readily extend to children. It means recognizing that we do not have to be endlessly available, endlessly patient, or endlessly giving to be good teachers. We can set boundaries, take a break without guilt, acknowledge when we are struggling, and make space for the parts of our lives that restore us. Self-awareness allows us to consider how we care for and love ourselves. Self-love is not selfish. It is part of sustaining ourselves for the work of caring for others. The familiar reminder to put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else offers a useful metaphor: we cannot continually pour from an empty cup. Taking time to rest, reflect, recharge, and attend to our own needs allows us to return to our work with greater patience, presence, and emotional availability.

Try this:

Pick one moment from your day (or week) that stirred up strong negative emotions. Was there a person who offended you, a situation you felt powerless over, or a general sense of ill that impacted your day? Write about it for at least 3 pages of handwritten script or sketch it out, giving yourself time to elaborate on the feeling with symbolic or realistic imagery. What were you feeling? What did you need? What might you do differently next time? This self-curiosity is how growth begins. Next, you might imagine someone (a loved one, a trusted friend, etc.) coming to your aid, to listen, comfort, and reassure you.

This exercise helps you slow down your initial response, which may have been to lash out at the situation or, conversely, shut down and bury the feeling altogether; neither of these manifestations will provide you with the insight that informs your work with young children. Personal insight leads to deeper self-awareness and self-compassion, which in turn fosters greater compassion for those you will teach and care for.

For more self-awareness tools, see: <https://ggie.berkeley.edu/my-well-being/>

Artistic Processing Helps Children Resolve Feelings

Art is more than fun; it helps children express what they feel inside and resolve painful or confusing emotions. In an early childhood classroom, this can show up in simple, everyday ways. For instance, a child who had a rushed morning with a stressed parent might arrive tense and withdrawn. When given time with paint or clay, that same child may begin to release their frustration through color, motion, and texture. What began as scribbles or pounding clay can slowly soften into focused play.

At times, art becomes a way for children to process the unthinkable. After the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September, 11th 2001, it was nearly impossible to shield children from the breaking news that displayed the horrors of human destruction. Soon after, teachers across the country began seeing children draw buildings, smoke, and people holding hands. Their artistic process of recreating images (and drawing new ones) gave children a way to make sense of events they could not put into words. In such moments, a teacher's presence and thoughtful response is as important as the art itself. The thoughtful teacher could converse with the children about how they were feeling and offer comfort with statements like, "What you saw was very scary, but your parents and your teachers here at school are here to protect you and give you comfort".

Making art helps children feel safe, contented, and understood. The child who painted fiercely after a stressful morning may start to relax, talk about their day, or simply smile again. The child who drew the towers might tell a story of people helping each other, finding comfort in hope and connection. It is the teacher's role to help start these conversations with the young child.

Art can also reduce stress and help children feel proud of who they are. When children see their artwork displayed, or when a teacher takes time to comment on their effort, they begin to internalize a sense of value and capability: "I am important!" Each creative act reinforces the message: "My feelings matter, and what I create has meaning." This further motivates thinking and

acting innovatively.

As we learn to recognize our own emotions, we become better able to notice and respond to the emotions children reveal in their art.

What Teachers Learn When Children Express Through Art



By observing how children express emotions through art, teachers gain insights that go beyond what words alone can convey.

When children express emotions through drawing, painting, or building, teachers gain a window into their inner world. These expressions can reveal confusion, fear, joy, or longing emotions that are difficult for young children to express verbally. Attentive teachers often collect samples of children's artwork over time, observing changes and patterns. When something stands out or raises concern, they collaborate with families and community agencies such as resource and referral agencies like Orange County Help Me Grow in Southern California to ensure each child receives the support they need.

Respectful Observation

Respectful and unobtrusive observation of children's artistic processes helps us understand who they are and how they see the world. It allows us to look beyond behavior and into meaning.

Consider a kindergarten teacher who became frustrated when five-year-old Katie repeatedly took a brush loaded with black paint from the easel area to the doll corner and began covering the dolls in thick strokes of black. The teacher, unsure of how to interpret this, sternly reprimanded Katie and placed her in a time-out, taking away her painting privileges for the rest of the week.

Photo by [Gautam Arora](#) on [Unsplash](#)

This response missed an opportunity for understanding. Instead of asking what Katie might have been expressing, the teacher focused only on rule-breaking. Yet Katie's action could have carried layers of meaning: perhaps she was processing a strong emotion, experimenting with transformation, or exploring ideas about identity, power, or care. Her art offered a glimpse into how she saw her world at that moment. By punishing her, the teacher silenced that expression and replaced curiosity with shame.

A more thoughtful approach would have been to pause and think, then later invite conversation: "I noticed you painted the dolls black today. Can you tell me about that?" Such a question opens a door. It communicates that her ideas are valued, that her art is taken seriously, and that her teacher is a partner in understanding, not a judge.

Children feel seen and respected when adults recognize their artistic choices as meaningful, even if those choices are puzzling or messy. If Katie's teacher had taken this approach, Katie might have felt supported emotionally enough to share her feelings, and her creativity (and trust) could have grown instead of shutting down.

Respectful observation starts with our willingness to slow down and question our own assumptions. Observation is just the first step; respecting the work children produce ensures their voices are valued.

Respect Their Work

Just as respectful observation helps us see the meaning behind children's actions, respecting their artwork shows them that their ideas and efforts matter. Every brushstroke, collage, or scribble carries a piece of their thinking. When we appreciate their work, we strengthen their trust in us and in themselves.

Imagine you are learning to ski for the first time. You've just managed to get those heavy boots on properly when a well-meaning stranger steps in: "Here, let me help," and takes over. Suddenly, your small triumph is gone. How you feel in that moment depends on how much you wanted help versus how much you wanted to master it yourself. Children feel the same way. They paint, build, and explore not only for fun but to gain a sense of mastery. When adults step in too quickly—by "fixing" their artwork or adding our own marks—we interrupt that learning moment.

Just as we must resist the urge to take over a child's artwork, we must also resist reacting impulsively from our own frustrations. Always ask before writing on a child's artwork. Some children won't mind, but others will feel that their work has been changed or taken over. When you do need to label or document, try writing on the back or on a separate piece of paper instead. Even better, let children write their own names or words, however they can. These early, imperfect marks are part of their unique expressiveness. Allowing them to take ownership in this way builds confidence, supports literacy, and sends a clear message: their work—and their effort—are respected.

Five Guiding Questions: Creating a Therapeutic Classroom

An imaginative classroom is also a therapeutic one. Children flourish when they feel emotionally safe, understood, and free to explore. Every element of the environment, from lighting to language, can either open or close the door to that sense of security. When teachers view children's processes with respect, the next step is to shape the environment so that creativity and emotional well-being flourish. Ask yourself the following five questions to evaluate your classroom space both indoors and out.

1. Does this Space Feel Safe and Calm?

The atmosphere sets the emotional tone. Soft lighting, muted colors, and cozy corners help children settle their bodies and minds. A relaxed, predictable space communicates: "You are protected here." Materials should be easy to reach, non-toxic, safe, and arranged thoughtfully. When children know where things belong and can explore freely, even moving materials from one area to another, they begin to relax. Curiosity and initiative replace fear and guilt, which young children are prone to feel as they are in Erikson's third stage of psychosocial development.

2. Are Children Given Freedom to Express in this Space?

Creative expression cannot happen under pressure. Working and playing with art materials should never be about "doing it right." When children are given open-ended materials (clay, paint, collage scraps, or natural objects), they express what words can't capture. One child may swirl color to show joy, another may pound and pinch clay to release anger. Each act of creation becomes a form of self-regulation and discovery.

3. Are Children Hearing Supportive Language?

As discussed in an earlier chapter, we know the words we use carry power. Supportive teachers choose language that invites conversation rather than judgment. Instead of "What is it?" try "Tell me about your picture." Or invite discussion about the artistic elements of color, line, texture, shape or space. Such open questions show genuine interest and leave interpretation in the child's hands, as well as encouraging more language on the part of the child. Avoiding correction or praise lets children experience their art as personal truth rather than a performance for approval.

4. Do Children Experience Flexible Routines and Opportunities for Choice?

Predictable routines offer emotional steadiness. That consistency fosters emotional growth, and young children thrive on it. Within that structure, there should be an element of flexibility so that children can spend more time on a process of play even if a teacher calls: "group time!". Meaningful choices build confidence and independence. Whether choosing which materials to use, where to sit, or when to be finished, these small decisions tell children their voices matter. Routine and choice together create balance: stability without rigidity. Together, routine and choice reinforce the emotional support children feel when their ideas are esteemed.

5. Is there a Strong Connection with Families?

A therapeutic classroom extends beyond four walls. Sharing children's artwork with families deepens understanding and builds

trust. Additionally, displaying art respectfully or sending it home with an expert note helps families see their child's growth through a creative lens. Inviting families to make art alongside their children turns the classroom into a shared space of healing and joy. When adults experience the freedom to create without fear of being wrong, they often reconnect with their own creativity. That renewed sense of play and confidence can strengthen their relationship with the child as well.

Reflecting Thoughts

Creating a therapeutic classroom starts with us. The patience and curiosity we want children to develop must first be embodied by the teacher. When we take the time to listen to our tone, examine our assumptions, and recognize our urge to “fix,” we foster genuine connection. Regular self-reflection enhances our capacity to observe, respond empathetically, and respect each child's artistic journey. In this reflective state, children feel emotionally secure, valued, and free to explore and express themselves. From attentive observation of emotions in art to honoring every brushstroke, our mindful focus helps children feel seen, heard, and confident. By prioritizing self-awareness, careful observation, and respecting children's expression, and by creating a nurturing, therapeutic environment, we foster a space where children grow emotionally and artistically. They build resilience, confidence, and joy, understanding that their feelings, choices, and creativity are truly important.

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child development

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