Talking with young children about their art. Download Here

Talking With Young Children About Their Art

By Robert Schirrmacher

Four-year-old Justin, holding his dripping-wet painting by its two upper corners, rushes up to you. The running colors have formed several dark blotches. Beaming with pride, he thrusts his painting at you and says expectantly, *"Look what I painted!"*

Just what can you say? Should you praise it, encourage more painting, critique the work, or remain nonjudgmental? What is the best way to talk with young children about their art?

As adults, we are fascinated with children's art. We know that it provides us with a better understanding of children's developmental status (Gardner, 1980; Goodnow, 1997; Schirrmacher, 1980). Even so, there has been little empirical research on creativity in the early years (Smith, 1982).

Because we know so little about the artistic and aesthetic behaviors of young children (Taunton & Colbert, 1984), teachers and parents are often unsure about the best way to respond to children's artwork. This article will take six traditional approaches to children's art and analyze the impact each one has on the child artist. We will then offer alternate, and more appropriate, ways to respond.

Traditional approaches to children's art

Complimentary approach

Comments like "*That's a beautiful painting*" or *"Oh, how lovely"* or *"Yes, very nice"* are typical of the complimentary approach. In turn the child will often smile, say "thank you," and walk away.

How many opportunities for a rich verbal dialogue were missed! In addition, these vague expressions have become little more than overworked platitudes. *Nice,* for example, as in *"Have a nice day,"* has been used so freely that it lacks meaning and sincerity. What is a *nice* or *pretty* picture? Who sets the standards? How might more specific feedback enhance the child's artistic development?

Judgmental approach

Similarly, with the judgmental approach the adult tells children their art is *good* or *great* -- *"That's great work, Susan!"* Most of us do not want to rank children's art as good, better, or best, so we simply tell all children that any and all of their art is

good. Before long, these terms, too, become overworked and meaningless. As a result we lose our credibility with the children. How can one child's impulsive scribble and another's detailed scene both be *good*? Such empty judgments convey a rubber-stamp, production line attitude.

Valuing approach

When we tell children *"I like that a lot"* or *"Oh, I just love it!"* we are using a valuing approach. Children should create to express themselves, not to please adults. It is important that you tell children that you appreciate all the time and effort they spend creating their art. However, rewarding and encouraging a child for the process is far different from putting your personal stamp of approval on the finished product. Valuing the product over the process is a very limited way of viewing art, especially since the process is often much more important to the child than the final product (Francks, 1979).

All too often, stereotypic, impersonal art is what we hang on the bulletin board or on the refrigerator door: a drawing of a square house topped with a triangular roof and a smoking chimney, flanked by trees and flowers. Often there are two windows with parted curtains and a smiling sun in the sky. Many children create art that is personal. Much of this expression in the early years will not be representational, and therefore not always recognizable by adults. But the art is still very important to the artist and to our understanding of the artist's development.

Questioning approach

With the questioning approach, an adult directly and bluntly asks *"What is it?"* or *"What is that supposed to be?"* An older or very verbal child may respond, but many children cannot verbalize what they have represented on a very personal level. How does a child say *"I painted how I feel when everyone ignores me"* or *"I enjoyed watching the blue paint drip onto the red"*?

When we demand to know what something is, children may shrug their shoulders, cast their eyes downward, say *"I don't know,"* or walk away. If we persist, *"Well, is it a person or an animal?"* children are likely to verbally play along with us just to end the interrogation. Consequently, they certainly will not feel very positive about what they have created.

Much of young children's art is private, egocentric, and not intended to look like something. Therefore, it is unwise and even harmful to ask a child at this stage *"What is it?"* (Smith, 1983). The primary value of nonrepresentational art may be the activity leading to the development of physical knowledge (Kamii & DeVries, 1978). Children delight in brushing, dabbing, swirling, and smearing paint or glue, for example. The finished product may be of no consequence.

Also, early efforts at representation may not be recognizable to an adult. How

disappointing it can be to a child if we do not immediately recognize their splash of watery yellow paint as a galloping giraffe! But how can we know?

Probing approach

With the probing approach, the adult attempts to draw from children some hint, title, or verbal statement about their art: *"Please tell me all about it"* or *"What would you like to say about this?"* Probing is less forward and abrasive than questioning, and it does support an integrated approach to curriculum development in which art relates to other activities. It does have value in encouraging children to talk about their art, and does not, like the other approaches, place more value on the product than the process, or on the adult's judgment rather than the child's.

Dimondstein (1974), however, believes that the arts have value in themselves and should not be viewed solely as a means to achieve other educational or social goals. The art speaks for itself through its symbolism and does not need verbal language or storytelling to sanction it. Children's art is itself valuable, and is not merely a springboard to the other basic (and often erroneously considered more important) curriculum areas.

Although the probing approach has merit, it should be used sparingly, since it grows stale with repeated use. First-grader Adrian told the other children in the class not to show their artwork to the new student teacher, because *"She will make you tell a real long story about it and then you have to wait while she writes it across your picture."* Encouraging, but not mandating, that children talk about their art is sound practice.

Correcting approach

When a child shows you his drawing of a tiger, it is tempting to reply, "*Very good, but next time remember to draw stripes on your tiger. Tigers have wide stripes.*" This well-intentioned approach supposedly will enable children to improve their art by more closely approximating reality. But children's art is not intended as a copy of the real world. Child artists may freely choose to add or omit details. Children know what their face looks like, yet their self-portraits may lack ears, eyebrows, or other features. Lowenfeld (1968) warns that the adult's corrections or criticisms only discourage children and do not foster artistic growth. Children's development cannot be rushed.

More effective approaches

Then what is best for parents and teachers to say or do about children's art? Several alternatives have been proposed:

- Allow children to go about their artistic discoveries without you comparing, correcting, or projecting yourself into their art (Francks, 1979).

- Shift from searching for representation in children's art to a focus on the abstract, design qualities, or "syntax" (e.g., shape and form) (Eisner, 1976, 1982; Dimonstein, 1974; Sparling & Sparling, 1973; Smith, 1983; Kellog, 1979) to encourage the development of aesthetic awareness and potential (Wachowiak, 1985).
- Use reflective dialogue in talking with children about their art (Taunton, 1984).

A combination of these approaches would seem to be most appropriate. Also, since children's ideas are fresh and their interest in sharing their art is high immediately after they have finished their art, then is probably the best time for us to talk with children about their work (Smith, 1983).

The next time children show you what they have created, smile, pause, and say nothing at first. This serves two purposes. It gives you time to study the children's art and to reflect on what you want to say before you speak. It gives you time to think of a better response than an impulsive, banal comment like *"That's nice."* Second, and more importantly, it will give children an opportunity to talk first if they so choose. This provides a lead-in and agenda for your subsequent comments.

The elements of art provide a good framework for responding to children. You can identify and organize the artistic elements in several ways (Fisher, 1978; Lasky & Mukerji, 1980; Hardiman & Zernich, 1981). There is no consensus on which list is best, however, the following list of elements (Hardiman & Zernich, 1981) seems both manageable and developmentally appropriate for talking with young children about their art:

1. Color
2. Line
3. Mass or volume
4. Pattern
5. Shape or form
6. Space
7. Texture

Before using these elements when you discuss art with young children, you will want to become familiar with them yourself. Do some reading or take a course in art appreciation, visit museums, study art work in an art history book, or engage in art projects yourself. Then you will be ready to incorporate these principles into your conversation. For example, you might ask "*Who has felt the bumpy texture in Spencer's new sweater?"* or *"Look what a beautiful pattern the spider has made in its web!"*

After you feel comfortable using these terms, you are ready to respond to children's drawings by talking about the elements evidenced in their work.

As with any technique, of course, you will want to use it sparingly. Just as too much seasoning can ruin a gourmet meal, excessive comments from an adult can turn off the child artist.

Discussing nonrepresentational art

The symbolism in young children's art is usually not obvious, so teachers and parents need to rely heavily on the artistic elements when talking with younger children about their art. How would you respond if you were handed the crayon drawing in Figure 2?

Knowing the child's age, developmental level, background, and interests will help you select an appropriate comment. Certainly you will not bombard the child with an onslaught of verbal feedback. *One* of these types of responses might seem just right for the child:

"You have filled your paper with many lines and shapes."

"I see one long, thin line which frames your picture" (as you point and trace the line with your finger)

"You used green to make a pattern of three horizontal wavy lines near the bottom. Each line makse a different kind of wave"

"There are blue lines that make the upper case M shape."

"You have used blue, green, pink, and a little bit of orange in your picture."

Not all comments need specifically to refer to the artistic elements. They might also refer to other aspects of the project or to the child's specific interests as well. When the 3-year-old artist who drew Figure 2 handed the drawing to his teacher, he announced, *"That house is on fire and there's the fire trucks."* In situations where you have additional information such as this, you may want to comment on other qualities of work as well, such as the amount of time and effort spent, how the materials were handled, or the meaning of the drawing to the child. For example, you might respond in *one* of the following ways:

"Your drawing certainly depicts a great deal of action!"

"How hard you worked to include the fire trucks, the house, and the fire!"

I can tell by your picture that you really enjoyed using so many different colors of crayons."

No one piece of art will contain all the artistic elements, but focusing on one or two will enable you and the child to enjoy a richer dialogue. Texture is useful to describe a child's collage or painting where surfaces are rough, smooth, or layered.

Mass or volume applies to three-dimensional art such as clay, sculpture, or construction. Topal (1983) recommends that you discuss both positive and negative space when children are involved with three-dimensional media. These projects will more likely be undertaken by somewhat older children who are more representational in their approach to art.

Discussing representational art

Figure 1 is an example of a child's representational art, although the subject matter and treatment lack creativity. In responding to more realistic drawings such as this, one might comment

"What a colorful picture! There's a house, a tree, and a row of flowers. You have used green grass at the bottom to form a baseline." or "It looks like the sun is trying to peek through the cloud. The sun and cloud on the right balance the smoking chimney on the left."

Because the symbols are so evident, it would be a waste of time to talk about a yellow round mass with radiating lines in the sky!

Sustaining and concluding the dialogue

After you have made your initial comment, children may have questions or comments of their own. They may or may not respond directly to your remarks, but you can use their lead and what you know about them to tailor the remainder of your discussion. The dialogue for Figure 3 might go like this:

Teacher: *"When I look at the right side of your picture I see a pattern of six blue points outlined with an orange line."*

Child: *"And there were strawberries in the ice cream."*

Teacher: *"Did you eat strawberry ice cream?"*

Child: *"Yes, and this is for my Mommy's birthday, too. Can you put my name on it?"*

Teacher: "Of course. And let's put it in your cubby to keep until your mother comes for you."

Other ways you might conclude a conversation include

- *"Thank you for sharing your work with me."*
- *"You spent a lot of time making so many different shapes."*
- *"You worked very hard at drawing today."*
- *"You are so proud of your work, aren't you?"*

A child's unsuccessful attempts or disappointments should also be discussed. For example, if a child tries to paste tissue paper for a collage and the wet tissue tears, an

adult might say: "That's really frustrating to have the purple tissue tear. Would you like some heavier paper?" or "You worked so hard on your collage. What could you do next time to keep the tissue paper from tearing?"

Summary

All of us want young children to grow to appreciate and create art in a way that is satisfying to them. Rather than resorting to platitudes, criticism, or interrogations of children about their art, adults can respond to children's creative endeavors by commenting on the artistic elements in their work. When used sparingly, this approach will help facilitate children's artistic and aesthetic development.

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Robert Schirrmacher, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education and Child Development at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

Young Children, July 1986

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