

Learning through art

by Angela Michaelis

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia urges educators to help children become 'confident and involved learners' and 'effective communicators'. Programming art experiences for children in your service offers many opportunities to achieve these goals.

Each day on arrival in the children's playroom, a small group of three and four year olds has been watching tadpoles hatch and grow. One morning, a child exclaims, 'Look at the tails! They're wiggly and curly when they move, but when they're not moving they're straight!' (Kolbe, 2007, p.103).

Ursula Kolbe describes how the educator in the long day care service turns this observation into art – using drawing materials, with which the children are familiar, and clay. 'While making tails, both straight and wiggly, proves far from easy', writes Kolbe, '[the children] are so fascinated they persist for days'. In the process they discover more about the medium of clay and its suitability to show 'wiggliness'.

Involved in their play, the children observe closely and communicate their findings. The art experience deepens and extends their learning (Pelo, 2007).

Babies learn through their senses

Kolbe describes children as 'eager explorers' (2007, p.7). The exploration begins with a baby's observations of sounds and smells, textures, shapes and colours. Everyday routines like meal and bath times allow a baby to taste, smell and touch the food, or to feel and hear the splash of water (Winer, 2003).



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 2.2 and 3.7

OSHCQA Principle: 5.4

QIAS Principles: 4.4 and 4.5

You can add to babies' visual experiences by providing air-driven objects like mobiles or streamers, or placing them outside under a tree where light plays on leaves. Hold them so they can see artwork in books or on walls, choosing bright colours and strong contrasts. Slow down to observe with babies and comment on what you find – prickly pineapples, shiny spoons, fluttering birds, or tickly feathers (Kolbe, 2007).

Materials for early learners

As babies become toddlers, they can start exploring art materials. They will find out about paper by crumpling and crinkling, hearing how it sounds as well as watching how it changes shape.

Provide fat crayons as first drawing materials, along with playdough as soon as the children are beyond the stage of putting everything into their mouths (Winer, 2003). Introduce painting on a wall with a bucket of water and a house paintbrush, and let them experiment with finger paint indoors, and outdoors with sand or mud.

From about the age of two, children may be interested in discovering and creating patterns (Kolbe, 2007). Provide paper shapes, coloured blocks, playdough balls, shells or leaves. When they are ready, children will draw or paint their own lines or shapes. You can show and talk about patterns on objects, like decorated Easter eggs or richly patterned fabrics.

From this age, children love playing with paper and glue or sticky tape. From this first experience in collage, they can later:

- Create their own shapes with scissors
- Use textured materials like felt, lace or wool
- Use three dimensional materials, both processed (bottle tops) or natural (twigs).

Interacting and guiding

Kolbe (2007) suggests many ways to talk to children about their activity including:

- suggestion: 'Try out the colours and see what the brush can do'.
- comment: 'You've put little circles inside your big circle'.
- question: 'How do the puppets move?'

Educators can further promote children's learning when they:

- provide quality art materials in attractive ways
- are aware of a child's preferences for materials
- allow time for repeated experiences with familiar materials
- share picture books and talk about artwork.

Extending the art experience for older children

Marks on paper – or wet sand – are not just pictures of what children see, but what they feel, imagine or otherwise experience. As children approach the age of three, their pictures may communicate fierce dinosaurs, jumping horses, flowing rivers, loud thunder or the flight of a bird or a plane. Just being with them may encourage children to talk about their artwork. At other times you may ask, 'I wonder what's happening here – would you like to tell me?'

As preschool children begin to make friends, their art may become more collaborative. In trying to create what they imagine, with building blocks or with boxes, tape and string, they solve problems. By school age, they can put things together for other purposes, like making books, puppets or wearable art. At each stage, their art can be both inspired by and contribute to dramatic play.

Clay, like drawing, is a key art form that children should be able to go back to repeatedly (Kolbe, 2007; Winer, 2003). Clay is smooth to touch and fun to squeeze but it also allows children to express themselves and interpret their world in three dimensions. Children create with clay on big and small scales, both temporary and permanent models. They change its texture with their fingers or fingernails, or by imprinting or embedding materials like rice or pebbles.

Taking art outside

The outdoors is a world of new observations – of the sky, of shadows, of bark, leaves and spider webs. Encourage children to respond by providing paper, pencils and clipboards. As they engage with the details they may have first overlooked, children draw to learn as they learn to draw (Lubaway, 2009, p.5).

Depending on their age, children can be encouraged to:

- See, feel and collect natural objects
- Group or form found objects into patterns
- Explore the colours of the landscape in paint or crayon
- Use charcoal to portray light and shadow
- Make leaf rubbings
- Create a photographic nature journal.

Conclusion

A thoughtful art program offers children new perspectives for their learning and allows them ways to express their findings. The educator aiming to help children become 'confident and involved learners' and 'effective communicators' will find in art many rich and exciting opportunities ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners
- Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

References and further reading

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: Author.
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- Winer, K. (2003). Learning about art. *Learning at Home Series*. Watson, ACT: Early Childhood Australia.