

Creating a Masterpiece:

focusing on process over product



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Adapted from "Creative Art With Young Children... It's the Process Not the Product!" by Lisa Murphy, Ooey Goey, Inc.

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." — Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso, arguably one of the most famous painters of all time, was able to overcome the need that many adults have to create the perfect piece of art, the perfect *product*. Instead, as he put it, "I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them." This focus on the *process* is likely what helped him to develop into the remarkable artist that he became. By emphasizing process over product in a learning environment, children are given the opportunity to explore their own creativity in new and exciting ways.

Many studies have been conducted to determine the effect that creativity and the arts have on young minds. When children draw, paint, sing and learn rhymes, they are developing critical areas of their brains. There are even some areas of the brain that have been found to only respond to music. By expressing their feelings through art, children develop gross motor skills, strengthen their own emotional well-being, and even develop social skills by sharing their work. These skills are a solid foundation for establishing a society of well-educated, emotionally stable adults.

With this in mind, the role of child care providers and other early childhood educators is to create an environment and provide opportunities that allow children to fully develop these skills. This is done through an emphasis on the process of creating art, rather than the final product. This "process over product" approach encourages children to use their imaginations and their knowledge of the world in order to create something unique. If the parents come in, look at the bulletin board and whisper in your ear, "What is it?" You are on the right track! Children's art will not and should not "look like something!"¹

Resist the urge to say WHAT IS IT? Resist the urge to really SAY anything about her work. If a child comes running to you saying LOOK, LOOK, LOOK! Then do just that – look, look, look! The child did not say look, look, look *and comment*.

If a child asks, "Do you like my painting?" Put the question back to him and ask, "Do *you* like your painting?" Then you can be clever and turn the paper around or upside down and say "How about when I hold it this way? Or this way?" "Lay down and tell me if you like it better when I hold it over you."¹

Never make models for the children to copy. Avoid ditto sheets, cookie cutter art, coloring books, cut and paste projects, and pattern art AT ALL COSTS! Give the children an area to work at that is filled with the materials they need, like coloring markers, chalk, crayons, glue, scissors, paper, masking tape, hole punch, envelopes, and sticky dots – the loose parts of art!

If you must sit to "work" with the children, use your non-dominant hand and copy what the children are doing! Let them lead you; otherwise they will all copy you and without realizing it, you will have made a model and an example for them to try to copy. Inadvertently, you have shown them a "right" way to make something. They will begin comparing their skill level to yours and to each other. Not only does this create competition, it also creates frustration and dissatisfaction.

As the children begin to grow and develop through their art, you will be able to watch them transition through the various stages. In fact, there are 80 different stages of scribbling that each child will go through before he begins to write. These stages include drawing dots, straight lines, curved lines, zig zag lines, loops, spirals, imperfect circles, crosses, suns, and humanoid shapes, among others. These stages are essential for small muscle development and control.

The learning doesn't stop there. Typically, children will favor certain types of scribbles over others. Research has even been done to determine how children place those scribbles on a page. There are actually 17 distinct areas of a page where our youngest scribblers place their drawings. This marks the beginning of decision-making skill development. The idea of process over product extends to more than just drawing and painting. Indoor and outdoor play time, even meal time can be learning time! Studies have shown that toddlers who are given the opportunity to touch, poke, squeeze, eat and even throw non-solid objects, such as juice, milk, applesauce, soup and pudding, are more likely to

associate words with those objects. Without this chance, they would be unable to tell the difference between a cup full of glue and a cup full of milk. It has been proven that the messier children get in their highchairs, the more they are learning.

This early vocabulary building has been linked to greater cognitive development and function later in life.

Unfortunately, such messy learning can cause frustration for parents at pick-up time. Have you ever watched a child proudly drag his parents out into the yard to show off the tree forts, castles, and mud houses he spent all day building and creating, designing and painting, only to be asked, “Why are you so dirty?” or to be told, with a heavy sigh, “Oh no... there’s paint on your new shirt!” You’ve probably witnessed emotional breakdowns because mud got on a new pair of sneakers, or heard children request to throw away their dirty shirt so their mom won’t get mad, or had children announce that they aren’t allowed to paint any more because it ruins their clothes. What kind of message is being sent to the children when there is so much emphasis on their clothes and shoes?

Can the shirt really be more important than the opportunity to engage in a new creative experience? Don’t you wish you had a dollar for every time you’ve said, “Please send your child in clothes you don’t care about.” You can encourage, demand, threaten, bribe, write notes home, scream, post signs and tell parents until you are blue in the face about the importance of wearing “play clothes,” but until you take the time to show them *why*, you’ll constantly find yourself fighting a losing battle. Let parents witness the creative process first hand. It’s a common misconception that children are getting dirty because child care providers or teachers are not paying attention. Slide shows, short video clips and photographs are tools for educating the parents not only about the creative process, but also about your involvement and investment in the activity, as well.

Educators and child care providers need to be able to verbalize why creative art and other kinds of messy play is important and be able to identify for the parents, the skills that are being developed as the children are engaged in these experiences. Remember that the parents aren’t there during the day to see the creativity, cooperation and process first hand; all they might see is the red paint in the hair and the glue on the jeans.

Share with parents and let them know that clothes will get messy, sticky and dirty, but this is okay! They need to know that you don’t say to their children “Hey! Let’s paint our belly buttons!” However, when the children do this (and they will), they are better off with a caring, loving, supportive adult who facilitates the experience, rather than with someone whose first response is “STOP THAT!”¹

For more ideas on how to focus on process over product, check out www.ooeygooney.com. This website, run by Lisa Murphy, M.Ed., CEO of Ooey Gooney, Inc., offers a variety of information and activity ideas for all ages.

Every day that you spend with children is another opportunity to help them grow and become the best possible version of themselves. By giving them the chance to fully explore their imagination and creativity, without the boundaries of having to model their artwork after something else, you are helping them to express their feelings, learn how to be independent, and build their confidence. Doesn’t every child deserve to have that opportunity?

