

Helping Children Express Themselves Through Art

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Young children love to draw. It's as natural to them as learning how to walk, talk, sing or dance. If they don't draw, they often form or build or bend materials into new shapes. Expressing what they know and feel is as much a part of them as the desire to move. The love of creating is a compelling force. This is not surprising since we are all made in the image of God, the Father of all creation.

The first stage of scribbling is purely an expression of delight at seeing motion appear on paper. Later the scribbles become rhythmic marks. Still later they are formless but named lines. Then repeated and definite geometric shapes appear. From this point on everything the child sees and feels can be transferred to paper or expressed in other ways as the magic of creation begins.

Adult attitudes and encouragement are important at this stage. As each child's precious creative gifts open and flower, we can enjoy this primitive but expressive work for what it is: a spontaneous, colorful, sensitive panorama of an expanding world. If we learn to show our real interest, the child will continue to produce one delightful piece after another. The symbols may not be recognizable or produce a realistic picture, but the fun of creating them is enough, and patterns of line and color become fascinating and possibly full of meaning. "Tell me about your picture" will usually evoke a long, imaginative story, and this verbal communication is as important as the work itself.

If one word could express the essence of good child training in the arts, "awareness" would be the word. Children are profoundly influenced by adults who consciously pause in their busy whirl to savor the marvels of nature. The stars, sunlight through leaves, raindrops, snowflakes, birds at the feeder, the smell of damp earth, the sound of gurgling water: these are the small wonders which build the excitement of life. Children need to be taught the difference between hearing and really listening, between seeing and truly looking. They need to touch many things, feeling them with their senses fully open to all the wonderful sensations of this world. In fact, one secret of life is learning to respond to the things which stir our loves. There are many ways to provide the **TIME**, **SPACE**, and **SUPPLIES** for the expression of these responses. Then the innate creative awareness in each little child will not wither before it has a chance to grow.

Providing the **TIME** is easy. It need not be formalized or come with any special instructions, but rather as a natural part of everyday life. A relaxed climate in the home, a happy affectionate sphere, is all that's necessary, along with a few pointed questions or comments to start the ideas flowing: "What did you make in the sand today?" "Show me the rabbit you saw in the garden." "Make the colors dance on your paper like the leaves falling all around us when we go for a walk." With little children the words "I," "my," and "doing" are the key, expressed with softness, motion and bright colors. The fun of opening a new box of crayons or dipping a brush in paint and watching the amazing marks it will make on a page may be enough to begin a whole day's adventure. Very small events are important to the child. Just a glimpse of an early robin cocking his head to listen for a worm in the still frozen spring earth can be turned into a series of paintings. Children themselves will spontaneously enter into these activities without any self-

consciousness. Their marks on the page may be scribbles to us, but they have meaning to them. Adults need to encourage them. No training or guidance is necessary, as the children have lovely things to express on their own if the way is freely opened.

The **SPACE** necessary can be a tabletop spread with newspapers, or even the kitchen floor. Keep the materials in a handy place so the child always knows where to find them. One family has a large box under the kitchen table for the depiction of any vivid experience moments after it happens. Provide a plastic apron or smock as part of the routine. If the adults in charge are not tense about mess, the children will be less likely to make one. Also, if children are engrossed in what they are doing, they seldom cause trouble or misuse materials.

The **SUPPLIES** can be very simple: several sizes of drawing paper, newsprint or computer paper and a pack of colored construction paper. A roll of shelf paper or even brown wrapping paper can be useful. Crayons are the least messy tool, but provide some others of variety, such as large carpenter's pencils, Cray-Pas, felt markers, scissors, tape, and Elmer's glue. Poster paint is useful. (Provide only a few colors at first, adding more as interest grows. Use square-tipped, bristle-type brushes, one for each color since children seldom remember to rinse between colors.) Watercolors are also fascinating to small children. They magically fuse and blend on the page. Clay is also very useful. Some children express things far better in three dimensions than in two. Both Plasticine oil-based, non-hardening clay and self-hardening, water-based clay are useful. It's also fun to maintain a box of exciting scraps such as bright gift-wrappings, feathers, pebbles, shells, bottle caps and buttons. Many common things are precious and wonderful to children. With a bit of glue they learn to combine these materials in many intriguing ways.

In spite of these suggestions actually only one or two of the materials listed above are necessary. If funds are limited, ordinary scrap paper, pencils and crayons will be adequate. The important thing to remember is that a pad filled with a child's very own pictures has immeasurably more value than a stack of cheap coloring books. Of course it's a great temptation to supply these at times. It seems so much easier for the adults since children are quiet and occupied while using them. But these materials are very inhibiting in contrast to individual, truly creative art and craft activities.

A child's eye view of the world is very different from ours. Children's feelings for space, time, and size relationships are extremely limited in comparison to ours. The smallest happenings are fascinating and of deep concern. Curiosity, a sense of excitement, various fears and affections are aroused in instantaneous reactions unmellowed by life's later experiences which slowly explain and smooth the emotions. Rather than showing children how to express ideas and feelings, let them explore and discover for themselves. Commending a child for a well-filled outline drawn by someone else will not help in "as of self" development. It's merely fulfilling the requirements of an adult world, which is often beyond the child's understanding. When childish efforts do not meet the "standard," incentive can disappear and the child will cease to try. Artistic expression will seem to be something set aside for the favored few who are given special talent from birth, rather than a satisfying and rewarding part of everyone's life.

The environment we provide for our children will also profoundly affect their development. Be discriminating in choosing the objects, toys and books, which are such important parts of a

child's life. Memories of these things may be far more powerful influence than we realize. What we see, touch and hear in the earliest stages of life deeply affect our sense of taste and values. Many times in later life they are the means for stirring remains (angelic memories) provided by the Lord for our salvation. The things of nature, such as rocks and driftwood, pine cones and seed pods, branches, flowers, and many growing plants, are endlessly satisfying decorations.

Children love to handle and collect them. Fabrics, textures, colors and surfaces add immeasurable, subtle enjoyment to a home. Hand crafted objects, fine works of art or reproductions, and other displays enrich the life there. Change the displays frequently, allowing children to take part in the decisions, adding their own treasures for all to enjoy.

The children's books published today are a stimulating experience in themselves. If we choose them with a discerning eye for their simple beauty and endearing qualities, they will be companions for life and a very real influence on the artwork of the children who handle them. If properly chosen, books can awaken the most tender and imaginative visions. This is especially so in the realm of poetry. Children can learn in their first few years that a poem is not a mere jingle, and that a line can remain in the memory as a part of the distilled essence of mature life.

The vital point is that there is beauty in everything if we open our eyes to see it. The shapes of buildings against the sky, the swirl of smoke, the exciting colors and textures of brick, glass, or metal, the roundness of a stone or an acorn found in the park—all these form the fabric of sensations which can transform life into an adventure filled with daily discoveries. The child who is helped to see and feel with loving awareness will be likely to grow up able to think through the complicated relationships of this modern world with creative insight. The earliest beginnings are extremely important. Helping children to grow creatively as the Lord intended is a challenging task, full of quiet joy.