

Calling All Budding Artists

Setting Up an Art Center in Your Preschool Classroom

Effective Art Centers in the preschool classroom have many benefits, including fostering creative, physical, and emotional development. The benefits of an art program along with tips for center setup, usage, gathering of supplies, and maintenance will be explored along with methods for successfully integrating the arts across the curriculum and assessing children's learning.

Benefits of a well-planned art program can help children:

- build on what they know and have experienced.
- express ideas imaginatively.
- develop creativity and critical-thinking skills.
- learn kinesthetically by exploring materials and methods for use.
- interact with others while developing vocabulary.
- record in creative ways what they think and learn across the curriculum.

Choosing the Perfect Place

The Environment It is important to create an environment that will inspire creativity in young children. Select a bright area near windows or with ample light for your Art Center. In addition to art supplies children use, include objects to inspire them, such as fine art posters, sculptures, and books with pleasing illustrations.

Arrange all materials on low, open shelves. Clearly mark and label clear containers of supplies with words and pictures so children can see where everything is. Group similar tools together. Provide trays for children to use to carry tools they will need for a project. In addition to shelving, provide work tables, easels, drying racks, display areas, hooks or a tree for art smocks, and easy access to a nearby sink. It would be wise to use a washable floor covering in the area. Also make sure you have plenty of child-safe cleanup supplies.



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What to Include

Donated items: Solicit the help of families, friends, and merchants to donate ribbon, fabric, yarn, sponges, gift wrap, wallpaper samples, fabric squares, paper towels, drinking straws, cellophane and masking tape, small rolling pins, plastic dinnerware, and anything else you can think of.

Recycled materials: margarine tubs; metal and foam trays and foam packing; cardboard tubes and boxes; clean milk cartons; grocery and lunch bags; magazines and newspapers; old oversized shirts for smocks; mismatched socks, gloves, and mittens; and objects from nature (leaves, stones, shells, twigs).

Purchased items: art paper, construction paper, finger-paint paper, safety scissors, washable paints, finger paint, paintbrushes, rollers, non-spill paint cups, washable markers with durable tips (some now have flip-top caps), large-sized colored pencils, crayons, oil pastels, chalk, craft feathers and beads, craft sticks, chenille sticks, wiggle eyes, washable glitter glue, glue sticks, school glue, foil, clay, stamps, ink pads, and other items you like to use.

Quick Tip: Select materials that are easy for little hands to handle, such as flexible broad brushes and paper that holds up when wet!

Maintenance

Create a center that is easily managed by children so cleaning up is a cinch. Put children in charge of setting up materials for the day such as filling water containers, replacing the paper supply or paper towels, and checking for empty glue sticks and bottles. Show children where extra supplies are stored so they can help retrieve what is needed. Teach them to clean up the center after each use, remembering to put away supplies, replace lids on containers, empty used water containers, wash out brushes, hang up smocks, and place finished artworks on drying racks.

Your Role in the Art Center

Model for children Don't leave the basics to chance! Children must be taught how to properly use scissors, brushes, rollers, markers, stamps and ink pads, and other supplies. When a new project or medium is introduced, model a step-by-step approach. A young child's interaction with adults is enhanced whenever modeling occurs. Encourage children to jointly problem-solve with classmates and adults and to express their enthusiasm and commitment with each art project they undertake.

Strategies to encourage your budding artists There are many practical strategies you can use to encourage children in the Art Center:

- Guide children to solve problems in more than one way.
- Build upon children's prior knowledge and experiences.
- Find out what children know and are curious about.
- Help each child's strengths and interests grow.
- Encourage children to wonder, question, and "think outside the box."
- Offer different ways to perform a task; for example, demonstrate different ways to color with crayons or use paints or chalk so children can choose.
- Use supportive comments: How did you do this? This is an interesting way to use _____. Tell me about it. Why did you choose _____? How can I help? Have you thought about using _____? What will you try next?



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Art Across the Curriculum

Why integrate art with other areas of the curriculum?

Art can bring other content areas to life by encouraging children to think creatively and to express understanding of their world in imaginative ways. When this happens, your classroom art program is a success.

How can I successfully incorporate integrated learning?

First, look at district, state, or national standards as your guide to daily practices. They can lead you to resources that support your art program and help organize your curriculum.

Second, link curricular areas to help children receive a broader understanding of concepts. For example, when children learn about animals, make content connections; have them move like animals, make animal sounds, count the number of legs, put animals into groups, look at artists' interpretations of animals, make animal masks, create animal sculptures, draw a favorite animal, and observe real animals.

Third, set up an integrated Art Center. Your Art Center can connect with every area of the curriculum so children can explore and enhance their learning through art knowledge and skills. According to Patricia Pinciotti (2001), there are many practical ideas for accomplishing this. Some include:

- Identify partners. Art specialists, teachers, families, and businesses can provide materials, demonstrate skills, and bring new insights to the classroom.
- Focus on a central theme. Enhance a theme you are currently studying. If the theme is “circles,” include round objects like a world globe, a snow globe, a color wheel, objects with wheels, fabric with dots, coins, buttons, CDs, plates, and other circular items. Display fine art prints and picture books that feature circles. Show circles in nature: the sun, moon, and planets; the rings on a raccoon’s tail; round bugs; and so on.
- Establish outcomes for each theme. Let children know what you expect them to learn or accomplish.
- Enlist children’s help. Ask children to help set up and organize the Art Center and to help find artifacts that represent the theme. Display their artworks as they are completed.

Display Children’s Art

One way to show children that you appreciate and cherish their artworks is to display them! Some tips to remember:

- Choose an open and safe area for display. Oftentimes local places of business and your public or school library will display artworks.
- Keep display areas uncluttered and well-labeled. Include the name of the project, name of the artist, date, and materials used.
- Mount or frame two-dimensional pieces. Display three-dimensional pieces on eye-level shelves or platforms made from boxes.
- Give children the opportunity to write or draw positive comments about one another’s artworks, and post the comments near the displayed artworks.

Assessing What Children Learn

After children are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, analyze the results, determine what they have learned, and identify areas for growth and development. One way is to create a portfolio for each child in which to store art samples and work from across the curriculum.

One unique way to keep a more complete record of several art projects is to enlist the help of a computer-savvy friend (if you yourself are not). Photographs can be taken of each art project and then scanned and saved on a disk. A child’s collection can then be shared with family members during parent-teacher conferences. This visual record is perfect to use to evaluate a child’s growth and address needs.

Two Projects to Try

Crazy Quilts

Focus Children will create replicas of family heirloom crazy quilts.

Curriculum Connections

Art: creativity, sense of design

Fine Motor Skills: stamping, cutting with scissors Mathematics: patterns, counting 1 to 6, arranging rows of 2 by 3

Social Studies: family heritage, history

Beforehand Read aloud the book *The Quilt* by Ann Jonas. Show samples of quilts or pictures of quilts in books. Discuss different patterns children see. Explain how quilts are made and the historical significance in a family, and then invite children to make their own versions of a crazy quilt, a quilt that was made from bits and pieces of different kinds and patterns of materials.

Gather 9" x 12" construction paper, variety of ink stamps and stamp pads, scissors, glue sticks

To Make

- Children use several different stamps to print all over sheets of construction paper. As they finish, draw cutting lines to mark off 3" x 4" squares.
- Children choose patterns and colors they like and cut six different squares from the patterned sheets.
- Have children arrange the six squares on a sheet of construction paper in three rows of two squares, using a glue stick to attach.
- Display children's quilts on a wall to create one large crazy quilt!
- Discuss other ideas for making future quilt squares, such as using wallpaper or wrapping paper, drawing original designs, or adding family photographs.

Animal Sculptures

Focus Children create soft animal sculptures.

Curriculum Connections

Art: create a sculpture, use of a variety of materials, creativity

Fine Motor Skills: hand-eye coordination, cutting with scissors

Science: animals

Oral Language: listening and speaking

Beforehand Display a variety of photos of animals, and talk about special features they notice in each animal. Display animal sculptures for children to observe and feel. Invite children to make a soft animal sculpture.

Gather socks, gloves, mittens (Send home a note asking for contributions.); newspaper; scissors; glue; buttons, material scraps, wiggle eyes, yarn, and other trims

To Make

- Have children choose an animal they would like to sculpt. They can use one or more socks, gloves, or mittens, depending on the shape of the animal.
- First, children stuff the shape with crumpled newspaper.
- Eyes, ears, a tail, and other features can be added by gluing them on or tying off sections. Encourage children to use creativity and problem-solving skills to figure out which materials work best.
- Invite each child to present his or her finished sculpture and tell the group about it.

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