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.

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).

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

Discussing nonrepresentational art

“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 makes 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.”

Discussing representational art

“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.”
“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.”

Sustaining and concluding the dialogue

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?”