Encouraging Self-Expression Through Art
By Grace Hwang Lynch

Craft stores may be filled with coloring books, craft kits and precut models, but some of the best ways to foster creativity require only the simplest materials and few complicated directions. You can encourage your child’s self-expression through process-oriented art: simply put, art that is based on exploration and allows different outcomes, rather than emulating a preconceived finished product.

After all, the essence of art is expressing oneself. “When children are very young, they may start making marks on walls and other places parents don’t appreciate. Early art education helps them learn to make their mark on the world in ways that people will appreciate,” says Dr. Kerry Freedman, Head of Art and Design Education at Northern Illinois University. “They learn that they can actually have an impact on the world through the visual arts.”

The key to creativity is to find the kind of art education that will help foster young minds to think in innovative ways.

Do’s and Don’ts for Encouraging Your Child’s Creativity

Don’t Follow Directions. That’s right. While learning to follow directions can be an important skill for youngsters, too much direction can stunt the creative process.

“If they are only following what an adult has created and then [are] asked to copy the adult’s work, then they are learning to follow directions—a fine skill—but they are not growing creatively,” says MaryAnn Kohl, an arts educator and author based in Bellingham, Washington.

What young kids need in order to develop a sense of self-expression is the chance to make their own decisions in their artwork. “Children can come to rely on the feedback or approval of an adult,” explains Molly Campbell, Manager of the San Francisco Children’s Art Center. “Rather than trusting their own judgment or feeling safe enough to play around with different outcomes, they should take risks and make mistakes—all important aspects of creating knowledge and of the creative process.”

Do Choose Materials Carefully. Steer away from coloring books or kits that come with premade pieces or specific directions. The most basic supplies are often the best ones for encouraging creativity. A plain sketchbook, a variety of colored pencils, or an assortment of papers can lead to open-ended trial-and-error style exploration. “For all ages, crayons and plain blank paper are at the tip-top of any list of ‘must haves’ for creative or process art. Scissors and glue come next,” says Kohl.

Don’t Ask, “Is that a flower?” Adults often want to know what a child is drawing, but that’s not how young minds operate. “Try to avoid asking young children ‘what is it?’—as young children don’t always think of their artwork as representational,” says Campbell. “It’s better to describe what you see—what colors were used, how the lines go, or how filled up the page is, and invite the child to tell you about it in their own words.”

Do Take Risks. When a child is not given specific directions on what to make, she is freer to experiment with what she can imagine. “For example, a child might spend time cutting shapes out of paper, tape them together, and decide it looks like a dragon,” says Campbell. “She might then decide to color the dragon, or fold it up, or reconfigure it in some new way where it might become something completely different.”

Don’t Limit Art to Art Lessons. Show kids that appreciating and creating art can be part of daily experiences. Eileen Hopkins, a homeschooling mother of four from San Jose, California, encourages her kids to keep nature journals while hiking or walking around the neighborhood. “The inspiration they need to ‘make a project their own’ is the ability to tap into their own experiences, how they view their world,” says Hopkins.

Do Know the Difference Between “Arts” and “Crafts.” Although the two terms may be commonly used interchangeably to describe children’s activities, there are important differences. Crafts involve a youngster following directions to reproduce an adult’s idea and require no original thinking. Although arts and crafts should not be confused with each other, they each serve a purpose in education. “Crafts are meant to be useful or practical, or to reinforce a fact or learning theme,” says Kohl. “Value both arts and crafts experiences for exactly what they are, but be clear when doing
activities with kids and use the words ‘crafts’ when they are following directions to copy an adult, and ‘art’ when they are experimenting with their own ideas and art materials with an unknown outcome.”

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More Tips for Parents to Encourage Creativity and Visual Literacy in Art

- Set up an area in your house where kids can easily access art materials: felts, crayons, markers, bingo dobbers, scissors, glue, recyclables, magazines, etc. Have a table for them to work at that is free of clutter and a good height.
- Talk about their artwork in a way that encourages expression and critical thinking. For example, “Tell me about your painting” as opposed to “It’s beautiful!”.
- Encourage effort and taking risks. Avoid judgements and words such as “good” or “bad” when talking about art.
- Aim for variety in subject matter, materials, approaches, etc. For example: play some interesting music and interpret it through art, create an art project in nature using only materials found in the area, create an illustration for a story that the child tells, etc.
- Remember that how you talk about art will influence your child. Avoid statements like, “I’m terrible at art!” or “I have no talent!” as the emphasis is placed on the end product as opposed to the process. Stay positive! You are their example.
- Visit art galleries whenever possible and/or visit their websites! For example:

  The Tate Modern: [http://www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

  The National Gallery of Canada: [http://www.gallery.ca/](http://www.gallery.ca/)