

Looking At Art With Toddlers
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Art Appreciation Experiences of Infants and Toddlers:

Teaching young children to appreciate art is not the daunting task that it appears to be. At a very young age, children are quite capable of having an aesthetic experience, whether it be the mixing of different textured foods on the high chair table top or visually interacting with a mobile suspended over the crib. Without realizing it, young children are afforded many opportunities to engage in an aesthetic experience.

When children express preferences for colors, shapes, sounds, tastes and textures, they are making aesthetic choices. Long before children can speak, their responses to shapes, sounds, and other necessary phenomena around them establish their personal personalities and their styles of interacting with the world. **Every young child expresses awareness and preferences about the world in different ways. While one toddler sways rhythmically to music in a television commercial or a song on the radio, another returns time and time again to look at a particular visual image in a picture book.** Aesthetic experiences can enhance cultural sensitivity, promote language development, and improve the quality of young children's own art making. For aesthetic development to occur, children need experience with beautiful environments within the school and home, exposure to fine art and opportunities to discuss art and beauty with thoughtful adults. (Feeney & Moravcik, 1987). Aesthetic learning experiences will be more meaningful with these suggestions in mind.

The Importance of Adult Intervention:

Some research indicates that young children cannot engage in quality artistic experiences without the appropriate materials, adequate time and space, and adult intervention (Bruce, 1998). When viewing art works, "... adults play a vital role in determining what children notice about a particular work and how

children feel about the very process of encountering works of art." (Dietrich & Hunnicut 1948, p.154) Yet, too often, early childhood educators limit the art experiences for young children to include only the making of art. "Since the preschool child is just beginning to learn a language system and vocabulary is developing rapidly, that time would seem propitious to introduce simple art terms and beginning art understandings." (Douglas, Schwartz, and Taylor 1981, p.24) A study by Douglas & Schwartz (1967) confirms that this is possible. Results suggest that children's interest in art is nurtured when adults encourage children to talk about art objects, who the artists were and how the objects were made.

Looking at art and encouraging conversations about it can support not only visual perception skills, but also literacy skills in young children. "Intellectually, art criticism introduces the processes of logical and creative thinking. The step-by-step system helps children organize their thoughts. As a prereading exercise, the Feldman model teaches children that visual symbols can communicate ideas. By articulating what is seen, the child develops vocabulary and sharpens perceptions." (Cole & Schaefer, 1990, p.38) "Works of art can be utilized as settings or backgrounds for children's invented stories", (Newton, 1995, p. 82) Teachers can serve as good role models for this process of storytelling by using descriptive language as they talk about art works with young children.

Young children learn to create new meanings through interaction with art. Thoughtfully planned visits to traditional art museums can be valuable experiences for preschoolers, contributing to growth of aesthetic awareness. Stokrocki (1984) suggests that multisensory activities prior to the gallery visit increase the understanding and appreciation for the art process. Activities such as molding clay, painting, or even creating sculpture with pipecleaners offer insight into the work of artists. For the child, the learning begins with "visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and even olfactory responses to paint, collage materials, and types of clay" (Stokrocki, 1984, p.14) and is the first step in the development of aesthetic awareness.

Taking young children to an art museum provides a wonderful learning arena and can be an enjoyable experience for them if one is well prepared. Finding out about an exhibition ahead of time can help in the preparation of suitable materials for young children. "When looking at a work of art, invite responses and questions from the children. What do they notice? What do they think the artist was thinking about? Why do they think the artist used these materials and colors? Talk about works of art in ways that relate to children's own experiences." (Kolbe, 2002, p. 120)

While the museum experience begins with looking at art, it should also include other multisensory experiences. Invite your child to pose like a

sculpture of a ballerina, pretend to put on a ceremonial crown or fancy headdress from the museum collection, or imitate the sounds that might come from a painting or sculpture. Select a theme for your visit based on your child's interests and take along a special object that relates to the theme for added tactile experience. If your child enjoys animals, take along several small toy animals in your "museum backpack" that you can match with animals found in art.

Developmentally Appropriate Activities:

Looking at art reproductions can be done in a similar way, but children can look more closely and interact with a reproduction more so than an actual artwork in a museum setting. Newton (1995) observed that young children enjoyed using art reproductions in matching and sorting games. Duplicate postcards of reproductions can be matched. Sorting activities can include the criteria of subject matter or color. **A similar activity is also effective for museum visits. Prior to taking your child to the museum, purchase several interesting postcards that represent artwork on view in the galleries. These can easily be found in the museum shop. Your child can then select his or her favorite postcards and can help plan the outing to the museum.**

The Arts Education Partnership (1998) suggests that young children can collect their favorite art reproductions and place them in a scrapbook. Adults can encourage them to make up stories about the pictures as they view them. These stories can be in a verbal or written format. Connecting words to pictures is a pre-literacy activity that builds important skills. Adults can serve as good role models for toddlers by using descriptive language while talking about an artwork together.

Picture books also offer a wonderful opportunity for aesthetic experiences. The Arts Education Partnership (1998) stresses the importance of picture books beginning in the early toddler years. As children become more familiar with the stories, adults can facilitate the process of viewing the visuals as narratives of the story. "Pictures can communicate much to us, and particularly much of visual significance - but only if words focus them, tell us what it is about them that might be worth paying attention to. In a sense, trying to understand the situation a picture depicts is always an act of imposing language upon it - interpreting visual information in verbal terms; it is not accidental that we speak of 'visual literacy', of the 'grammar' of pictures, of 'reading' pictures. Reading pictures for narrative meaning is a matter of applying our understanding of words" (Nodelman, 1988, p. 211).

For young children, listening to a story without pictures is significantly different from an experience that includes images as well as words. Children make meaning by blending information gathered from the visual images as well as from hearing the text. Marie Clay (1995) notes that many children learn how to read by interpreting the pictures that accompany the text in picture books and not using the written word as the guide. When offering any of these experiences, "it is important to accept a child's interpretation of what he or she sees, even if it is not the conventional view" (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002, p.322).

All of the previously mentioned activities can help to develop important skills in young children that include visual perception, critical thinking, language acquisition, and problem solving. Nurturing these skills will be beneficial to the child in later stages of development in preparation for formal schooling.

Conclusions

Young children are capable of aesthetically responding to various artworks and adults play an important role in this process. **Opportunities abound for both informal and formal encounters with art. By creating experiences that reflect the unique learning style of young learners, it is possible for children to develop visual discrimination skills while at the same time cultivating a sense of appreciation for great art works. A personal connection to art at an early age can build an interest in the arts as well as important skills that will last a lifetime.**

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