Children's Artistic Development: An Overview

I have provided a condensed version of the Stages of Children's Artistic Development. The pioneer in children's artistic development research is Viktor Lowenfeld who is the author of "Creative and Mental Growth". His work and that of Rhoda Kellogg in "Analyzing Children's Art" have dramatically changed the way art is taught to children. Since the early 1950's art teachers have learned that artistic abilities develop in predictable stages, like all other human phases of development.

These stages are only guides to help us understand more about child art development and are not a rigid definitive tool for the classroom. Age appropriate art programming will build upon the child's abilities as they grow. Where an art program may provide a product the process to achieve this product should always be of prime importance, thus the knowledge of children's artistic development is most important in order to reach children’s greatest creative potential. Each child is an individual so should be the art expression.

Developmental Stages:

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**The Scribbling Stage ages 2-4**

The first scribbles will be random marks. The child gains satisfaction for here there is active involvement in self-expression outside of crying. The average child starts scribbling around the age of two. The child is experiencing pure pleasure from the haphazard marks. The range and variety of scribbles is very great and relates to the child's own development and experiences in his environment.

**Disordered Scribbling**

During this stage the marks on the paper can go in many directions. Where the child is drawing (on a table or floor) and the crayon size will influence the direction. The size of the scribbles shown on the paper is relative to the size of the child. At some point the child will discover that there is some relation to his motions and the marks on the paper. This may occur six months or so after the child starts scribbling. Enjoyment of this activity encourages the child to repeat and vary his motions. This helps in the development of motor coordination and feelings of mastering a new task.

**Naming the Scribbles**

A parent may not recognize scribbles as anything, but by around the age of 3 1/2 to 4 the child begins naming scribbles. He has begun thinking in terms of pictures. Before this stage he was satisfied with the motions themselves, the activity was purely kinesthetic. In the naming scribbling stage the child connects the motions with the world around him. He is beginning to think in terms of pictures or symbols. Naming of scribbles shows that the child is ordering his thinking into symbols or a "schema".
Motivation

At no point should a child be inhibited, criticized or corrected while creating art during any stage of his development. Usually in the first stages of scribbling no special motivation is needed except to provide the child with the proper materials and the encouragement to go ahead with the activity.

The child's own experiences are fertile topics that can motivate and excite them in art activities. Class field trips, stories from books, personal experiences etc. should be discussed before an art lesson to help the child to draw from his own vision, and thus enjoy and learn during the art lesson.

Art Materials

The best materials for this stage are simple and easy to manipulate, fat black crayons or markers, 11"x18" (or smaller) white paper, white chalk on black paper or a chalkboard. I do not recommend the use of finger paints for children of any age. Children do not learn to use tools, in this case a paintbrush, nor does finger paint encourages the manipulation of paint. The finger paint distracts the children from the painting process, while they soil everything within their reach, the painting activity is forgotten.

Paints should be thick tempera or poster paints with large white paper and round medium sized brushes. Play dough, or easy to form modeling clay are wonderful in the development of fine and gross motor coordination. Occasional use of collage materials from random shapes (NOT PRECUT SHAPES) can add fun and involvement in cutting and pasting. Stencils can be useful if limited to the child manipulating and learning how to use the stencil.

Allow the children to cut their own shapes using safety scissors. They will derive pure enjoyment from this activity and show great pride in their achievement. Cutting with scissors can involve a child completely in his discovery in the use of a tool. A child's fine motor coordination can develop rapidly through the mastery of cutting paper. Some children will not possess the gross motor coordination to even hold a pair of scissors, however tearing paper into shapes can fulfill the child's need to manipulate paper into shapes of his own design.

First Representational Attempts: The Pre-schematic Stage 4-7 years

A different mode of drawing has begun- the conscious creation of form. From the disordered scribbling, to naming the scribbles now the child has developed a way to represent form. In scribbling the child was mainly interested in kinesthetic activity, now he is involved in representing the world around him.

A child's first representational attempts grow directly from symbols the child was using during the scribbling stage. The circles and longitudinal lines will come together to form a person. Usually the child's first representational symbol is a man. The man is typically drawn with a circle for a head and two vertical lines as arms legs or a body. At this stage a child is constantly searching for new concepts, so while the "man" is always of primary importance it's form may change many times.

The constant searching for new concepts will continue until about age 7. By this time the individual pattern or "schema" will begin to appear. The child is involved in discovering his own patterns, which will at times translate into direct and immediate representations of places and events. A child's feelings can have profound effect upon his art creation. The more stimulating a child's experiences the more dramatic and exciting his artwork will be. The child discovers there is a relationship between his drawings and his outside experiences.
The child in the pre-schematic stage is developing understanding of spatial relationships. The child may always appear in the center of the picture, while objects seem to float around in space. This is because the child is just learning to perceive his place in the world around him. The size of objects in a child's picture may appear very different than what they are in reality. This is because the child places important objects larger on the picture than unimportant objects. For example, very large hands are common among children when they are drawing pictures of themselves involved in a hands-on activity.

**Motivation**

Any motivation at this stage should start with the child himself. The child must feel art to be an important stimulating experience. A child should become involved in and identified with his art experiences. Become involved with the children but let them work on their own level, and in their own way. Be sure that you find meaning and excitement in the art experience, with lots of encouragement and positive energy for the children.

**Materials**

Since the child at this age is excited by his ability to represent what is meaningful to him, any art experience should provide the opportunity for developing mastery of the material itself. Since the PROCESS OF CREATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE PRODUCT an art material should be selected that meets the needs of the age group for which it was planned. Constantly changing materials or using cute things in an art project can undermine the integrity of the child's artistic expressions. Good quality crayons on 12"X18" white paper, thick tempera or poster paint with a round medium sized bristle brush, clay, markers, collage materials, are all excellent art materials for this age group.

**The Achievement of Form and Concept: The Schematic Stage, 7-9**

The importance of the schema can only be fully realized when we understand the child's desire for a definite symbol, or schema of a real object. Although any drawing could be called a schema, here we will refer to schema as a concept which a child arrives at which he repeats again and again when no intentional experience influences him. These concepts are highly individualized. For some children they may be very intricate while for others the schema may be a simplified symbol. The schemas are as varied as the children themselves are. The schema of an object is the concept at which the child has finally arrived, and it represents the child's active knowledge of the object.

At about age seven the drawing of a human figure should be a recognizable symbol. Usually all body parts are apparent and clothing, even fashions are present. Facial features are represented from very simple to the inclusion of eyelashes, earrings and various details. Hands and feet become important in the human form, but are not always present in every drawing. Sometimes ovals, triangles, squares, circles, rectangles, or irregular shapes are used as schema for the body, although all kinds of shapes can represent aspects of a human figure.

In the human schema the child is not attempting to copy a visual form. The child arrives at a concept by a combination of many factors, his awareness of his own feelings, and his development of perceptual sensitivities. The child's human schema can give us a clue as to the development of the individual.

Another schema that becomes apparent at this point in a child's development is the "space schema". The child finds new relationships between himself and other objects. No longer do objects seem to float around in space in a child's artwork. Now there is a "baseline" on which all
objects in the child's schema will be placed. The "base line", is just that, a line placed on the bottom of the paper by the child, on top of which everything is drawn.

At the schematic stage of development the child has not developed an awareness of the representation of a three dimensional quality of space. We find that the schema is usually a representation of two dimensions. The biggest discovery is that there is a definite order in spatial relationships. The space schema is entirely abstract and has only an indirect connection with nature, as adults know it. Another interesting visual way a child represents objects is to show the insides of the objects as X-ray pictures. He depicts the inside of a building or structure simultaneously with the outside. A child may even draw the insides of a human while showing the outside and the space around the man.

**Motivation**

Motivation at this stage must create an atmosphere in which the child's consciousness of being a part of the environment is stimulated. In the same way we need to stimulate a greater awareness of the actions and functions of the human figure. The inclusion of actions in an orderly space concept will be of greatest significance. Our motivation could be characterized by the words: we, action, and where.

It is important in any motivation that each child is personally involved. There should be a wide range if topics so a child has the opportunity to identify with his own particular interests: "Playing at Recess with My Class", "Playing Ball with My Friends", "Visiting the Zoo With My Family" etc.

**Materials**

Materials used by children at this stage should be the same as those used in previous stages, with the addition of printing weaving and perhaps "found objects" sculpture materials.

**The Dawning- Realism: 9-11 years**

One of the outstanding characteristics of this stage is that the child realizes he is part of a society—a society of peers. This is the stage where children are learning to work with groups of other children and cooperate much as they will in adult life. The discovery of sharing similar interests, secrets, and the pleasure of doing things together, are all very fundamental. There is a growing awareness that one can do more in a group than alone. This age is the time of groups or gangs. The word gang is not used negatively here. The reference is towards hanging out with friends in groups. This age shows an increasing interest in "social independence" from adult interference, learning about social structures in a personal way.

At this age the child is becoming more aware and sensitive to his environment. He is becoming more critical of himself and others. He may hide his drawings from inquisitive adults who may make some remark about their efforts. Studies have shown that there is a surprising similarity between drawings by children of this age and the drawings of untrained adults.

Children of this age have a strong desire to produce naturalistic or photographically real pictures. Although their experiences have much do with their artistic expression they are easily frustrated if their work does not appear the way they think it should. Be patient with children at this age, they are their own worst critics, adult interference can only cause more frustration in the child.
The schema is no longer adequate to represent the human figure during the gang age. The concept of the human figure as expressed during the schematic stage will give way to differentiation between male and female and much more detail will appear. This is the stage when the base lines will no longer sufficiently express their understanding of the world. The change from single base line to the discovery of the plane is usually a rapid one. We also find that the sky line is no longer drawn across the top of the page but now extends all the way down to the horizon. He has not yet developed a conscious visual perception of depth, but he has taken the first steps toward such awareness. The child will begin overlapping objects to show their relationship to one another in space.

At this stage the child is becoming sensitive to the qualities of a material. It is of great importance, that children be given the opportunity to improvise independently. There is a greater ability to use tools and multi-media materials. The emphasis should be on the process of manipulating and exploring the material and not upon achieving a "nice looking" finished product. Boys and girls will also have a preference of materials that they want to work with. Ask them what they are interested in working with. Provide enough variety to involve all of the children in a creative enjoyable art activity.

**Motivation**

Motivation during this period must stress the newly discovered social independence in order to give the child a feeling of self-esteem. An art experience must give him an opportunity to express the growing awareness of self, and to satisfy a new curiosity for the environment. It must also inspire the child to use the newly found methods of group cooperation as beneficial means for achieving results. Group projects are best suited to this age group. Many experiences can motivate a group of children to work on a cooperative project. Allow the children to provide some direction as to their interest as individuals and in group situations.

**Materials**

Some of the materials the child has used during previous stages of development can seem "babyish" to the gang age child. The child now has greater control over the art materials so will prefer a variety of materials which will enable him to become familiar with new ways to combine materials. If the child has experience in the use of basic art materials, then he will find new ways to express his ideas and show his mastery of the medium. Respect for the child's personal expression is very important at this stage, for art can be a valuable medium for the child to express how he feels about himself, and his environment.

Now the child is ready to put his thoughts and ideas, feelings and reactions into a visual expressive form. Craft work can lend itself to this child's need to explore new materials and fulfill their desires to make things. Care should be taken when choosing craft materials for a children's art program. Many craft projects are "busy work" which require little creativity and are not fulfilling the child's need to "do their own thing." A selection of wood, papier-mâché, cloth, buttons, lace, cardboard, boxes; straws, colored paper, etc. can be saved and made available to the children.

The ability to break away from the schema and to recognize particular details connected with the self and with the environment is on of the characteristic of this age. Children between ages 9-11 are more observant of their environment and their interest in nature can be seen in their collection of things. They see things through their own experiences, and assume this reality is the way things really are. We can see that naturalism is not the ultimate goal of this age, because there is usually no attempt to show natural colors, light effects, folds of cloth etc. There should
be no value judgment placed on a child's artwork. At this age the child and his peers pass on plenty of value judgments about one another's work. An adult only need recognize the sincerity vested in the work.

**The Pseudo-Naturalistic Stage, The Stage of Reasoning, 11-13 Years**

The pseudo-naturalistic stage of development is very different than any of the previous stages. Because we are mainly concerned with elementary art development we will briefly cover this stage.

This is the period of a child's development termed, preadolescent. It is a time for seeking greater independence form adults. There is more awareness than ever of the human figure and the differences between boys and girls. A preadolescent is no longer a child but not yet an adult, thus the term child no longer applies. There is more interest in following the "crowd" and establishing his place in society. The preadolescent also has developed a strong sense of social awareness and the beginnings of a half-understood and not entirely welcome change in status.

During this stage, for the first time, the attention has to be shifted from the importance of the working process to an increased emphasis on the final product. The final product becomes more significant with increasing age. The pre-adolescent has a critical awareness toward their imaginative activity; many times they lose their spontaneous creative ability. An active, stimulating art program is necessary to keep students involved in the creative process.

The human figure takes on a predominant role in the preadolescent's artwork. A motivating, rewarding art lesson is live model drawing. Students can take turns being the model, thus feeling a sense of cooperation and togetherness with classmates. Murals are excellent for working in groups and learning appreciation for the skills and ideas of others.

**Motivation**

Any art motivation should stress the individual's own contribution. At this stage of development it is important to reinforce individualistic thinking. An art program that is primarily concerned with productions may miss entirely one of the basic reasons for the existence of art in a school program, that is, the personal involvement of an individual and the opportunity for a depth of self-expression.

**Materials**

All of the materials, which the child has used during each stage of development, are appropriate at this stage. The difference is that now the way the child uses the materials will change. Technical proficiency has improved enough that the child will find new ways to use these materials. More sophisticated materials can now be introduced such as, water colors, oil paints, drafting supplies and rulers.

**The Development of Two Creative Types**

Something very interesting occurs during the creative process that researches don't yet fully understand. This is the different ways in which humans create. Especially during childhood one can observe the approach that a child takes when designing a picture or three-dimensional object. Some children will produce rather naturalistic objects while others will tend towards a more abstract depiction. These two approaches are termed "visual", and "haptic."
When we investigate the artistic products of these two types in their pure forms we find that the "visual type" starts from his environment, that he feels as spectator, and that his intermediaries for experience are mainly the eyes. The "haptic type", is primarily concerned with his own body sensation and the subjective experiences in which he feels emotionally involved.

A visually minded person would be disturbed and inhibited if he were to be stimulated only by means of haptic impressions, that is, if he were asked not to use sight but to orient himself only by means of touch, bodily feelings, muscular activities and kinesthetic fusions. This much is clear from research, but what is not obvious is that "seeing" may also become an inhibitory factor when forced upon an individual who does not use his visual experiences for creative work.

Most people tend to fall between these two extreme types. Investigations have shown only a few individuals have equal amounts of visual and haptic predisposition. Seventy-five percent of people have an appreciable tendency toward one or the other. What this tells us is that a child with a visual type tendency will not benefit from a lesson that is purely kinesthetic, and a child with a haptic type tendency will not benefit from a purely visual lesson.

Many art educators feel very strongly that there is no place in an art program for coloring books or "copy" lessons. The development and growth of creative thinkers in our society depends upon allowing children to express themselves in a personal manner. There is no feeling of satisfaction for a child when he does not know which project is his on the wall because "they all look alike." A polished, neat, copy type of art project will only satisfy adults and will make the child feel incapable of creating "good" art. Engage the children in their own self-expression and valuable learning will be discovered in the classroom. We can plan art lessons to stimulate all of the child's creative potential through sight, sounds, movement, feelings, and personal experiences.