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Developmental Stages of Art

Regardless of how old they are, most every person who handles art materials for the first time will progress through developmental stages. Understanding the developmental stages enables you to help children engage, process, and grow by teaching techniques when the time is appropriate, commenting using descriptive language, and encouraging exploration; critical elements in open-ended art. To support each developmental stage, allow individuals to develop at their pace and use appropriate language when responding to their work. By asking questions that help children reflect on the process or investigate the material further, you will avoid labeling or judging children's work and instead help creativity grow.

1 Exploratory Stage

Children at this stage will explore art materials in their own way. They are interested in the qualities of the material- how it feels, looks, smells, tastes, sounds and what it can do.

What you will see:

Drawing: Random marks, light colored, banging, dragging, sweeping and then back and forth lines, slightly curving lines, pleased with movement

Painting: Whole arm movements, repetitive movements, lines, dots, dashes, zigzags, circular webs, excitement of changing colors

Clay: Poking, pushing, pounding, tearing, smoothing, etc...

Collage: Cutting and gluing are two different activities

Descriptive, Reflective, and Motivational Comments:

"I see you have made your clay very smooth. How did you do that?"

"How did you make green?"

"What can you do with this extra square of paper?"

2 Energy Stage

Children in this stage have a basic understanding of the medium and start working energetically with the art material.

What you will see:

Drawing: Lines fill the paper and go around and around, movements are repeated and sometimes a noise is produced. Drawings include all the basic 20 scribbles.

Painting: Paintings become brown due to the repeated overlap of one color on top of another

Clay: Clay can be flattened, stacked, flattened and stack again

Collage: Materials can be placed and glued one on top of each other.

Descriptive, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"There are so many different colors in your painting!"

"How did you get your clay to stand so tall?"

"Can you make this type of line again?"

3 Shape Stage

As children's visual-motor coordination increases, they are more able to control their work and shapes begin to emerge.

What you will see:

Drawing: Children will begin to connect two ends of a line to make shapes. Scribbles will be named.

Painting: Solid areas of color will merge in paintings and are either placed separately or next to each other.

Clay: Children will begin to roll coils (sometimes called "snakes") and balls either between their hands or on the table. Often children will make "whole families" of coils or balls sometimes covering their entire work surface.

Collage: Collage pieces are carefully placed either separately or next to one another.

Descriptive, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"I see that your lines touch together to make a circle!"

"What did you do with your hands to make such a long coil?"

"I wonder what you could do in this white area?"

4 Design Stage

Once children have mastered making shapes, they will begin to create elaborate and well thought-out designs.

What you will see:

Drawing: Mandalas, suns and radials are formed. Drawings are balanced.

Painting: Patterns and designs made up of combinations of lines, shapes and distinct colors.

Clay: Clay balls and coils placed one next to each other across the board, sometimes going around the edge of the board.

Collage: Repeated shapes, colors and lines. Compositions are balanced and ordered.

Descriptive, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"I see the balls are the same size and so carefully placed on your board.

Let's trace with our fingers the interesting design your textured shapes make!"

"How can you add to your design?"

5 Representation Stage

Using basic shapes and designs, children will begin to create the people, animals, and objects in their world.

What you will see:

Drawing: Basic people consist of a round form, inner shapes and lines. This basic form becomes a car, bug or cat. Details will begin appearing as the stage progresses.

Painting: Landscapes, flowers, houses, vehicles, animals and people will begin to emerge often in space or on a base line.

Clay: A ball of clay with a coil sticking out of both sides will become a "person". A flat slab with a coil on it will be a person in bed.

Collage: Shapes will be placed to suggest objects in their environment.

Descriptive, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"What a good idea to use the triangle shapes to make the legs of your person!"

"What were you thinking when you made your painting today?"

"You created the nose in such an interesting way. It looks like you pulled it out from the clay. Could you use this technique somewhere else?"

Every child will progress through the developmental stages in their own way at their own pace. Some children will progress quickly through one stage and then stay at the next stage for a longer amount of time. Children will also go back and forth between stages. Even though a child might have passed the design stage and begin to make representations, that child might return to designs another day. Understanding the developmental stages and being aware of what you say to children during their creative process will help children develop the self-confidence to believe in their own ability to explore, create, and express themselves. What an incredible gift to give a child!