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Developmental Stages of Children's Clay Work

In order to foster a young child's artistic growth, it is crucial to understand the developmental stages of children's artwork. 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. Understanding developmental stages helps you to observe students work perceptively and appreciate their creations without imposing adult judgments.

Clay is a developmentally appropriate art material that can enhance every early childhood classroom. Young children love working with natural clay. It is a valuable creative material that can be easily manipulated, changed, and reformed over and over again. When properly conditioned, it is soft and slightly cool to the touch. Because there is very little need for tools when working with clay, a direct intimate connection from the hands to the material is established. Clay is heavier than play dough. Unlike play dough, it holds its shape and doesn't crumble. Clay teaches children about form, space, texture, weight, and structure. It is so easy to set up and clean up that it can be offered to children on a daily basis.

Clay is a versatile modeling material that presents endless opportunities for exploration and learning. The following list illustrates the benefits clay can bring to your classroom.

- Working with clay aids in the development of fine and gross motor skills through touching, poking, pushing, pulling, prodding, squeezing, and joining.
- Clay provides a medium for children to express ideas, feelings, and what is going on in their lives.
- Clay builds self-confidence by responding to the child's will. Its malleable nature allows children to control the forms they make and change any part with pressure from their fingers. It is impossible to make mistakes with clay.
- Handling clay calms the nervous system and relieves tension.
- Children love clay.

Regardless of how old they are, most every person who handles clay for the first time will progress through developmental stages. Adults and older children might spend a few minutes at one stage whereas a young child might spend a few months. Someone who has had prior experience working with clay may skip

the earlier stages and begin farther down the developmental ladder, whereas a person who is coming to clay for the first time will most probably start at the beginning. Each person will have a different experience using clay while passing through the developmental stages described below. To support each developmental stage, allow individuals to develop at their pace, and use appropriate language when responding to their work.

The use of appropriate language is vital. It focuses on the process used by children and the qualities of texture, form, shape, or size achieved when handling clay. Such descriptive comments bring children's attention to the process by asking them to reinvestigate their creations. Reinvestigating teaches children to reflect, analyze, and to become conscious of their explorations. Furthermore, questions that elicit more than a yes or no answer, allow the children to talk about their work, thus opening up listening opportunities for you, the teacher. Descriptive comments also help everyone at the clay table become aware of different techniques. By using the appropriate language commentary below, you will avoid labeling or judging a child's work.



1 Exploratory Stage

Children at this stage will explore clay in their own way. They are interested in the qualities of clay - what it feels like and what it can do. Children will explore clay by pushing, building, poking, tearing, pounding, smoothing, etc....

Descriptive Comments:

- "I see you have made your clay very smooth. How did you do that?"
- "How did you make the clay so flat?"
- "What do you like about the clay?"



2 Shape Stage

Children in this stage are interested in how they can shape the clay. They 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.

Descriptive Comments:

- "I see you have made all your coils the same length."
- "What did you do with your hands to make such a long coil?"
- "Wow, you made so many coils, let's count them together!"



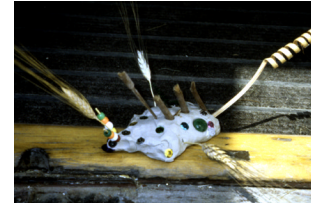
3 Design Stage

Once children have mastered rolling coils and balls, they will begin to line them up and create simple, yet carefully thought-out designs. Children at this stage will also enjoy creating designs by sticking objects into the clay such as dried flowers, seeds, wooden sticks, feathers, beads, pipe cleaners, and wire. Creating textures by pressing various fabric and found objects into clay is another appropriate way of extending children's natural desire to design and explore.

Descriptive Comments:

"I see that all your balls are the same size and so carefully placed on your board. Let's trace with our fingers the interesting design they make!"

"What do you like about your design?"



4 Simple Representation Stage

Using basic shapes such as coils and balls, children will begin to create the people, animals, and objects in their world. A ball of clay with a coil sticking out of both sides will become a "person". Three balls stacked on top of each other will become a "snowman".

Descriptive Comments:

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

"Do you want to tell me about your sculpture?"

"I see that you used coils to make the arms of your person. How did you make the body?"

Up to this stage, it is appropriate for the children to reuse the clay by returning it to the bucket after they are finished creating. Returning the clay to the bucket allows children ample opportunities to revisit the clay over and over again. This will give them plenty of time to experiment and explore as well as opportunities to refine and strengthen their ideas. (Lowenfeld, Creative and Mental Growth, 1987) Once children begin to create representational forms, they may want to keep their work.



5 Detailed Representation Stage

At this stage, children are creating animals, people, masks, houses, bowls, etc. using more advanced building techniques. Children will concentrate on making their creations look "real". Techniques such as scoring, joining and slab rolling help children create durable, more complex sculptures.

Descriptive Comments:

"I see you carefully smoothed all the joints so your sculpture will last a long time."

"Is this the way you want your sculpture to look? What do you think you can add to it?"

"You created the house in such an interesting way. How did you make the chimney? What technique did you use to make the roof?"



6 Decoration Stage

Children are interested in adding details and texture to the surface with a variety of tools. Details and texture help create a more "real" appearance to the creations. Sculptures are rotated and worked on from all sides. Painting, glazing, or burnishing their finished sculptures is also important to children at this stage. Children

enjoy adding color and details to their clay pieces and delight in the surprise of seeing their finished sculptures after they are fired.



Descriptive Comments:

"Is this the way you want your sculpture to look?"

"Are there any more details you can add to it?"

"I see you carefully painted all the details on your mask."

"You made the lizard's body look so real. What tool did you use?"

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. The interest in designing can last an entire lifetime.

Working with young children, we have an incredible opportunity to witness unencumbered creativity and spontaneity. Young children approach art materials with curiosity and excitement. 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!

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