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## **How To Take The Mess Out Of Art**

Kids love art. However, kids and art materials are often seen as a volatile combination. Art projects, to many teachers, seem to take a lot of energy to manage, they create a headache, and are time consuming to clean up. The secret to providing successful, hassle free art experiences is to create natural boundaries, establish routines, organize materials and teach children to care for materials. These basic management techniques will help you provide successful art experiences in your before and after school program. Art does not have to be messy.

**Create Natural Boundaries.** Natural boundaries will give structure and focus to the art project, which will in turn minimize behavioral problems.

1. **Define the work area.** Keep all art materials off the floor. If art materials are placed on surfaces with defined edges, such as tables, children tend to work with them more carefully. When they are placed on the floor, materials tend to scatter. If the children need to work on the floor to do a large-scale project, make “work stations” by taping off or blocking the area.
2. **Define individual workspace.** Defining the workspace gives children a finite boundary to work within. It prevents children from touching their neighbor’s work, reminds them where to keep the materials and cuts down

on clean up time. Provide each child with a placemat, an individual piece of newspaper or some sort of work surface. You can easily make your own placemats by placing a large piece of dark colored construction paper or cardstock in between two pieces of contact paper.

3. **Use bins to create boundaries.** Giving a child or a pair of children a bin tells them where their materials belong. Old aluminum pie pans make great bins. They are indestructible, stackable, washable, and easy to carry. Place a pair of scissors, a glue stick, and some collage materials into the pan and you have a nicely contained instant art kit. Creating mini art kits in bins works extremely well with young children because they benefit from a limited choice in materials.

**Establish Routines.** Just like in every other aspect of after school care, establishing routines with art materials helps children know what is expected of them. Routines are especially important during set up and clean up times.

1. **Set up art projects “cafeteria style”.** Displaying materials “cafeteria style” sets up an organizational system, helps children make their own aesthetic choices and speeds set up and clean up time. Place each type of material to be used for the project on its own tray or in a separate clear plastic shoebox. The children can then take an empty pie pan and collect the materials that he or she wishes to use. If the children have left over scraps after completing their art project, they can sort these by placing them back in the appropriate container. When the art project is over for the day, all you have to do is stack the trays or put the lids on the shoeboxes.
2. **Create art kits for each table-group.** Another option for setting up is to place all project materials on trays or in bins in the center of every table-group of children. This system allows the children to stay at their tables rather than get up out of their seats for additional materials. Each table-group could assign an organizer and materials checker for each art project to make sure everything is put back neatly.
3. **Teach and practice cleaning up.** Decide whether you want to have the children responsible for the entire process of cleaning up or just a part of it. Asking the children to only be responsible for part of the clean up usually helps it go quickly and smoothly. One easy clean up routine for paints is to have the children place their brushes face down into a bucket of water, their paint containers in another soapy water container, and then take their sponges and trays to the sink and wash them. At the end of the day, you could wash the brushes and paint containers or you could appoint one child to be responsible for each job. When using clay, have the children be responsible for washing their boards off and their hands by

giving them two wet paper towels at the end of the lesson, one for the board and one for their hands.

**Organize Materials.** Look closely at how the art materials are stored and displayed in your classroom. A well-organized art area is clearly labeled and contains everything a child needs to create an art project.

1. **Place all art materials with art materials.** Would you keep your forks in one drawer, your spoons in another and your knives up on a shelf in your kitchen?
2. **Display only a few materials at a time.** You don't have to put everything out for the children all at once. Allow the children to become acquainted with only one art medium at a time. It gives them the opportunity to understand the material and use it to its full potential. Start with a limited choice and then as the year progresses, expand the children's choices. For instance with drawing materials, first put out pencils. Then throughout the year, add crayons, colored pencils and markers.
3. **Label all art materials.** Labeling the shelf reminds the children where each material belongs and helps everyone know if a certain material is in use or is missing. Label both the shelf and the storage container with easy to read or to identify paper labels and cover with contact paper. The contact paper will stick the label to the shelf, ensure durability, and facilitate easy removal.
4. **Create a space for drying and storing art projects.** Plan ahead how you will store a work-in-progress or a project that needs to dry. Invest in a portable drying rack or establish a window shelf or place on the floor where the children can leave their artwork to dry. If you don't have extra drying space, plan the art project for the earlier part of the afternoon so it will be dry by the time the children go home.
5. **Determine how the children will take their artwork home.** To preserve paintings, wrap paper strips around paintings and secure with a piece of tape. Clay objects can be taken home in boxes lined with shredded newspaper.

**Teach How To Take Care of Materials.** Often in after-school settings we focus our teaching on social relationships and rules but often forget to also teach the basics of caring for materials. It is important to assume that the children in your care have never been taught how to care for art materials and it is your duty to teach them how. If you spend a few weeks on taking care of materials and

praising the children for their efforts, your time spent will be paid off throughout the year. You will have a neatly organized, well-maintained art area.

1. **Gluing.** Don't hesitate to teach the children how to unscrew a glue stick and place the cap on afterwards. To eliminate glue dripping onto the table, teach the children to take a drip paper when they pick up their glue containers and place it under the container before they begin.
2. **Selecting paper.** You can teach the children how to select a piece of paper without messing up the whole stack by showing them how to place one hand on the top of the stack while the other hand takes out the desired piece.
3. **Painting.** Instruct how to pour paints and how to clean off the paint container caps if they are caked with dried paint. Make sure you point out how much paint should be poured and what it should be contained in.
4. **Using Clay.** If you are using natural clay, teach the children how to reuse the clay. Clay scraps can be rolled into a ball, wet with water by poking a hole in the clay ball and filling it with water and placed in a plastic bucket.
5. **Set up a cleaning schedule.** Setting up a cleaning schedule helps to make sure the art area is cleaned each week. Knowing how to clean is a life skill that children naturally enjoy and parents appreciate.

After-school children are old enough to help maintain a neat and well-organized art area. By spending some time creating natural boundaries, establishing routines, organizing materials, and teaching how to care for materials, you will have an art area that stimulates creativity, is inviting for the children, and runs smoothly. In all areas of teaching, a few weeks spent establishing routines and creating boundaries allows for months of relaxation. Structuring their time in the art area will allow them to blossom and will make your time as a teacher more effective.

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Here are some do's and don't s to maintain a messy free art area:

**Do's**

- Do establish routines for setting up and cleaning up
- Do define the work space
- Do use bins to contain children's supplies
- Do teach how to take care of materials
- Do establish a system of organizing your art supplies
- Do create a cleaning schedule
- Do praise the children when they have successfully organized or cleaned up
- Do limit the art materials available to the children at one time

**Don'ts**

- Don't assume children know how to clean up, care for or manage art materials
- Don't blame the children if the art area is messy; first look critically at your own management techniques. Have you set good routines and boundaries?
- Don't prevent children from creating art because you think it is messy. First think about how you can teach the children to keep it clean.
- Don't offer an art activity without thinking through how you will set it up, how the children will access the materials and how it will be cleaned up. Will they keep what they have made?