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What To Say During Clay Play

Regardless of how old they are, most every person who handles clay 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. 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 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, Reflective, and Motivational Comments:

"I see you have made your clay very smooth. How did you do that?"
"How did you make the clay so tall?"
"What can you do with this extra piece of 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, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"I see the balls you made are all the same size and shape."
"What did you do with your hands to make such a long coil?"
"Can you make a whole family of snakes?"

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, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"Your clay looks so rough. What did you use to create such a rough texture?"
"I see the balls are the same size and so carefully placed on your board. Let's trace with our fingers the interesting design they make!"
"How can you add to 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, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

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

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

"Can you make a friend for your animal?"

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 gives children plenty of time to experiment and explore as well as opportunities to refine and strengthen their ideas. Once children begin to create representational forms, they may want to keep their work. Before you allow children to take home their sculptures, be sure to teach them how to properly join two pieces of clay together.

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, Reflective, and Motivational Comments:

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

"You created the nose in such an interesting way. It looks like you pulled it out from the clay."

"What other techniques did you use to make your sculpture?"

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

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, Reflective and Motivational Comments:

"I see you carefully painted two coats of glaze on your animal. I can see you want the glaze to look solid and bright when it comes out of the kiln."

"You made the lion's mouth look so fierce, how did you make it? What did you do first?"

"Is there anything else you can do to the surface of your sculpture to make it more real?"

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.

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!

**Find out more information on how you can support clay in your classroom.
Call Kathleen Bailer for an in-service workshop! Call Toll Free 888-266-3094.**

