Supporting the Development of Creativity

A three year old sits at the kitchen table extremely focused on his art.
He’s gathered white paper, a glue bottle, scissors, small bits of colored paper, tissue paper, and finger paint from his own special art box. He chooses which paper to cut and which to tear. He intently glues each small item to the white paper, creating a collage. He then finger paints bright red all around his gluing, creating a framed-effect. With delight, he shows his sister his creation, and begins to make another piece of art.

A four-year-old waits for instructions while her mother gathers materials for her to create a flower basket.
Her mom places a piece of large white paper, a glue bottle, a pair of scissors and small pieces of tissue paper on the table and says, “Okay, you can make this however you want --- BUT the basket is the base and I cut that for you, and then the tissue papers pieces are the flowers. Let me show you how to tear the tissue paper.” The four-year-old pastes the basket in place and glues the flowers, creating the basket of flowers as planned. She shows her mother what she’s made and says, “Is this right?”

These examples show two very different types of art experiences. In the first, a process art experience, the child has many opportunities to explore the materials, think, express himself, and create. The second is a product focused art experience where the child follows directions given to her to make a predetermined end product. These two types of art experiences don’t support children’s development in the same ways. It’s important to know the difference in order to offer children art experiences that support their creativity, enjoyment of art, thinking skills, and healthy development.

Process Art Experiences Support Many Aspects of Children’s Development

Physical Development: Your child’s small motor skills develop as he glues, draws, paints, and plays with clay or homemade dough. Small motor skills are important for future writing.

Language & Literacy Development: As you talk with your child her vocabulary expands when you name new art materials, tools, and concepts such as scissors, collage, purple, wide, sticky, and smooth. Your child often tells you about the ideas she’s expressing through the art and this type of conversation supports literacy development.

Social and Emotional Development: There is joy and self-exploration in self-expression. Art supports the development of self-regulation and self-control as your child focuses, makes choices, and feels successful. The ability to focus is important to future school success.

Product Art Experiences Do Not Support Rich Learning
Product art offers children a few learning opportunities (following directions and developing small motor control) but does not offer the rich opportunities for cognitive, language, and social and emotional development open ended art experiences offer.

Clues To Identifying Product and Process Art

Product Art:
• Your child follows a sample, pattern, or model and follows instructions
• Adults know in advance what the artwork will look like
• There’s a right way and a wrong way
• Adults feel the need to “fix” the art
• Patterns and cut-outs are easily available online

Process Art:
• There’s no sample, pattern, or model
• Your child explores lots of interesting materials
• Adults have no idea what children will create
• There’s no right or wrong way to do the art
• Children are relaxed and focused
• Your child wants to do more
The art is truly an "original" every time

In addition, **children react differently** to these two types of art experiences.

Children doing **product art** might say:
- "Can I be done now?"
- "Is this right?"
- "Mine doesn't look right."
- "I can't do this!"

Children doing **process art** might say:
- "Can I have more time?"
- "Can I have more paper?"
- "Is there any yellow?"
- "I want to make another one"

**Parents Can Offer Exploratory Process Art Experiences:**
- Provide a place for art materials such as a special bin or drawer
- Save recycled materials (like magazines) children can later use to create collages
- Include watercolor paints, finger paints, and offer brushes and interesting painting tools such as toothbrushes and potato mashers
- Offer many drawing materials like markers, crayons, and colored pencils of different sizes
- Have lots of blank paper (rather than coloring books)
- Include tape, glue, and scissors
- Make homemade dough and offer clay
- Try art outside – use natural materials like leaves in art projects or paint outside for a change of setting

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[https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/supporting-development-creativity](https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/supporting-development-creativity)