

# Talking to Kids About Their Art.

## A “How To” guide.

By Kim Adams

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Most adults don't really take much stock in children's art-work until they see representational art (art that looks like something from real life). This is a shame. So much is happening in children's work before they are able to produce “representational art” (usually only by the age of 4-5 years) that lays the framework for future artistic, cognitive, and psychological development. Young children enjoy the experience of artistic expression rather than the production of a certain product. It is very important for children to experiment with different mediums (paint, markers, pencils, collage, chalk, glue, paper, clay, etc.). A paper with a scribble, a puddle of glue with glitter mixed in, a page of paper with a fringe of scissor snips, paint splatters on easel paper are all examples of “process” over “product” art. As kids experience the moment, they are learning about colors (hue, value, intensity, etc) line, form, shape, space, design (symmetry, repetition, variation, etc.), and materials. The foundations of original composition can be observed in the art-work of very young children, in fact often the envy of professional artists. There is much to value about our children's art so why do adults

respond so often with the stereotypical “that's nice”, or “I love it.” Or worse, “What is it?” Does it matter that it is not a “thing” to be given a label? Rather it is an amazing aesthetic moment in time for a child.

*Suzy spent the better part of the morning going back and forth to an easel painting. Wiggling feet, focused eyes, humming (to a tune only she recognized, at times talking (to no one in particular) all the while, full arm brush strokes, and layers upon layers of colors were smudged with a fat brush. The experience was tactile, joyful, sensory, and required gross motor, fine motor and thinking skills. The end result was a big brown/black blob on a paper, ripped and worn by the repeated soaking and scrubbing of paint. Now imagine an adult approaching and asking, “I love your painting. What is it, a rock?” To Suzy it may have been a grand adventure, a story or a dance, it may have been an expression of feelings even she didn't have labels for, or it just might have been an experience of cause and effect (science if you will), colors blending, gravity pulling drips down the page in a race of colors.*

How sad to ignore the experience. The next time Suzy is at the easel it is likely that she will try to copy the “rock” in order to get the adult to praise her again. Seem far fetched? Sadly, it is not. Often the joy of creating can be lost if the child feels he must produce in order to receive attention and praise. In fact, I have seen children who were simply unwilling to try painting again, frustrated in their own lack of ability to produce a representational drawing. Or worse, I have seen many children after being “shown” by an adult how to draw an object, only draw those objects over and over. (Where did the experimentation go? Where did the unique use of materials go? Where did the fun go?)

Children seek adult approval. One must take care in responding to a child’s work because it may interfere with the valuable lessons he or she is gaining. If an adult only comments about artwork the child has intentionally or accidentally produced to look like something recognizable, it may become the focus of the child’s future work. The intrinsic joy of working with paint is replaced with the extrinsic reward of adult praise. Caregivers and parents don’t want to thwart their children’s creative experiences, in fact most probably believe they are encouraging children with their praise. I would simply like to suggest some alternatives for speaking with children about their art.

1. Start by saying nothing. Just watch. Be interested and observe the action. This may be just the right encouragement, as it is demonstrating to the child that you are interested enough to stop what you are

doing to watch what he or she is doing. (Children will often share what they are doing or describe their work with out any verbal prompting)

2. Comment about what you observed the child doing. Example: “You were holding the paint brush so tightly. Your arms made large sweeping motions.” Or “I noticed that while you were using the yellow you were making this sound with your voice, hummmm hummmm hummm.”
3. There is very often a subtle feeling state that accompanies artwork. Ask the child “How did you *feel* when you were painting with your hands?”
4. Ask the child “Do you want to tell me about your drawing?” Respect the fact that sometimes children will say “no” and this is a perfectly acceptable answer.
5. When a child does talk about his work, try very hard to listen. Reflect back what you have heard. Example: Child-“This is my house and this is my mom, and my dad, and my sister.” Adult- “you were including your whole family in this work.” Child-(laughing) “yes, and see how my dad’s hair is sticking up all over his head?” Adult-“It looks like you think that is funny.” (No adult judgments are made here)

6. If a child asks “do you like my picture?” try to re-direct your response “it looks like you are very proud of your picture.” Or “do you like your picture?” or even “wow, you really must want to share your picture with me.” Demonstrate that you value the work by displaying it in a place of honor.

7. If you are going to talk about the project itself (sometimes kids do ask us), keep in mind the following elements of visual art:

- colors (hue, value, intensity, etc)
- line
- form
- shape
- space
- design (symmetry, repetition, variation, etc.),
- materials

*Examples: “I see that the marker lines are going in a vertical direction” (move your hand to demonstrate “vertical” motion.) Or “That blue is really intense on this edge of the page but it lightens up as it moves across the paper.” Or “I see that you covered all of the white space on this page with tape.” Or “I am noticing that the dough has the same shape on both sides, it is very symmetrical.”*

Allowing children the freedom to enjoy and discover their own aesthetic sense through artistic expression is a gift. Helping children find the words to express the experience is invaluable. Being present and in the moment of creative expression is life affirming for both the child and the adult.

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