



# Progression and skill development in the visual arts

ECE resources

Teachers who want to intentionally support the visual arts learning of young children can benefit from knowing about what artistic skills children can learn and how they develop.

Young children's earliest forays into the visual arts are likely to take the form of mark-making, which may arise from a desire to imitate caregivers whom they have observed writing and drawing. Children are likely to imitate the gestures of drawing rather than the result, as their principal aim is to behave like an adult and, when early mark-making pleases caregivers, children are more likely to start to use art to communicate with them<sup>1</sup>.

Early stages of art-making have been found to involve just as much complex and critical thinking, activity and cognitive development for toddlers as for older children. As early as their second year of life, children develop the ability for mental representation and using a signifier to evoke meaning<sup>2</sup>. Toddlers are motivated to make art because of the opportunities it presents to explore concepts and ideas, rather than the pleasure it offers in terms of the physical activity of scribbling or developing fine motor skills. Children use marks to represent form and movement and this mark-making is an important part of young children's learning about the visual arts.

At some point, children realise that their marks can communicate meaning. For example, they might be making marks with chalk and then realise that their marks look like something like a pirate ship or an animal. This exciting realisation that marks convey meaning makes it possible for children to engage in the world in new ways. In this stage, children tend to draw first and then give a name to the drawing they have made. Later, they draw with purpose, deciding what they will draw before making marks<sup>3</sup>. Children's intentions can be quite nuanced: for example, a drawing might represent a bird or, more specifically, the bird's flight path.

Scribbling with pastels, crayons or pens, as an early form of drawing, progresses through a series of stages. Infants and toddlers usually start by making horizontal lines, as part of the 'longitudinal scribbling phase', before moving on to shorter lines and circular marks or 'circular scribbling'. Scribbles may be used to create a dynamic representation of an object that focuses on the way it moves or feels rather than a figurative representation<sup>4</sup>. In other creative endeavours, infants and toddlers may explore the properties of materials. For example, they might push and stack blocks to create constructions: in this stage, blocks are used simply as blocks and may be carried and stacked but not used for any symbolic purpose. A little later, blocks are used to reproduce a known, accessible object, such as a phone or a table in the room: in this way, the block construction represents a pretence which is closely aligned with reality<sup>5</sup>.

In their early explorations with clay or playdough, young children discover the properties of the material and experiment with the different effects they can create with different actions such as poking, pulling, pinching, squeezing, as well as the creation of texture on the surface of the clay. They also discover that clay can hold other materials upright.

In later stages of art-making, children aim for more figurative representations, but these are likely to be fantastical rather than realistic<sup>6</sup>: it is important to be aware that there are many ways in which children can be creative and demonstrate artistic thinking which need not involve realistic representation.

Teachers should be careful not to overlook or fail to engage with children's early artworks<sup>7</sup>. Some researchers suggest that children are not interested in representing reality but rather their experience of it<sup>8</sup>. For children, drawing or sculpting an object such as a pirate ship or an aeroplane is like creating an adventure that develops as the artwork progress. Children's art at this stage is likely to contain a blend of fiction and non-fiction as they draw from both their imagination and their comprehension. For example, they might combine factual knowledge of animals with fantastical elements such as wings. Children's block constructions also become symbolic, perhaps representing a tree house or a spaceship. Blocks are adapted to particular play ideas, and play ideas are adapted to blocks. For example, a tall, thin cuboid may stand for the rocket needed to propel the spaceship. These ideas are symbolic as children are representing objects that are not accessible but exist only in imagination<sup>9</sup>.

Children develop skill with sculpting materials such as clay through actions such as pinching and rolling shapes. Once children can successfully roll sausage shapes, they can begin to explore coiling, which is often an intuitive next step. Young children will progress to making things by combining pieces of clay (the synthetic method), such as beginning with a body and adding a head, legs and a tail to make a dog. Other children may begin with a single lump and squeeze parts from it.

Well-known schema of children's representational drawing indicate stages of drawing and often link each stage to a particular cognitive understanding. For example, one schema shows how children develop in their ability to draw people: initially, children draw people with arms and legs coming out of their heads before learning at a later stage to add a body to their drawing. However, these schemata may encourage adults to prioritise realistic artistic representation in children's development in the visual arts and to undervalue children's early achievements in relation to mark-making<sup>10</sup>. Rather, each child's visual arts production should be valued not in relation to a progression or stage but in its own right. While stage theories can provide a frame of reference, it is important to recognise that multiple social, cultural and personal factors contribute to children's learning in the visual arts. The interactions and support children receive from adults can be a major influence on their artistic achievement<sup>11</sup>.

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## Recommended further reading

Longobardi, R., Quaglia, R., Iotti, N. O. (2015). Reconsidering the scribbling stage of drawing: A new perspective on toddlers' representational processes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1227. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01227>.

## Endnotes

- 1 .Longobardi, R., Quaglia, R., Iotti, N. O. (2015). Reconsidering the scribbling stage of drawing: A new perspective on toddlers' representational processes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1227.
- 2 .Longobardi et al., 2015.
- 3 .Narey, M. J. (2017). The creative "art" of making meaning. In: Narey M. (Ed.), *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood. Educating the Young Child (Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice)*, vol 12. Springer.
- 4 .Longobardi et al., 2015.
- 5 .Cohen, L., & Uhry, J. (2011). Naming block structures: A multimodal approach. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 39, 79–87.

- 6 .Longobardi et al., 2015.
- 7 .Brooks, M. (2009). Drawing, visualisation and young children's exploration of "big ideas".  
International Journal of Science Education, 31(3), 319-341.
- 8 .Longobardi et al., 2015.
- 9 .Cohen & Uhry, 2010.
- 10 .Visser, J. (2005). The historical, philosophical and theoretical influences on early childhood visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand. ACE papers, Issue 16: Approaches to Domain Knowledge in Early Childhood Pedagogy, Paper 2.
- 11 .Narey, 2017.

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