

Why Messy Is Good

Encourage your preschooler's innate creativity.

By Mary Seehafer Sears | February 11 , 2008

Young kids are naturally creative. They run, play, color, paint, and dress up with abandon. Arts educator Elena Caravela of Summit, New Jersey, encourages parents to let this carnival of childhood creativity run free, and shares some tips to encourage exploration and discovery. In a spirit of playfulness and fun, here are her Cardinal Rules for Parents:

1. Lower your standards of cleanliness and order. For the most part, kids aren't neat. Give them an area where they can make a mess and don't have to clean up right away. (Think garage, basement, outdoors.)
2. Encourage each creative effort regardless of outcome. Never criticize a child's art. Do not impose "sense" on a child's pictures. At the same time, don't give false praise. "Tell me about that" is always a good starting point.
3. Be a family that reads and [tells stories](#). Encourage kids to make drawings to go with their stories and stories to go with their drawings.
4. Encourage your children to hang upside down or to look at a reflection in a mirror. Acknowledge that there are many ways of looking at things and several good ideas or solutions to a problem, not just one "correct" answer.
5. Point out shadows, light, patterns, and colors in the world, and revel in them yourself. Look at the sky, the clouds, the waves, the wind in the trees. Ask your child to close his eyes, listen, and report what he hears.
6. Give your child the gift of [unstructured time](#) (even if you have to schedule it to make it happen!) to daydream and "do nothing" without the distraction of a TV, computer, or video game.
7. Help her enjoy and savor the creative process. Finishing a work of art quickly is not the goal. Let a project sit and come back to it for a fresh perspective.
8. Provide toys that encourage open-ended play and individual expression instead of kits that lead children to a required outcome.
9. Ditch traditional coloring books in favor of a big pad of paper and crayons, or an open-ended book like *Scribbles: A Really Giant Drawing and Coloring Book* by Taro Gomi, where simple lines spur the creative process. Other options: start a simple drawing and ask your child to finish it. Or play Five Lines: you draw five lines and ask your child to make something from them. Then reverse the process: your child draws the lines, and you generate the art. This is a perfect game when you're traveling or while sitting in a place where you have to be quiet, like a doctor's waiting room.
10. Encourage each creative effort your child makes, regardless of outcome.

11. Use [nontraditional materials](#) to make a work of art. Pour birdseed in your driveway and let the kids manipulate it. Fill the wading pool with sand. Give kids empty toilet paper and paper-towel rolls and a roll of masking tape and see what they create.
12. Banish awards and competitions for kids younger than 8. Let your child know that participation is more important than rewards.
13. Point out and show your admiration for all kinds of artists working in the world today. Let your child know that you think there is an important place for artists in the world.

To help advance and support [arts education](#) in your child's school, download "My Child, the Arts and Learning: A Guide for Parents PreK to 2nd Grade" from the [Center for Arts Education](#). This document is available in nine languages.