

# Open-Ended Art: Fostering Creativity in Young Children

## What is “open-ended art”?

Open-ended art focuses on *the process rather than the product*. This means allowing children to explore materials as they see fit, rather than expecting children to create a certain realistic drawing, painting, or product. For younger children, this may mean exploring art materials with all of their senses as they get to know and understand the world around them. For preschoolers, this may mean experimenting with different techniques to see what happens, trying new approaches to solve problems, or beginning to experiment with making representational art.

## What are the benefits of open-ended art?

- Open-ended art allows children to express themselves through their art. This supports their understanding of their own emotions, and provides a tool for self-regulation.
- It provides opportunities to use language related to their creations and their emotions.
- They develop and refine their fine motor skills as they manipulate materials or use tools.
- Open-ended art encourages the highest levels of creative thinking.
- While exploring materials and methods, children's natural curiosity drives them to engage in problem solving. This helps prolong attention span, improve executive functioning skills (such as organization and sequencing), build perseverance, and instill a sense of competence and confidence—all of which contribute to creativity!
- These early experiences with creative thinking provide many of the skills needed to succeed later in life.



## How can I support my child's open-ended art?

In addition to providing the time and space for your child to explore independently, there are other things you can do to support your child's creativity at home, beginning with your thoughtful selection of art materials. Below is a list of fairly common open-ended art materials that have high potential for supporting creative thinking.

### Traditional Materials with High Creative Potential:

- Tempera Paint
- Paintbrushes
- Watercolor Paint
- Eye-droppers
- Finger Paint
- Tape or Glue
- Clay or Play Dough
- Pipe Cleaners
- Pastels
- Chalk

### Non-Traditional Materials with High Creative Potential:

- Cardboard Tubes
- Cardboard Boxes
- Craft or Popsicle Sticks
- Velcro or other Adhesives
- Wire
- Coffee Filters
- Recycled Food Containers
- String, Thread, Yarn, etc.
- Sponges, Tennis Balls, Golf Balls
- Leaves, Sticks, Rocks, or other Natural Materials
- Buttons and Fabric Scraps

Another factor in successfully supporting your child at home is how you talk about their artwork. Many of the benefits of open-ended art can be supported through your thoughtful and intentional use of language. Below are some examples of common phrases that can be problematic for young children, and alternative ways of approaching the conversation.

### Instead of Saying This...

#### **"I like your picture!"**

*This communicates to your child that they should create art to please others instead of themselves. A hallmark of open-ended art is children's intrinsic motivation to create, without seeking to meet others' expectations.*

#### **"What is that a picture of? A house? Wow it looks like a house!"**

*This communicates to children that art must be representative, focusing on the product rather than the process. Preschoolers may identify what their work looks like after experimenting, but applying labels detracts from the value of open-ended exploration.*

### Try Saying This...

#### **"You seem so excited about your drawing! Do you want to tell me about it?"**

*This communicates your interest in your child's work without focusing on your opinion or feelings. It also invites your child to express themselves and acknowledge their pride and excitement, contributing to feelings of competence and confidence. This is a great way to respond when your child asks "Do you like my drawing?"*

#### **"I see lots of red lines and green squares on your paper. You're working so hard on that!"**

*Instead of labeling your child's work, make concrete observations, putting emphasis on your child's process and effort. This also ensures that you don't mislabel what they have created—it may be a house, or it may not be anything, but avoid labeling it until your child does so first.*