

Children's Art Show

An Educational Family Experience

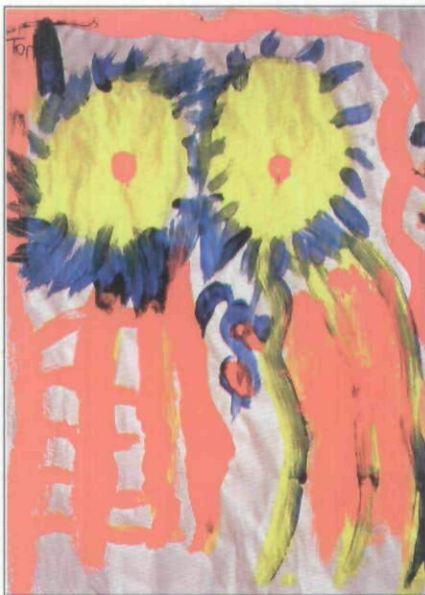
IN A TIME OF SEEMINGLY rampant budget cuts in the arts in school systems throughout the country, a children's art show reaps many rewards. It can strengthen family-school relationships and community ties and stimulate questions and comments about the benefits of art

and its significance in the development of young children.

The Worcester Area Association for the Education of Young Children (WAAEYC) created just such an exhibit several years ago to commemorate Carol Lawson, a longtime WAAEYC member, officer, conference chair, and local children's advocate. A free community event, the show celebrated the opening of the New England Association for the Education of Young Children's Annual

Conference in late April. The conference was presented by the Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children (MassAEYC) and the Massachusetts School-Age Coalition.

The show featured the work of children from infancy through age 12. WAAEYC members, families, and other teachers gathered more than 300 pieces of art over a six-month period from child care centers, Head Start programs, family child care providers, and public schools.



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Photos courtesy of the author.



Child-Centered Art Activities

Open-ended activities allow children to express their ideas and build upon their own experiences, bringing these experiences into their art. In an open-ended activity, there is no right or wrong way to work, and there is no one "correct" end result. An art activity of this type reflects the diversity of the group, as children have the freedom to express their individual narratives. Children are engaged because the art has meaning, and they can learn about their friends by observing and talking about one another's art.

Excerpted from Susan Conklin Thompson, *Children as Illustrators: Making Meaning through Art and Language* (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2005), 8.

Planning and Implementation

Preparation for the event began with visits to the DCU Centre Exhibit Hall to meet with the marketing agent and reserve the exhibit space. We drew up plans and ordered materials from the exhibit hall, including easels, dividers, skirted tables, and a curtain backdrop against which to hang children's large pieces of mural art. MassAEYC helped with the cost of supplies and equipment.

In the September before the spring show, I announced the details of the Children's Art Show at the annual WAAEYC meeting and urged members to begin saving children's artwork. A display table at the meeting held examples of some of the various



types of media that might be included in the show. Members of the art show committee designed and mailed a newsletter in January to public schools, early childhood centers, Head Start programs, and family child care providers. The newsletter contained suggestions for open-ended art activities and ways to mat and frame

children's artwork; detailed drop-off procedures; and contact information for art show committee members.

By early spring artwork was arriving in steady batches. We followed up with hundreds of phone calls and e-mails reminding early childhood educators and local public elementary schools about the show in April.

WAAEYC art committee members and early childhood students from Quinsigamond Community College and Becker College met weekly at the community college to mat, frame, and assemble the children's work. Using colored mat board, oak tag, cardboard, heavy manila paper, and clear acrylic plastic, they framed and mounted the art. Local paper factories, craft centers, recycling centers, and glass manufacturers generously donated frames, Plexiglas, paper, glue, scissors, tape, wire, string, tacks, and staples. The volunteers labeled each piece of artwork with preprinted adhesive strips stating the child's first name and program or school.

Two weeks before the show, the committee distributed brochures to public schools, early childhood programs, and family child care providers inviting families to attend the Children's Art Show.

The day arrives

At noon on the day of the show, committee members and college students began to hang the art in the exhibit hall. The art was organized by age/developmental stage. There were infant/toddler, preschool, primary, and school-age sections.

In addition to paintings and drawings, artwork included stitchery and weaving, clay, wood, and collages from recycled materials. The infant

and toddler section offered finger paintings, scribbling samples, and texture collages. Preschoolers created murals with cotton, sticky paper, and paint, along with some large box structures. Elementary school children displayed painting in acrylics, mosaics, and aluminum foil constructions. It was an aesthetically pleasing event with a fun, learning atmosphere.

Boards with educational commentary, excerpted from various books about early child development and art, were posted throughout the exhibit. For example, in the infant/toddler section a board titled "Stages of Scribbling" described what infants and toddlers do as they explore the use of crayons, chalk, finger paints, water and paintbrushes, and other media. In the preschool display area a board discussed "Developmentally Appropriate Open-Ended Art Experiences for Children." Other topics included "Why Is Art



This event brought into sharp focus the importance of art and creativity in the early years.

Important for the Young Child?" and "Elements of Art."

The show was scheduled to open at five o'clock. As we finished hanging the last pieces at 4:30, I noticed at the entryway a line of families already gathering in anticipation.

A success!

It was thrilling to see so many families enjoying the show with their children. I was moved by the faces of the elated children as they searched the aisles and found their work. I could hear voices call out, "Mom, Dad, Auntie, my art is over here!" I am not sure who was more excited, the children or their families. In the background children's musical groups filled the air with joyous, uplifting tunes.

This event provided a memorable, enlightening experience for teachers, children, their families, and the community. It brought into sharp focus the importance of art and creativity in the early years. It was a sensory and emotional experience I will never forget.



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