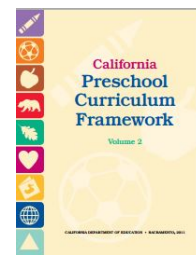




# Visual and Performing Arts Domain



## Guiding Principles

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## Guiding Principles

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This section describes general principles for preschool teaching and learning in the visual and performing arts. Each is applicable in some way to learning in any of the arts disciplines. Some principles are derived directly from contemporary theories of learning and child development. These include the importance of teachers “knowing” their children and providing instructional activities that tap into their prior levels of knowledge and preparation for those activities. Some principles, such as the first one below, point out general attributes of children as learners, particularly their keen, almost innate, enthusiasm for the arts.

The principles also include statements about the importance of exploration in pursuing the arts; after all, children’s creative expression will be more authentic when it is not dictated by adult rules or standards. When allowed this freedom, children will pursue not so much quests for right answers in art, but rather for expressions that are right for them or pleasing. This principle certainly does not suggest that teachers, parents, and caregivers are not valuable participants in the creative process. Their role is to scaffold learning; they do this by providing structure to activities, mediating potential problems, and inspiring and encouraging children’s progress. In this manner, adults can make the arts rewarding to all children, including those with special needs.

Beyond helping to build artistic skills, reflection and modification are important to the creative process. These opportunities in the arts also build skills such as problem solving and critical thinking; the arts bring parallel opportunities for the development of language/communication,

mathematics, and the development of social and interpersonal skills. In the same vein, the arts have applications to learning in many disciplines and to aspects of social-emotional development. Observant teachers can capitalize on the arts to foster such development.

The arts can be pursued even with meager budgets and free materials. Children benefit from high-quality learning experiences and high-quality materials—both as vehicles to encourage exploration and as symbols that demonstrate adult caring for children’s welfare.

► **The arts are inclusive of all children.**

The arts allow all children to participate in a meaningful and significant way and can help in developing a collaborative preschool environment. All individuals, including children with disabilities or other special needs, can find the arts satisfying and enjoyable. Accomplished artists with disabilities—Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Chuck Close (Wylie Coyote), Frida Kahlo, and Itzhak Perlman, among others—can serve as inspiration to all child artists, especially those with a shared experience of a disability.

► **The arts are a language that is common to all.**

Arts education is an opportunity to improve communication and embrace understanding between children of different linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and between children with different abilities. Children will flourish from using the arts as a means of self-expression. Additionally, arts education may serve as a scaffold to help children build verbal language skills. A prop and shared experience can create a point of shared meaning among children and in teacher-child interactions.



► **The arts promote dispositions for learning.**

Most young children enter preschool with a love of drawing, pretending, listening to music, humming and singing, and moving. They have a natural curiosity about the arts and a desire to be involved with and play through the arts. Daily time devoted to learning in the arts, the learning environment, adult-child interactions, and the curriculum design support and develop children's dispositions for lifelong engagement in arts-related activities.

► **Children make their own meaning.**

Children are unique in their own artistic interests and abilities; they process, construct, and assimilate information and skills according to their own desires. Original, imaginative expression is a natural occurrence when children engage in the arts. However, appropriate amounts of adult intervention or scaffolding are often necessary to



reinforce, promote, extend, or redirect learning. When provided with time for exploration, an appropriate environment, modeling, and encouragement, children will grow to value their own expressions and interpretations.

► **Children are capable of creating original art in all its forms.**

Preschool children have an impressive capacity to be inventive and skillful in their creations. Often this is observed at play. A child may portray the character of a grandmother with powerful persuasion or create a sculpture from material found in the home. These are examples of natural, creative expression that can be nurtured in the school and home environment.

► **Children learn about human connections, beauty, and appreciation of the arts.**

The arts speak to human beings' need to make connections between intellect and emotion and to find beauty in the ordinary. The arts are critical in any educational program, as they present situations to children, families, and teachers in which there is no approved standard or answer; people can discover their own sense of beauty and order. When a child is exposed to the arts—when he or she comes to love the art object or art making because of a deep, personal knowledge of it—the child will appreciate and value the arts in a unique way.<sup>1</sup>

► **The child's work is play.**

Children progress through various developmental stages and thrive in safe, playful environments. Well-designed arts curriculum accommodates children's developmental needs and provides various types of social interaction and play-oriented approaches to learning.

► **Children are active learners who thrive when challenged appropriately.**

Developmentally appropriate activities and materials are crucial to the young child. Art making can be messy, but children of all abilities progress in the arts through experiential, hands-on activities. An effective curriculum is therefore a container large enough to hold a broad range of methods, experiences, and definitions of success for all children, teachers, and preschool settings.

► **Arts experiences for preschoolers are more about process than product.**

If children engage in art, that is what matters—regardless of the end result or product. Predetermined performance goals or levels tend to hinder originality and potentially cause stress for children.<sup>2</sup> The process may sometimes seem messy and the result undistinguishable, but the child will likely take much joy in the experience and pride in her accomplishment.

► **The arts reinforce the integrated nature of learning.**

The arts are a unique way of knowing, but they also support learning across the curriculum. Engagement in the arts can be an effective means through which important early childhood skills and dispositions are developed—such as empathy and cooperation, curiosity in and knowledge about linguistic and cultural differences, ease with differences among people, vocabulary, symbolic understanding, and math-related concepts such as number, size and **shape**. Because children learn holistically, the arts should be presented in a way that is integrated with other domains of learning. Artistic

expression and products connect to other domains in the preschool curriculum, and these connections can be emphasized at strategic times during arts activities.

► **Cultural competence is approached through art.**

The arts are a part of all cultural traditions. The arts can help children reflect on their own cultures and origins as well as those of others. Some strategies included as part of this framework will aid preschool teachers in reflecting on the cultures and interests of the children's families and teachers. Through the arts, families and community members learn about and understand what goes on in preschools for their children and may devise at-home activities that embrace multiple cultures, abilities, and ways of learning. When children see and experience the artistic efforts and creations of families from diverse cultural backgrounds, it promotes positive connections between home and school. All children are empowered by sharing each other's family art traditions.

► **The arts are motivating and engaging for learners.**

Unique to the arts, for many children, is the feeling of success during the process of creation, which often results in the pursuit of art experiences. Success in the arts is not typically measured by a tangible product or a preconceived outcome, but through the experience and process. Early successes lead to future success and can create feelings of competency and confidence for children. The arts are a means to explore, take risks, communicate, and define personal perspectives and preferences regardless of culture, developmental status, or ability.



► **Art can nurture the nurturer.**

Learning in the arts provides the opportunity for teachers, along with the children in the program, to take part in artistic growth. The arts—especially in the preschool environment—are experimental, and teachers can enjoy the freedom and flexibility to offer arts experiences around interests that add to the feeling of joy and excitement in learning for all participants. Since children have a propensity for imitation, more than anything else, a teacher who is excited about the arts can potentially inspire children of any culture, language, or ability to become excited about art making.

► **The arts provide a unique means for families to interact.**

Parents and families, because of special bonds and trust, are in a position to encourage, enrich, and support their child's artistic opportunities, development, and education. They can contribute to the child's learning in the arts in many ways. This framework presents ideas for family activities in the arts in each strand. In addition, families are a rich resource for the preschool program. They have songs, stories, games, and many other talents to share. When children in the same early



childhood setting come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the gains from family involvement can be even more pronounced.

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## Environments and Materials

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**M**ost materials necessary to support preschoolers' learning in the visual and performing arts are inexpensive and easy to obtain and can often be shared across art domains. In fact, by rotating **props**, books, masks, and the like, teachers reinvent them in novel ways. Who would have suspected that the feather duster from the prop box would make such a wonderful peacock tail? This section presents possible materials for each of the four domains (a useful but not exhaustive list) and suggestions for creating a preschool environment to support learning.

There are basic needs in each art domain in order to create an exciting and enriching learning experience.

- Dance and movement require only space in a room and benefit further from music and **costumes** of modest scope and cost.
- Many things handy in a preschool environment can serve as props for dramatic play and drama,\* where imagination can turn almost anything into something else.
- Visual arts largely involve drawing, painting, and creating **two-** and **three-dimensional** works of art. These

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\*In this chapter, the terms *dramatic play* and *drama* are used. *Dramatic play* refers to children's spontaneous engagement in play, whereas *drama* refers to guiding children's activity in a structured presentation or actually providing explicit instruction in which children act out a drama.