

# Art Experiences for Infants and Toddlers

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Because infant and toddler development is so focussed on sensory and physical learning, there is a presumption by many that art experiences for infants and toddlers are not particularly useful to their development. However, observing the fierce concentration of an under two year old engaged in her first experience of painting in a playgroup session and the immense satisfaction she displays piling the paint onto her picture, demonstrates that the act of painting involves not only physical coordination but also important cognitive processes.

## The painting experience

By physically manipulating her brush into the paint and then putting it onto the paper the child has completed a relatively complex task, requiring focus and concentration. With repetition and practice the child will become increasingly skilled at manipulating the art tools available to her.



*A toddler engaged in a natural materials collage experience at playgroup.*

Once the paint is on the paper the child can decide how to move the paint around in a way that pleases her. The initial marks she makes on her paper will be random and clumsy. However, as she practices with painting, her skills will develop and refine. Children move through specific stages of art

development – scribbling, symbols, beginning realism.<sup>1</sup> Each stage is important and, in each stage, specific skills are learnt so the next stage of development can be reached.

Often, very young children can be helped by adults who can ‘scaffold’ the initial physical skills needed for painting by gently guiding brushes into paint pots, moving the pots nearer the brush, and talking with the child about what they are doing. However, it is very important that adults do not take over the action for the child. Role modelling can be helpful e.g. demonstrating how to use art tools alongside the child, but ‘the creative process must belong to the child.’<sup>2</sup>

Painting opportunities can be set up both indoors and outdoors. Because painting can be messy it is important that painting activities are kept in defined areas and are well supervised. A tarpaulin or lino square on the floor is fundamental to creating a good art area for infants and toddlers. Easels that are at infant and toddler height are important so little children do not have to struggle to get their brushes onto the paper.



*A perspex easel can either have paper attached or children can paint directly onto the transparent surface.*

<sup>1</sup> Brownlee, P. (1983) *Magic places*. Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 21.

Big pieces of cardboard or stiff paper, such as wall paper, attached to easels with bulldog clips, are good for toddlers who like to load lots of paint onto paper – newsprint often isn't tough enough for toddler art.



*Toddler using a very wide paint brush on cardboard attached to easel.*

A good option for toddler painting is a big piece of cardboard attached to a fence outside. Large fridge or dishwasher boxes (available from whiteware dealers) cut down the side and opened out, are fantastic for outside mural painting.

There are a range of paints that can be provided for infant and toddler art experiences. Tempera paint (pre-mixed or powder) is the most suitable for easel or tabletop painting. Non-toxic dyes are also good for toddlers.

Dyes are much more liquid in texture than thick tempera paint, and have bright clear colours. Painting dye onto absorbent paper can be effective (pieces of paper towel are effective as the size of paper can be varied). Dyes can also be used on newsprint paper. Keeping dyes in jars or pottles with lids, and with a piece of absorbent sponge in the jar, can minimise problems with spillage.



*Toddler experimenting with dyes. Pots are contained in a wooden paint-pot holder.*

Big wide brushes, rollers, large feathers and large pieces of sponge can give children the experience of handling different painting tools. These tools create quite different paint effects and can be used separately or in combination.



*Young child using large piece of sponge on her cardboard. The sponge pieces are dipped into a paint tray on a table next to the easel.*

Painting can be messy so having aprons available is important. Having a roll of paper towels near the art area can be helpful and reminding parents to send their children in old clothes is essential.

## The finger painting experience

Finger painting is a totally sensory, colour filled experience that is particularly appropriate for young children, and especially infants and toddlers. The ideal finger paint has a smooth creamy texture, which is presented to children on a flat surface such as a table or flat-bottomed water trough.

Having a smooth mixture allows little children to move the paint easily with their hands and make marks or patterns. Lumpy finger paint or paint that is too runny will not achieve the desired outcomes for a finger painting session.



*Toddlers playing with a cornflour finger-paint mixture in a flat-bottomed water trough outside.*

Finger-paint is best made by whisking together two cups of corn flour with one cup of cold water. Add boiling water to this mixture very quickly, whisking continually. Stop the hot water when the mixture suddenly thickens. Stir until the mixture is smooth and translucent.

A cup of lux flakes can be added to this mixture to give it extra body, but it is important to remember that some children are allergic to soap. The finger paint can be used without this addition.



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*Toddler and his mother enjoying a finger-painting session together.*

Adding colour to the finger paint can be done by using standard liquid tempera paint or food colouring. Each of these colouring agents will give different texture and depth of colour to the finger paint.

Finger painting can be a thoroughly satisfying experience for infants and toddlers, but it requires good supervision and input from adults who can talk to children about the experience. Adults can role model finger painting behaviour to children who may not be keen to try the new medium.

## The clay experience

Like painting, there are specific stages of development that can be identified as children learn to use clay. The first stage of using clay is the 'manipulative' stage, where children explore the clay by kneading it, poking it and playing with it. Infants and toddlers are at this stage of development with clay. They enjoy the tactile sensation of clay and, with experience, they enjoy a growing sense of control over the medium.

As children develop they move to the 'symbolic' stage where their clay shapes are named, even though there may be no apparent likeness to the object! This indicates a growing awareness that clay can be used to make objects.

The 'recognisable' stage of using clay appears when shapes do look like the object named by the child. These pieces will be crude at first, but with practice and experience young children can produce very sophisticated pieces of clay work.

Clay has some similarities to play dough but it is a much more 'plastic' medium, i.e. it can be used in a variety of different ways. Clay is a more sophisticated medium for modelling and encourages children to use their small hand and finger muscles, and fine motor skills. Good quality clay should be used with infants and toddlers. White ceramic clay, which has fine clay particles, is particularly appropriate. A low table, with a canvas throw over cloth, enables easy access by infants and toddlers. Simple clay tools and small sponges should be provided.



Clay can have water added to it, which creates another sensory way of experiencing the medium. Drying children's clay objects can also be a valuable way of showing children clay in yet another form. With older children this can encourage children to reflect on the objects they have made and the process involved in their creation.



*An under two year old enjoying squeezing a coil of white clay.*

Adult input into clay work can be extremely valuable. Adults can role model techniques for children by working alongside their child at the clay table. Enthusiastic participation and encouragement by an adult can be vital to a child's enjoyment of this medium.

### **The collage experience**

Gluing and sticking natural or man-made materials onto paper, card or wood is an appropriate art activity for infants and toddlers. However, it does require quality input from adults who will need to assist children with their first attempts. The glue medium itself requires an understanding of its properties and how to use it appropriately. For children to grasp these concepts, lots of explanation and demonstration by adults is needed.

As with other art activities, children can be assisted or 'scaffolded' with this process by: guiding brushes into pots and onto paper, discussion about choosing collage materials, helping place collage onto the glue. Adults need to take care that they do not take over the child's work and do it for them.



*Toddler using PVA glue to collage natural materials onto cardboard*

Collage materials should be displayed carefully so that children are aware of the range of materials available to them.



*Natural collage materials displayed in paau shells and cane basket*



*Natural materials displayed in ice cream containers*

## The drawing experience

Having opportunities for drawing is as important for infant and toddlers as it is for older children. There are a range of materials that are appropriate for drawing: pastels, crayons, pencils, and big felt pens. Chalk is an excellent drawing medium and can be done outside on concrete areas or on chalk-boards – set up either on table tops or on an easel.



*A young child talks about her mark making with her mother at playgroup.*

Surfaces for drawing need to be low or on the ground so that infants and toddlers can access the activity easily.

## Things to remember

- Support children's efforts but do not do the work for them
- Use non-toxic art materials
- Kept collage materials at a size that is safe for infants and toddlers

- Define art areas
- Have aprons and hand/paper towels available in art area
- Keep art activities well supervised

### Where to get art materials

There are many good suppliers of art materials that are appropriate for toddlers. Some of these are:

- School Supplies
- Playcentre Shops

Other companies also have comprehensive catalogues, which include art supplies. It pays to look around for the best deals. Always check that paints, glue, pens, crayons, pastels, and dyes are non-toxic.

Suggested art materials for toddlers include:

- 200 ml bottles of pre-mixed tempera paint in a range of colours
- short handled medium paint brushes
- wide brushes
- rollers
- powder dyes
- chalk
- wide felt tipped pens
- wax crayons
- pastels
- PVA glue
- Polycel glue
- white ceramic clay
- set of wooden clay tools
- canvas clay cloth

Potters supply stores (in the Yellow Pages) are the best for accessing clay as they specialise in a range

of clays. It is always a good idea to discuss your clay needs with the retailer. White clay is most suitable for toddlers but other clays are also good to use, especially if the clay has a high water content. Clay tools are also available through these stores.

Buckets with tight fitting lids are suitable for the storage of clay.

### Note well:

When storing clay, gather the used clay together at the end of a session, discarding dry or dirty clay, knead together and then shape into fist-sized balls.

If the clay feels too hard after kneading and balling, poke two finger holes into the balls and fill with water. Tightly pack into the bucket. Cover with a damp cloth.

Canvas for clay cloths can be purchased at stores such as Dwight's Canvas or Evans's fabric stores.

### Defining art areas

Keeping the art area fenced off from other areas in the playgroup can be useful. However it is important that parents and children can access the area easily and it is big enough for art activities to take place comfortably. Chairs and forms can also be used to separate off the art area.

