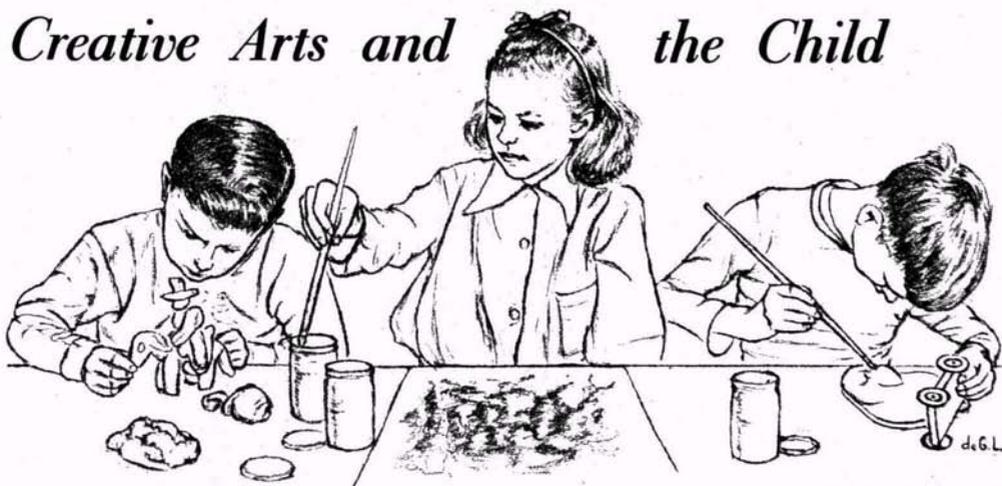


Creative Arts and the Child



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Art experiences can play a unique role in the emotional development of the child. Since they are both intensely personal and widely social, these experiences frequently influence the child's exploration of new and challenging areas of experience.

AMONG those who are concerned with education as preparation for full participation in a democratic society it seems generally agreed that a crucial test of the success of our educational system is the extent to which the young people coming out of our schools are capable of creative living. We sometimes fall into the error of believing, however, that a creative approach to living is something which is "taught" to young people in much the same way that the rules of grammar or the facts of history are taught. Actually it would seem to be closer to the truth to state that creative activity is a natural and essential part of human growth and development and that it is the difficult task of education to preserve and foster the irrepressible drive to creative action which we find in young children.

The methods by which very young children discover their world and establish relationships with it are essentially creative. The child's life is a constant succession of new experiences: the myriad sensations of a single day, the pronouncements from the adult world, the expanding relationships with other human beings, the child's own reactions to everything that he is doing and undergoing—all these constitute a continuous chain of events which are new in his life. These experiences carry no labels which the child can read and which will tell him how they relate to him as an individual and to his known world. This he must discover for himself, and the nature of his discoveries is essentially creative.

These discoveries come about through constant trial and experiment. A fork, the first time it is introduced to

a child, is something to eat with only because his mother says so. For him it may have a hundred possible uses, each one to be tried. And though the social amenities demand that he abandon most of his hypotheses, the day that he accepts a fork as something to eat with and nothing more is, in a sense, a very sad day. Out of his trials and experiments emerge relationships which the child accepts or rejects depending upon how well they fit into the constantly expanding concept of world and self which he is creating.

As a larger and larger percentage of the child's experiences become familiar through repetition and as the pressure toward conformity to routinized standards of adult behavior increases, the range of outlets for the child's creative drive is narrowed, and the arts begin to assume a more important place in his activities. It frequently appears to be a tacit assumption of those who are primarily concerned with the teaching of the arts that they have a corner on creativity, that only through the arts does the child—or the adult, for that matter—have any opportunity for creative activity. This is most unfortunate for, in the first place, it is a claim which is obviously false and, in the second place, it tends to obscure the truly unique contributions which the arts can make to the development of the individual. While it is true that the arts are essentially creative in nature, it is also true that every area of the curriculum presents opportunities for creative learning; the arts are not unique in this respect. Therefore to propose that the arts should have an important place in the curriculum because they are creative is to present only a part of the case.

A Personal Mode of Action

The unique quality of the arts is to be found in the fact that they are rooted in and develop out of the emotional and intuitive life of the child. Too often in the past we have tended to think of education as being concerned exclusively with the training of the intellect and to ignore the child's whole world of emotion and feeling as being either ineducable or inappropriate to the classroom. The idea that the emotions may be educated and that this education may best be achieved through experience in the arts is only beginning to be understood. Because the essence of creative activity in the arts is the individual and the personal, it is related to the experience of the child in such a way as to distinguish it from creative activity in any other area of human endeavor.

The uniqueness of this relationship has two aspects. First, because of the emotional and highly personal nature of art activity, it provides the child a means for dealing with aspects of his experience which defy adequate expression in any other type of activity. Each of us, even to the most thoroughgoing extrovert, has a private world of intense concerns and absorbing interests. These interests and concerns which form the core of the individual personality demand to be acted upon, and because they are personal and individual, they demand a personal mode of action—a mode of action which is the realm of the arts. It is true of children and adults alike that many of their feelings cannot be verbalized. This may be because the feelings are of such nature that they defy adequate verbal expression and can be stated more com-

pletely and more precisely in a non-verbal form of communication. Again, what the child feels about some experiences may not be clearly enough defined to be dealt with at the verbal level. Here the arts provide a means for further exploration and clarification of such feelings to the end that the child himself will better understand how he feels about such experiences. Or the child's feelings may be such that the rules of social conduct forbid him to act upon them directly. Some of his most intense feelings of revolt and aggression may be channeled into creative activities in the arts. While it is necessary that we recognize the importance of such motivation for art activities, it is also necessary to recognize that the field of art therapy is a very special field and that both diagnosis and treatment must be left to the specialist.

We have then, on the one hand, the private world of the child which, by its very nature, can be most adequately dealt with in the medium of the arts. This by itself might appear to make of art activity an almost morbidly introspective affair. But there is, on the other hand, the fact that through art activities the child can most adequately relate himself to many aspects of his more public world. Whatever concept or experience the child may be concerned with in his art activity, he can deal with it in his own terms and in his own way. The validity of his activity is verifiable not in terms of some outside criterion but only in terms of his own experience. He is not concerned with the statement of facts which are true in the experience of everyone, but rather with the statement of his feelings

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about those facts—feelings which are true in his own experience. Through art activities he has a means for integrating his understandings and his attitudes and establishing a pattern of values which is consistent with his own experience of the world.

New Areas of Experience

If the foregoing paragraphs can be considered as a general statement of the unique and indispensable function of art activities in the learning of the child—and therefore an indispensable part of the curriculum—then it may be possible to draw some conclusions as to the nature of art activities in the classroom and the kind of environment which is most conducive to creative development. The actual content of the art curriculum in the school is the experience of the child. It is recognized today, of course, by leaders in education that this is true of the total curriculum, but the concept seems to be of particular importance in the arts, first, because of their highly personal nature and, second, because art activity is essentially a means whereby the child brings his experiences together into unified patterns, lives himself into them, and makes them a part of himself. What the child learns from an art experience is not what the teacher has dictated or suggested but what he has been able to feel and express and clarify for himself. To achieve such expression he may often need the help and guidance of the teacher, but if he is to maintain his integrity as an individual what he ac-

cepts or rejects must be his own decision based upon his own purpose.

If this appears to relegate the teacher to the position of an almost helpless bystander, it must be pointed out that one of the most important functions of the teacher is to motivate children to explore new areas of experience. The child is not born with a full and complete set of purposes and motivations. These result from the impact of the environment upon his particular psychobiological make-up. Nor can creative activity proceed from a vacuum. It is rooted in direct experience, and the full range of human experience provides material for artistic creation. At the same time, the particular aspects of experience which provide motivation for creative expression vary widely from one individual to another. What is of intense interest to one child may be a matter of complete indifference to many of his classmates. It is important therefore that the school environment should be rich in direct experiences with as wide a range as possible, and that children should have opportunities to engage in art activities which are related to all areas of their experience. It is equally important that the teacher should take full cognizance of the diversity of interests to be found in any group of children, not only making allowances for it but actively fostering it to the extent that it is consistent with desirable social growth. Lest it appear that this is placing too great an emphasis upon the individual, it should be stated that many of the richest experiences are those which children are able to share with one another. The crucial factor is not whether the child is operating *alone* as an individual, but whether

he has the freedom and the opportunity to operate as an individual either alone or in the pursuit of a shared goal.

In his art activities the child is giving of himself more completely and more deeply than in almost any other kind of activity. Many times also he is exploring unfamiliar territory, attempting to find his way through a web of uncertainties. In such situations, his greatest need is an atmosphere of security and understanding with the assurance that he is respected as an individual and that his creative efforts will be equally respected.

The skills which the child learns must be understood as having a place of secondary importance. They are a means whereby he is able to increase the range and adequacy of his expression. This does not mean that the introduction of new materials or techniques must always await the expressed need of the child. **On the contrary, the** experience of new materials and modes of expression may often stimulate the child to explore new areas of experience or to deal with previously explored experiences in new ways. In fact, it is important that the school should provide as wide a range of materials as possible, but the use of materials and the learning of skills and techniques must always be understood as being instrumental to the basic purpose of art activities and should never become ends in themselves. For if we ask ourselves, "What shall we teach?" the answer must be that we shall teach the child to become alive to his world, to feel it as well as to understand it, to experience it deeply and, through such experience, to develop a sense of selfhood.

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