



## creative ways to parent FRESH COAT OF PAINT

My internal age is 4.5 years old, which is why my professional life consists of making art and playing with toys, in addition to asking and answering questions while I scribble in a notepad. I'm a Registered Art Therapist as well as a Mental Health Consultant and everyday parents ask me questions about their children, husbands, wives, grandparents, dogs, pet rocks, you name it. I have a firm belief that everyone has a creative side, literally or figuratively, and that sometimes we get stuck in the same old routine of living, loving, and working. Whether it's with our children, spouses, family members, co-workers, or most importantly, OURSELVES, we've probably all had to get a little creative in dealing with certain issues. This column will take you to a whole new level as I delve into topics that will get you looking at things a little... differently.

### LET'S GET MESSY!

There's something about glitter on the floor, paint on my clothes, and crusted glue on the table that makes me feel like I've had a productive day. I'll tell you a secret though: I haven't always lived like an Art Therapist. If there's something I've learned through the requisite house chores growing up (that I've carried through to adulthood), it's that (1) I despise cleaning the bathroom, and (2), it was my mother's goal to give me skills for my future and teach me to be responsible. She succeeded.

Instead of labeling a mess as a problem, it can instead be presented as an opportunity to promote and foster your own values in your child. These situations may provide the chance to assist your son or daughter in the development of creative expression, risk taking, limit learning, independence, social/emotional skills, self-control, self-responsibility, self-esteem, cognitive skills, sensory motor skills, and problem solving.

**As someone who has worked with various populations of children, I've picked up many techniques that can help you to achieve cooperative behavior with your children while maintaining your own parental balance.** Remember: young children usually engage in resistant behaviors in order to seek attention, gain a sense of control, or, more simply, to express boredom. So what are they really trying to tell you? The following list is a short compilation of some of the behavioral tactics I've used that can accomplish parental success in the home.

#### Choices, Choices, Choices

The initial step in gaining control is to give it. When children feel as though they have a say in the matter, they are much more likely to cooperate. Ask if they'd rather put their toys in the red bucket or the blue bucket. Would they rather clean up their blocks or cars first? This is a simple matter of semantics that will help you practice how to ask for things differently and still get the job done. Also, ask what they'd like to do once the task is

complete. Most likely, they will finish quickly since they're motivated for the next item on their agenda.

#### Crank the Timer

When I have to accomplish something with little ones on a time crunch, I give them a time constraint. Be enthusiastic, crank the clock, announce the number of minutes, and give a "READY, SET, GO!" Your child will be that much more engaged in the activity and have fun trying to beat you to the finish line. Periodically announce a time check or a countdown so they prepare themselves for the end. The ding will let them know the game is over, and if you use a timer with big numbers (or moving arms), they will quickly learn how to tell when their time will be up. The timer can be incorporated into many activities for a dose of quick fun. Remember, novelties wear off quickly, so time given should be in accordance to the age of the child.

#### The Token Economy

The Token Economy system is typically seen through the use of reward charts, sticker posters, and token belts. The goal of this method is for children to achieve cooperative behavior through positive reinforcements and "earning" a prize, sticker, or activity. Implementing a token economy should include true motivators for the child as the end result. For example, if your child loves reading books at night, when they complete a task, give them a sticker or a token that will earn them an extra book at the end of the week. Do they love the computer? If they get the job done, they can earn an extra 5 minutes at the end of the day (here comes the timer again!). For older children, another option is to earn tokens toward the future purchase of an item they've been begging you for. You and your child can compromise on a "token cost" for the item.



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#### Take a Break

It can be difficult for children to focus on tasks that require extended periods of time. Don't you find it easier to complete a time-consuming task when you take a quick break and then reapproach it? Sometimes the same rules can apply to your kids.

#### Dance Party Time!

In the middle of a task, announce an impromptu movement activity to break up the job into smaller sections. Give your child a 5-minute movement or sensory break and the chore won't seem so overwhelming. Engaging in a movement or tactile activity will stimulate their senses and give them a boost. Giving them an outlet for their energy will help them to re-focus on the task at hand a few minutes later.

#### Rotate the Bins

Is your child bored with some of the toys or books that have always entertained them in the past? In order to redirect your child in a state of upset, you've got to make sure you have items on hand that can engage them. Instead of always struggling to find new toys that may keep their interest, stow some away for a month or two and then reintroduce them (as long as they're still age-appropriate). You may find that your child has rediscovered their love for certain items and that the toys have stimulated some memories from the past.

#### The Schedule

Just because you're a morning person doesn't mean that your child will be. Having them create their own schedule will be a lesson in structure, planning, choice, memory tactics, and independence. First, take pictures of your child's activities where they take place, either in the home or at school. Stick Velcro to the backs of the picture cards and place them on a poster board. Include the

titles that your child will need to incorporate into their daily schedules such as Potty Time, Clean-Up Time, and any other pertinent task.

Place this schedule in an accessible location and have your child pull the picture cards off on a daily or weekly basis to create their own orderly schedule. The rule is that they are to use every card and complete all of them by the end of the day or week. Make sure to swap cards as activities develop or phase out.

#### ...and drum roll, please....Create a Mess!

Children learn a great deal of their own behavior through modeling and imitation, so show them that it's OK to make a mess! Explain that there is an appropriate time and place for it, and that the fun comes with the responsibility of cleaning up. If there's been mess or an accident, take this as an opportunity to exhibit your composure in handling the matter and bring in a cleaning lesson, such as how to use a broom, dustpan, or paper towel. Offering to help them, or using "please" and "thank you," will make your child feel as though you are both in this together.

Take a chance to transform those messes into a land of opportunities! If you practice these tactics, you might just wake up one day not minding that speck of glitter on the rug, paint on your jeans, or crusted glue on your kitchen table... and smile.

*Diane Quiroga, MA, ATR, is currently making messes all over New Jersey as a Mental Health Consultant / Child Counselor / Registered Art Therapist. She provides services at the East Orange Child Development Corporation and at Sensory Kids, LLC in Jersey City. She is also an Art Therapist at the Arc Kohler School in Mountainside. Diane is available for consultations and private practice at her office in Livingston, NJ. [www.dianequiroya.com](http://www.dianequiroya.com). [info@dianequiroya.com](mailto:info@dianequiroya.com).*

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