



# a fresh coat of paint CREATIVE PARENTING

by Diane Quiroga



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.



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## "LISTENING" TO YOUR CHILD'S ARTWORK

### Art Speaks!

Since prehistoric times, art has been used as a tool to communicate messages to others. For centuries, art historians have dedicated their lives to deciphering the codes and meanings of art. Fortunately, it won't take nearly as long for you to make sense of what your child's artwork is trying to tell you. As an Art Therapist, I'm often given a child's drawing by a teacher or parent along with one question: "What does this MEAN?"

Please understand that being an Art Therapist does NOT mean that I can tell you what your child's fears, hopes, and dreams are by "reading" artwork. **What your child's artwork CAN provide, however, is a wealth of information in regards to choice, self-esteem, emotional and developmental level, problem-solving, creativity, and overall ability.** Art is yet another tool that offers you insight into your child's development and creative growth - so we really need to pay attention!

Perhaps you think there won't be much meaning present in a scribble of Thomas the Train, but art definitely makes a statement. **As a parent, there are certain tactics you should learn that will make it easier to discern what your child's artwork is really telling you and that will help you to establish a most optimal environment for creating art.** The following techniques will give you the information you need to fine-tune those listening eyes.

### Set the Setting

First things first - setting up the time and place for proper art making is very important. As a kid, I thought I could multitask with the TV blaring, the rest of my toys strewn about, and the dog nipping at my leg. The result:

mediocre quality work and poor focus. It's best to shut the TV off, make sure you've got all the materials on hand, and designate an appropriate art space. Try to choose a time when you'll be most available and when distractions and interruptions will be at a minimum so that your child knows that this is important to you, too!

### Accept the (Potential) Mess

I'm a huge advocate of mess making. However, don't get nervous. There are ways you can let your child make art while preventing a mess from happening all over your kitchen. Smocks, drop cloths/newspaper, plastic reusable trays, and keeping small towels nearby can prevent the messes from getting out-of-hand. Accept the potential mess, prepare yourself, and get started! There is no excuse - especially if you've been introduced to the newest line of Crayola "Color Wonder" products (and no, I won't be getting paid for this advertisement!).

### Stop, Look, and Listen

We've all been culprits of leading our little artists to complete what our hearts desire, but shouldn't we be letting them create their own images and stories? A part of me can't help but cringe inside when I hear adults ask a child to make something "more pretty" or lead the child with their own ideas: "Is that a house? Are you going to draw Mommy and the grass and Spot? You should put more glitter on it!" Before you know it, you've already led the child toward what YOU think the image represents before giving them a moment to think or decide on their own. Chances are, if you tell your child what you think it is, that's what they may tell you it is. The key to their authentic ideas and answers is allowing them to take the lead. That means NO rushing, NO interrupting, and WAITING. You might be surprised at what a hard task this may be for you, but the first step is being aware and

### Ask Age-Appropriate Questions

Simply, keep it brief and ask age-appropriate questions they'll understand. Some examples of statements that aren't leading are:

- "Tell me about what you've done!"
- "Tell me about THIS." (As you point to a particular part of the picture.)
- "Tell me a story about your picture."
- "Tell me a Once-Upon-A-Time story." Start a verbal prompt for them to continue with "Once Upon a Time there was...."
- "What should you name this / title this?" This statement will give you information about what may be on the forefront of your child's mind even if the image is a scribble, or may help engage a child who may not want to speak about their artwork.

Notice a trend? These statements are very general, non-specific, and stimulate a response. They prevent you from leading the child, while helping to foster their own creative thoughts, stimulate conversation, and prompting them to make more art. If your child gives you a narrative or story as they draw and turns to you for a reaction, a simple pause, nod, "Oh!" or "Mm hmm" in agreement is truly all it takes for their personal thoughts to continue streaming out without your influence. **Your reassurance, presence, and acceptance of their ideas and artwork will boost their own self-confidence and self-esteem.** When adults are constantly giving a child their own ideas or overlooking the child's lead, the child may take this as a rejection of their ideas and refrain from sharing them in the future. Use the phrases above, and your child will most definitely respond confidently!

### Materials and Choices

Will your child choose artistic media that offers a sense of control and detail, such as pencils or markers - or something that will offer a higher sense of expressiveness, such as paints or clay? These choices will indicate preferences and control, and teach you more about who they are and HOW they want to communicate their artwork. Your permission and approval of

their choices and experimentation with media will boost their sense of self and ego. Does their clay crack? Does their paint smudge? This will give your child the opportunity to problem-solve and ask you for guidance.

### Don't Be Hands-On

I don't know about you, but when I'm in the kitchen cooking my world-famous quesadillas, the last thing I want is someone coming in and tampering with what's in my pan - so why would you do this to your own child's artwork? When trying to instruct your child in drawing skills, use your own sheet of paper on the side to show them, but please do not be hands-on in changing or "fixing" parts of their artwork. Children view their artwork as an extension of themselves. Not only can they get very territorial, but they can also get very upset when made to feel that their art is "wrong" or when their work is altered. I make it a point to teach children the boundaries rule, which requires that they ask permission before working on another person's work of art. I also make sure that they are aware there is no right or wrong when it comes to art.

Just because your child hasn't experienced a Bob Ross painting lesson doesn't mean they aren't expressing themselves while communicating a message, conveying a feeling, or exploring a creative outlet. When you look at their work of art, you should ask yourself: If I were to step into that picture, how would I feel and what story is being told? Art speaks! It's time to listen.

*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.dianequiroga.com](http://www.dianequiroga.com). [info@dianequiroga.com](mailto:info@dianequiroga.com).*

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