



# Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

## How to talk to children about their art

By Joanne Go, M.S.

When we see our toddler make marks on paper, we are thrilled. Our child can draw! We all know that drawing leads to writing, which is such an important skill in our society. And actually the precursors of all letters begin with the ability to draw lines and circles. Lots of practice at making marks will eventually lead to drawing symbols that look like something we can recognize.

From the toddler's first marks on a page to watching a teenager who doodles for hours or draws cartoons, we want to encourage all our children's efforts at self-expression. "Oh, that's beautiful!" we exclaim. Some of the pictures go on the refrigerator, some get sent to relatives. Some are even framed. And although this probably makes the child feel good, their focus is entirely different from adults.

Parents and teachers should be aware that for young children the process of creating the art is what's important, not the product. This is why often children simply throw away their work when they are finished. When we see a child making lots of lines on a page that don't seem to make a "picture", that's just as important as when the child begins to make their first representational drawings (pictures that look like something else). The sun, or a person's face is often the first recognizable picture a child may attempt.

Keep in mind that artwork is a personal expression of the child's inner life. There is no right or wrong way to create art. Any judgment we may make could be interpreted by the child as a rejection of them as a person. Pablo Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist when he grows up." The solution lies in how we as adults interact with children about their works of art. We must support their creative expression in both subtle and direct ways.

Some experts would say, "Absolutely no coloring books," but as a parent and a teacher I've seen many children go through a stage when they really want to use coloring books. Plain paper and crayons are best for encouraging creativity, but coloring books are appealing to 4 and 5 year olds who are interested in refining their artistic skills and accuracy. Just make sure that you are not insisting that they "color within the lines" and that you are providing other opportunities for expression along with the coloring books.

Sometimes it is wise to wait until the child shows you a picture before you make any comments at all. Otherwise, you may interrupt the flow of creativity. Don't feel compelled to say how beautiful and gorgeous each picture is. Instead notice the pleasure your child expresses in the act of creating. For example, you might say, "I noticed that you worked a long time on this." Or, "You are so happy with your picture."

Do not ask your child direct questions like, "What is it?" or "What color is this?" You will get more insight into your child's creativity by saying something like; "Tell me about your picture." Then just listen. Teachers often write the child's own words on the page. Sometimes reflecting back what your child has said will allow her to expand. You might say, "So, that's Sally and that's her balloon." The child may say, "Yes, they're at the zoo." Then she may want

to add more to her picture.

Another phrase you can use to get a conversation started is, “Is there a story that goes with your picture?” It’s perfectly natural for your child to go on and on with the story beyond what you can see on the page. This provides an opportunity for adults to get a glimpse of the child’s playful world of fantasy. Or, perhaps it may shed light on the child’s unique view of reality.

What about the colors children choose? I’ve heard people tell children such things as, “Now trees aren’t blue, are they? I’ve never seen a blue tree.” This comment places our subjective judgment on the child’s work. Color and accuracy are not important in a child’s artwork. If you want to comment about color, you might say, “I noticed that you used a lot of blue color on this page.” This statement acknowledges that the child chose that color without questioning his or her judgment.

Here are some ways to encourage children’s creativity:

- Listen to the child’s own interpretation of their artwork and respect their individuality.
- Encourage creativity by providing lots of materials for children to use - various colors and sizes of markers, crayons, and paper, as well as chalk, finger paints and watercolors.
- Allow them to use the floor as a surface sometimes.
- Work with clay or play dough to strengthen fine motor muscles. It will help children’s cutting and drawing ability to improve over time.

This kind of support gives children the confidence they need to continue exploring their inner world.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. [www.childbuilders.org](http://www.childbuilders.org) ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral  
call your child’s school counselor

DePelchin Children’s Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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