

# Nurturing Creativity in Kids

Kids are born with boundless creativity. When given encouragement to share their imaginations through artistic expression such as drawing, painting, dancing, singing, and acting, their creations will reach far beyond what any adult could have envisioned. The joy of artistic expression is more than just fun. Research is showing that expressing ourselves in creative ways is a cornerstone of wellness.

Unfortunately, our culture tends to place more emphasis on competing, winning, and achievement than it does on our innate human need for self-expression. Additionally, time for art is not given the same priority as teaching kids about subjects like math and English. This is a trend to examine and reverse. Kids must be given more opportunities to embrace their inner artists by exploring a variety of art styles, and by expressing themselves — and valuing themselves — as artists. Below you will find ideas for incorporating visual arts lessons and activities using nature as inspiration. Note that although the focus is on visual arts, the concepts translate to all forms of artistic expression.



## What is “Good” Art and Who Gets to Decide?

Many of us were taught that our art was “good” only if it resembled the subject. When it comes to visual arts, kids may take on society’s expectations about what “good art” is and, as a result, decide early on whether or not they are “good artists.” The shape of this tree is correct, the leaves on that plant are properly green, and so on. Yet a survey of famous (and not-so-famous) artists reveals an astonishing array of styles. Start by asking kids, “Does art need to be realistic to be good?” You can further the discussion by asking, “How does our culture judge art? Who gets to define what “good art” is? Who decides the value of a piece of art? Why?”

Invite them to consider Vincent van Gogh. During his lifetime he sold only one painting. He wasn’t famous and he struggled with poverty throughout his life. Today he’s considered one of the most influential painters in the history of Western art. In 1990 one of his paintings sold for \$83 million! Ask kids to ponder how and why his art became so highly valued. Revisit the previous question of who gets to decide how to value art.

## Setting the Stage for Creativity

Invite kids to consider the role creativity and art play in our lives. Share how wellness experts have shown the importance of creativity in supporting wellness. Invite them to consider if (and how) their own creativity has ever been quashed and allow them to share and then discuss. Talk about the disconnect between the importance of creativity to wellness and the ways our culture can overtly or inadvertently discourage creative expression.

Share some examples of different artistic styles. Engage students in a discussion about art and creativity with prompts such as, “Is this painting realistic? How? Is that important?” and, “What emotions does this piece evoke?” This may prompt an even deeper discussion about the role of art in society. Should art be pretty and make the viewer feel good? What about art that evokes other emotions? Should art help a person think or feel differently about life?

Below are a few nature-themed pieces of art in a variety of styles to share.

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*Young Woman with Peonies, Frédéric Bazille, 1870*



*Bouquet of Sunflowers, Claude Monet, 1881*

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*Zinnias*, Henry Lyman Sayen (1909–1912)



*Vase with Twelve Sunflowers*, Vincent Van Gogh, 1888

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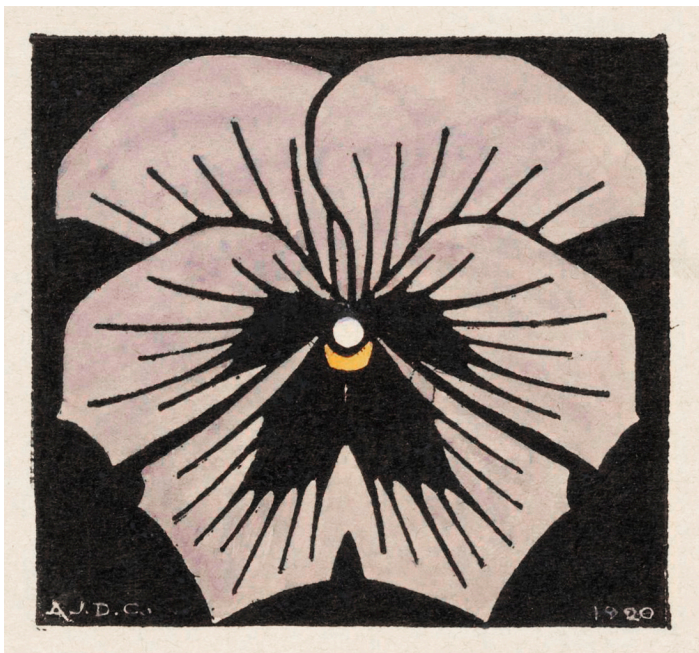
*Red Canna*, Georgia O'Keeffe, 1919



*Autumn Flower*, Paul Klee, 1922

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*Woodcut Flower, Julie de Graag, 1920*

### Fun Ways to Inspire Creativity

Now that kids have pondered the concepts of art and creativity and have seen a range of styles, it's time get them drawing! Following are some creativity exercises. One goal of these exercises is to help blur the line between kids who perceive themselves as "artistic" and those who don't, and to help all kids to know and embrace their unique creativity.

**Negative space:** Prompt kids to draw what's *not* there, instead of what's there. This exercise turns drawing on its head! We all have preconceived ideas about what a leaf or tree looks like, and when we start drawing our thinking mind naturally conjures up those ideas. By drawing what's not there we free up our creative side.

A simple way to do this is to place overlapping leaves on a surface and ask kids to draw the shapes between the leaves:



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Example of creative use of negative space.

### Non-Dominant Hand Art

Have kids draw with their non-dominant hand. They can use pencils, pens, even finger paint! This helps even the playing field among kids who are confident in their artistic skills and those who are less confident.

### Get Abstract!

Explain that abstract (or non-representational) art reflects the artist's feelings and thoughts, rather than striving to be an exact representation of what they see. Show examples, such as *Landscape at Collioure* by Henri Matisse and have kids describe what they feel. Then invite kids to create their own free-form art.



*Landscape at Collioure*, Henri Matisse, 1905

### Color Mix-Up



Who says a tree's leaves have to be green, the sky blue, the rocks brown/gray, etc. Invite kids to draw and color in shades that aren't "realistic." How about purple leaves, blue bark, and orange grass? This helps get kids out of the "it has to look real" mindset and just have fun.



*Décor Plat*, Henry Lyman Sayen, 1915

### Super Close-Ups

Have kids observe plants up close, such as the pattern of seeds on a sunflower, the buds of a zinnia, or a succulent rosette. Have them sketch just the pattern, rather than the whole plant. Further engage kids by bringing in samples (or photos) of patterns, such as the spirals on pinecones and pineapples, that are found throughout nature.

### Botanical Drawings

Explain how artists depict all plant parts in a single drawing (roots, leaves, buds, flowers, fruits), even when they don't all exist on a plant at the same time. Bring in plants for kids to draw. For example, dig up some dandelions or other "weeds," wash the soil from the roots, lay them on a sheet of paper, and have kids sketch the plant and label the plant parts. This helps focus kids on the plant parts and less on their perceived skill level.

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Example of botanical drawing.

## Collaborative Art Projects

Consider group projects that every kid a chance to contribute. For example:

### Improv Art

Inspired by improv theater! Give every child a blank piece of paper. Give them 30 seconds to quickly sketch a shape inspired by the garden/nature. It could be a leaf outline, a squiggly line that reminds them of a worm, anything! No pressure to "draw" anything. Have them pass the papers to the child next to them, who then has 30 seconds to add their own sketch/shape inspired by what they already see on the paper. Continue until every child has had a chance to contribute to every piece of paper. Then post the resulting art and discuss/admire.

### Collage

Have kids create collages by cutting out random shapes from gardening magazines, seed catalogs, etc. and pasting them onto sheets of paper. Option: show kids the color wheel and have them create collages based on color combinations: monochromatic, **analogous (colors found side by side on the wheel)**, **complementary** (hues directly opposite each other), etc. Then cut out leaf and flower shapes from the pieces of paper and arrange them on a poster board to create a large design.

### Free Draw

Finally, make sure to provide opportunities for kids to have complete control over the materials they use and subject matter they bring into focus. Set aside regular time to give them access to a wide range of media and the freedom create without boundaries.

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