

A Talk by Lindy Moran

Art News -- Inspiring Young Creative Minds
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Our Changing Landscape

Before I get into my world of art and inspiring young creative minds, I would like to take a moment to talk about the environment that surrounds us.

It's an exciting time in the progression of information technology. I'm struck by the range of electronic devices that entertain us, connect us and teach our children and us. Our iPhones are usually at a finger's distance, our children do their homework on laptops, our toddlers are entertained on iPods, and our babies on iPads.

The speed in which we move is fast – and the way our children learn is more cluttered and faster than ever before. Our concentration levels are shorter and the desire for multitasking is greater. We feel the need to be up to speed with the best and the brightest tools, and the latest parenting classes and activities, which keep our children's schedules full and their bodies and minds active.

And through all of this we are making choices to support our child's development.

The changes are accelerating, and we can't say how, when, where or why. What we do know is that certain trends indicate that the world will change in fascinating ways. China, Russia, India, Brazil and others will play an even more dominant role in the world. We know that the population will continue to grow at unprecedented levels. We know that technology will open new frontiers.

And, the only way to prepare for the future is to make the most of ourselves and be flexible and productive. And of course to educate our children to be solid individuals with the same outlook – they'll probably have multiple careers!

The Latest Medical News

When I was asked to give this talk I pondered over what focus I'd take. Should I focus on the benefits of art and child development linked to the latest medical studies, discussions with doctors, and teachers and so forth and so on?

Too much to cover in too little time ... so here's a sampling of the latest medical news.

Recently Harvard published results from the long awaited research from Gesell Development Assessment (measures a child's growth and development patterns). Childcare experts and the Early Childhood Development Coalition (US) strongly advocate art and play in early childhood to support a child's neurological development.

Several studies concluded that when a child receives quality art education, his or her ability to succeed in academic achievement is often interconnected. They all noted the positive effects of art on children's physical and mental development and decried the amount of time that schools allow for play and art.

Next came the study called "Learning, Art, and the Brain" by the Dana Foundation, a private philanthropic organization. Their study showed that the arts can train children's attention, which in turn improves cognition and might even improve math and reading skills. This is huge news for all children, but especially for children with learning challenges.

From medical experts and childcare experts the latest findings from the Pathways of Play studies concluded that art helps to develop the right side of the brain and helps fine motor skills that cultivate important skills that benefit a child's development. The optimum time for neurological development is from birth to 6 years.

Lastly, a report by the Rand Corporation (a nonprofit research institution) showed that involvement in the arts is associated with gains in math, reading, cognitive ability, critical thinking, and verbal skills, and improves motivation, concentration, confidence, and teamwork. Beyond these academic benefits, the report highlighted the individual pleasures of the art experience and noted that we "can connect people more deeply in the world and open them to new ways of seeing," creating the foundation to make social bonds and a deeper sense of community.

Educating the Educators

Then came the news that began to percolate about a new documentary called "Race to Nowhere." I'm sure you've heard about it, and if you haven't, you soon will.

This film features real-life stories about over-stressed, over-scheduled, over-competitive school children. These young people who have been pushed to the brink, educators who are burned out and worried that students aren't developing the skills they need, and parents who are trying to do what's best for their children.

There is a call to action to mobilize families, educators, and policy makers to question current assumptions on how to best prepare our children to become healthy, bright, leading citizens. This film raises many questions, and has fueled the need for change in our educational system from early childhood learning through to teens.

And what it's highlighted is the huge disconnect in the teach-to-test curriculum that favors memorization over critical thinking. What is catastrophically wrong with this mode of thinking is that it severely underestimates the human capacity. Tremendous significance is placed on standardized tests, funding is cut for what we consider "non-essential" programs, and then we wonder why our children seem unimaginative and uninspired.

I quote a recent thought from Howard Gardner, Professor in Cognition and Education, Harvard School of Education: “There has never been more material (or digital media) for teachers to present and for students to master in school. But at the end of the day, the most important questions are: What kind of human beings will we become? And what kind of society will we have?”

We are in a time of reflection, transition and change. There is an urgent need to evolve a new appreciation of the importance of nurturing human talent along with the understanding of how talent expresses itself differently in every individual.

Education and subjects have or are being reviewed and a renewed focus on arts education to help build life skills and critical thinking needs to be increased. Students need to explore the full range of their abilities and interests.

Education is the system that’s supposed to develop our natural abilities and enable us to make our way in the world, not stifle the individual talents and abilities of students. And, I believe that education is not linear, it is organic, and we need to teach and reach your children in creative ways to meet their needs.

Spotlight on Art!

But it’s not all bad. A new picture is emerging. From medical studies and documentaries to declarations of change, the spotlight is on Art.

Currently, schools and educators in academics are embracing the need to increase play and creativity in early childhood learning. I’ve been involved in meetings in Hong Kong and spoken to schools outside Asia and they are taking this seriously and integrating art into their school curriculums -- from entry level to Grade 5. And there is a renewed focus on the Arts from Grade 5 and up. In the U.S., Hong Kong and Australia, art interest is amplified.

And through all of this stirring it suddenly became clear to me. We need to get back to the basics or maybe to the “classics.”

So what I want to talk about today, and I feel passionately about, is the very human aspect of art. It is my philosophy for my Little Picasso Studio – simply, the 10 life skills that art brings to your children.

What is Art?

To me, Art can be many things. It’s not just drawing and painting – it is thinking and feeling and communicating. Art can be collage, mosaics, prints, photography, sculpture, video and many other media.

It’s not just Happy ... anger, pain, wonder, sadness and many other emotions. It can be therapy.

It's not just Realistic ... it can be abstract, symbolic, imaginary, distorted, or a fleeting impression of a moment in time.

And, as my son says Art can also be your Friend.

Personally, when I am painting, drawing or creating I have a general notion of what I am about, a feeling of my authentic self. I have a real sense of intuition, confidence and satisfaction. I am totally happy.

My job is to inspire your children to reach similar feelings and learn life skills along the way.

I believe that we are all born with tremendous natural capacities, and that we lose touch with many of them as we spend more time in the world.

Are we educating our children out of their creativity? I hope not.

Perhaps there is a misunderstanding of art and its very foundation. Some parents feel that art isn't that important because their child doesn't aspire to be an artist. They have missed the point.

The process of art and creating offers a solid foundation for your child's learning, improves academic studies, and is essential for their growth in life. It is the process that provides the critical thinking.

Please encourage your children to be creative and learn life's lessons. Creativity requires whole-brain thinking; right-brain imagination, artistry and intuition, plus left-brain logic and planning.

Skills in critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, communication, collaboration and innovation are crucial for achieving success in our changing global economy. AND, you are giving your child life's greatest gift – to connect with something fundamental to their sense of identity, purpose, and well-being.

Here's My Top 10 Life Skills That Art Teaches Your Children

(1) Imagination

Unleash a child's imagination and you've opened up dreams! Children imagine all the things that they want to be, want to create and they use innovation to get there. And when a child's imagination is unleashed he/she begins to create and cognitive development is happening. Types of creativity include: aesthetic organizing (order and beauty from chaos), boundary pushing (thinking outside-the-box) and inventing (think Leonardo da Vinci.) Not only was he a great artist, he was also a scientist, engineer, musician AND inventor. You may not know this – he was fascinated with machines. His ideas were certainly innovative – he designed the first helicopter, machine gun and tank. He was certainly ahead of his time.

Through imagination, we can visit the past, contemplate the present, and anticipate the future. We can also do something else of profound and unique significance. We can create.

I celebrate this so much that it's my Little Picasso Studio's promise: "Building an imagination for life!"

(2) Optimism

Through art children experience the feelings of freedom, fun and the overriding sense of positive adrenaline – the Optimism button is switched ON. I have seen this in my classes and it's very rewarding. Children who entered my studio with heavy shoulders because they could not focus or complete their school projects; they felt overwhelmed. But, once you tap their interests, spark their imaginations and celebrate their own ideas their outlook shifts and the work begins to flow. These children found their place in my art studio where they are engaged in creating, focused, completed projects and are happy. They experienced a great sense of achievement for the first time.

This transformation nurtures the very depths of a child and gives a child the opportunity for finding their passion in life. Optimism also provides good energy and helps children make good choices that affect their physical and mental wellbeing.

In addition, being optimistic will help a child be prepared for the challenges, opportunities and obstacles that comes with a changing world.

Lastly, there are health professionals who believe in these benefits too. They use Art Therapy to improve the well-being of their patients including attention disorders, reducing stress and anxiety, helping depression and increasing self-esteem and self-awareness.

(3) Growth

Art moves the mind and body into action--both physically and mentally. Research shows that art enriches the learning environment that stimulates a child's brain. Children develop their fine motor skills while creating – holding a paintbrush, drawing, squeezing a glue bottle, cutting with scissors.

And, children grow cognitively when their brain nerve cells are stimulated and motivated by the sensory and tactile aspects of art. Learning to create and develop art techniques playfully, patiently, diligently, and persistently are all great ways to teach and educate children to move forward and grow.

Lastly, I'll add good teaching practices to the Growth Skills. Studies show that children who are given constructive and positive feedback about how they are learning motivates the child to be self-motivated and to grow to their optimum ability.

(4) Courage

Some people say art develops self-confidence and I will add on one more. It also develops Courage. Did you know the word courage comes from the Latin word for "heart"? Just as the heart is the

organ that pumps blood to all the other organs, Courage is the virtue that vitalizes all the other virtues.

Children express self confidence through art on a fundamental level. Sometimes their artwork is the manifestation of that expression, but more often, it's the physical process of creating that is the expression. Picture the toddler pummeling his fists in play-dough to release unhappiness, a six year old joyfully painting flowers with huge arm movements blending reds and yellows, a ten year old drawing a portrait of her grandmother who recently passed away.

Creating art allows children to work through feelings and emotions in a real and confident way. Rather than being told what to do, they learn to trust their feelings and with gentle and patient teaching the answers will come from the child. This is building a child's self confidence in the most natural and efficient way.

Art is an experience that requires freethinking, experimentation, and analysis – all part of creativity and all part of building self-confidence. Children learn to believe in their own ideas and techniques and celebrate their own unique style. The freedom of expression mixed with good teaching will help a child take risks and overcome fear.

The key thing is, without the confidence to fully express ourselves and live our ideals, we're powerless.

(5) Purpose

Living life with a purpose equals achievement. Creating art is a process that fuels achievement. It's tempting to want our child's art to be perfect, but reassuring to know that we should relax. A child does not have to create a masterpiece to have a meaningful artistic experience.

It is the process of firstly imagining and then creating – exploring, discovering and experimenting and believing -- that has the greatest value and not the product.

Add problem-solving to his process and you've achieved Critical Thinking! At Little Picasso we take time to celebrate this with Show & Tell at the end of each class. Designing meaningful art projects within each semester provides a child with a focus, a goal and a sense of achievement.

Learning with a purpose matches success and it helps a child be tenacious and navigate life's journey.

(6) Problem-Solving

When children explore art ideas they are testing possibilities.

Should I use a shorter piece of string to balance my hanging mobile? This tape isn't holding, what can I use instead?

Art allows children to make their own assessments while also teaching them that a problem may have more than one answer.

Instead of following rules or directions, a child's brain becomes engaged in the discovery of "how" and "why." Children are solving challenges and coming up with new ways to handle unexpected outcomes even when experimenting or learning how to handle art materials.

Although this seems a small step, continued practice of this exercise is a major breakthrough for empowering a child. Problem solving and being flexible are essential in today's world where your children are likely to have multiple careers!

(7) Self-Awareness

It's hard for many of us as adults to figure out our Highest Purpose without a deep sense of Self Awareness.

Let's make the journey easier for our children through art. It's essential to educating and nurturing little people, others and ourselves. Art helps children see themselves and find their place in the World, and art lessons help children discover their signature strengths and celebrates their unique qualities.

Through self-expression, creativity and problem solving, children's skills will develop naturally, and their ability to discover who they are will soar.

Through group art lessons, children practice sharing and taking turns, as well as appreciating one another's efforts. This is honing social competence and practicing cooperation.

Art nurtures positive mental health by allowing a child to show individual uniqueness as well as success. I allow time for this one to shine during "Show and Tell" time. And from time to time, I showcase my students' works, and hold private art exhibition evenings so their families and friends can celebrate their work too. This is all part of building positive Self-Awareness.

(8) Communication

Art helps children learn to say what cannot be said and allows self-expression. Art exercises the mind and provides children with a powerful language -- even before they can speak.

Beyond expressing happy thoughts children can work through tough times (e.g. death of a loved one, divorce) and communicate their feelings through art. When a child draws a picture, paints a portrait, or hangs buttons from a wobbly mobile, that child is beginning to communicate visually.

A child may draw to document an actual experience like playing in the park, release feelings of joy by painting swirling colours, or share an emotionally charged experience like the passing of a loved one or the death of a pet.

And children listen during teaching instructions and conversations and learn to communicate in a positive way.

(9) Wisdom

Wisdom is all about taking what we know and making that the essence of whom we are and what we do. Too soon for our little ones? No, not at all.

Art builds stepping-stones to achieve Wisdom. Learning art history and viewing art explores the wisdom of art, and children learn to respect other cultures. Art helps children view themselves, their world and its cultures in a big picture. This knowledge has an impact on a child's destiny.

Art celebrates multiple perspectives and different viewpoints and one of art's largest lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world.

Lastly, Art also nurtures our very wise and spiritual goals of living with love, appreciation, joy and kindness and to live the life of our dreams.

(10) Spirit

Last, but certainly not least, here comes Spirit. The unique glow in all children which, when ignited, motivates their ideas and beliefs.

Spirit is the force that beats our hearts and keeps the planets in line. Art is the very vehicle that helps children fully connect to and express the divine within himself or herself. Inspire children to create and you will illuminate their human spirit – it's what keeps me coming back to my studio for each lesson.

Children have an amazing capacity to radiate this pure enthusiasm, self expression and amazement that lights up our world! This is art at its best and what makes us uniquely human. And, that's what life's all about!

Conclusion

THANK YOU. During today's talk I've shared with you my passion and philosophy and recent news on art and education. To help you put this information into practice I've written a Tip Sheet – Here, I've outlined some creative tips for you to share with your child and a few of my favourite resources.

Artful Tips And Resources

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to hold onto it as we grow up – Pablo Picasso

Whether your child grows up to be an archeologist, a zoologist or something in between, art will enhance their appreciation of life and inform their understanding of their place in it.

Here are some ways you can support and sustain your child's creativity and development:

Create an art tool kit at home. Include age-appropriate, safe items such as non-toxic paints, sponge paints, finger paints, fat or rock-shaped crayons, triangular-shaped pencils, pens with textured grips, molding clay, beads, paper and non-metal scissors. Remember that young children put things in their mouths, so supervise them at all times.

- *A good art kit has all the tools to develop fine motor skills, cognitive development, and sequencing skills.*

Encourage scribbling and drawing with fat chalk. Use a blackboard for convenience. It's a great way to encourage early creativity.

- *Strengthens motor skills (finger, hand and wrist) and is usually a child's first creative experience with large circular movements. Encourages writing in a fun way.*

Promote out-of-the-box thinking. Create a fun recycle box for your child to play with and create art sculptures. Contents can include empty toilet rolls, egg cartons, straws, string, fabric, plastic cutlery, boxes (toothpaste, tissue, shoe), textured wrapping (bubblewrap or soft mesh from fruit.) One idea: create a "Responsible Robot" from the above.

- *Taps all motor skills and encourages innovative thinking and problem-solving – and sends the right message for the environment.*

Help create a tactile texture book. Use things from the home, e.g. cotton wool for a duck, sand paper a crocodile and fabric, string, etc. for other images.

- *Enhances the total sensory experience (tactile, eye to touch) and fine motor skills.*

Share a family art project together. A painting project is excellent for toddlers and pre-schoolers. Alternate between large, stubby brushes and small, fine brushes. Wide brushes are easier to manage and will help with handgrip; thin brushes will require more control and will improve coordination. Add cotton swabs to the mix to help develop the pincer grip they'll need for learning to write.

- *Excellent way to develop fine motor skills and finger control to prepare for writing.*

Make homemade play dough. Fantastic way to strengthen handgrip, introduce texture tolerance, and enhance fine motor skills.

Encourage art activities at playtime. Your children will be tapping into fine and gross motor skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, and out-of-the-box thinking – with fun thrown in.

Enroll your child in quality art classes. Check that the curriculum is suitable for your child, offers age-appropriate classes and that class size is small. Make sure teaching is innovative and creative – not just copying techniques. Holiday workshops are another opportunity for your child to enjoy the art experience.

Share the art experience. Children learn by example and mirror parents so get creative and find fun and meaningful art activities to share.

Educate yourself. Go to the web for inspiring ideas and resources so that you can provide valuable art instruction to your children.

Visit museums, galleries and exhibitions together. Take time to talk about what you've seen – and let your child interpret what he/she sees.

Check out your school. Make sure your child's education includes regular art classes and that the school has a philosophy of teaching multiple types of learning.

Electronic Tips And Resources

Monitor your child's electronic time. TVs, computers and electronic devices are not the best tools for learning language or developing social and other cognitive skills.

Watch TV and explore websites together. Share the fun and explain what you're seeing.

Ask yourself: *What is my child missing?* Play, art, exercise and reading are more important than electronic entertainment.

Set guidelines and time limits. Short bursts are best.

Choose electronic devices wisely. Choose electronic devices, such as video games and learning games, that are more interactive and require more thinking and eye-hand coordination.

Hold off on the keyboard and mouse. Research shows that children under the age of 7 should not use a keyboard and mouse during the crucial time when a child is developing fine motor skills, such as eye and pen coordination.

Have a regular *No-Tech Time* in your house.

For more great tech advice, visit www.common sense media.org

For tech guidance by age for media of all types, visit www.common sense media.org/grade-pre-k

Child Health and Development Resources

www.zerotothree.org – valuable health/development information for your infant and toddler at this fabulous website – Zero to Three.

www.idonline.org – a leading website to find answers for children with learning difficulties, learning disorders or challenges.

www.arttherapy.org – for questions about art therapy, go here to enhance the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children, adolescents and adults.

www.dana.org/brain.asp – your gateway to information about the brain and brain research.

Recommended Reading

Boost your creativity and parenting knowledge with these books:

The Element, How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything – Ken Robinson

The Artist's Way at Work – Mark Bryan

The Creative Habit – Twyla Tharp

A Mind At A Time – Mel Levine, M.D.