

# Parents as Partners in Art Education

*I love to see the children's faces light up when I come in to begin the art lesson. They truly enjoy learning about art and doing art projects, since their exposure to art is minimal at best.*

—Parent Art Program Docent

## **FEW THINGS BRING AS MUCH PLEASURE AND EXCITEMENT**

to a child's school day as art. Beginning in preschool and extending into the primary grades, the visual arts benefit young children in many ways. They can develop skills for creative expression, learn about great works of art and art history, experience the connections between culture and art, and gain an appreciation of the arts in the world around them. What's more, research shows a positive relationship between arts education and the development of skills used in other content areas, such as mathematics and language arts (USDE 2004).

I have had the unique opportunity to teach art to kindergarten through third grade children at an elementary school through my local school district's par-

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ent art program. Parent art programs provide a vital link between home and school and help bring the visual arts back into focus in our schools

In this article I describe our parent art program, how it works, and ways to implement it. I emphasize the strengths of parent programs as a way to support and enrich existing arts education, not as a replacement for well-developed arts education programs taught by qualified classroom teachers and/or certified art teachers.



## **Visual arts in the curriculum**

The arts are one of the core academic subjects in early childhood education and are “essential to every child’s education” (USDE 2004). Arts Education Partnership (AEP), a consortium of more than a hundred national and local organizations and agencies, states that “learning in and through the arts contributes to overall student achievement” (2005, 7). AEP encourages families and teachers to

become arts advocates for children, communicating to local and state decision makers that arts education is essential and government funds can and should be used for it.

Research shows that arts learning supports learning in other subject areas. For example, the meta-analysis conducted by Kristin Burger and Ellen Winner (2002) indicates that arts-

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**Parent art programs provide a vital link between home and school and help bring the visual arts back into focus in our schools.**

# Enrichment

Laurie E. Hansen

based reading instruction is more effective than the teaching of reading alone. This can be especially important in teaching children who are English-language learners, as noted in one teacher's comment on a parent art program: "The parent docent highlights new vocabulary, which is so important for English-language learners." Other studies highlighted in AEP's report confirm the value of art as a vehicle for enhancing social studies and science learning (Deasy 2002).

## How to start a parent art program

A parent art program can be a component of a well-rounded, inclusive, family involvement program in early childhood settings for children in pre-K through grade three. A good way to begin such a program is with a team of volunteers for one grade level. As the program catches the interest of children, families, and other teachers, additional grade level teams can be formed. The following 10 steps can guide program planners.

**1. Seek your school administrator's backing.** Describe a parent art program, its benefits for children and families, curriculum enrichment, and your plan for organizing the project. One classroom teacher can serve as the point person for program development.

Explain how the program would be developed in partnership with the school district art teacher, the school librarian, and one or more classroom teachers. Ask for the opportunity to introduce the idea at an upcoming parent-teacher association meeting and to seek funding.

**2. Recruit teachers.** Seek those who are interested in developing art learning experiences and gathering art supplies and prints (see steps 3–5) needed to create several kits per grade level (four is a manageable number).

**3. Use state content standards** for the visual arts. These can serve as a beginning guide to outline topics for the art kits at pre-K to grade 3 levels.

**4. Collect resources** (prints and materials). Graduate students and/or art professors at local university art departments might be willing to suggest works of art to study and help to gather resource materials. Reliable Web sites, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, provide resources like a Timeline of Art History, from which teachers can develop learning content and identify excellent examples of works of art to include in the kits. Most large museums have Web sites that provide information on featured artists and works of art on exhibit.

Some museums, such as The Getty, sell inexpensive art prints of good quality. Art prints are also available

## Parent Art Program Teaching Kits

- Create four art kits for each grade level, pre-K through grade 3.
- Choose a focus topic for each kit (genre, element of art, principle of design, or artist).
- Include art prints of sculptures, paintings, or drawings or photographs suited to the kit topic. Usually kits contain examples of one medium, because the art elements lend themselves to particular concepts, for instance: sculpture (*form*), drawings (*line*), or paintings (*color*).
- Tie topics to social studies and other curricula whenever possible.
- Relate kit topics to multicultural curricula; for example, integrate art that represents the children's community and offer art prints from a variety of cultures, especially those represented by children in the classroom.
- Develop each lesson around a goal, one or more learning objectives, and concepts related to the art prints or sculpture. Provide an art vocabulary, materials list, and background information for the presenter.
- Build in a hands-on art exploration activity in each learning experience to allow children to apply the art concepts presented.

## Links for Online Art Research

Teachers can follow up children's art experiences with whole-class Internet searches and discussions. Older children could also do individual online research to find examples of works of art that fit the content of the art experience.

Art in Public Places, Brea, California—

[www.ci.brea.ca.us/section.cfm?id=50](http://www.ci.brea.ca.us/section.cfm?id=50)

The Getty Museum—[www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu)

The Guggenheim—[www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)

The Louvre—[www.louvre.fr/llv/commun/home\\_flash.jsp?bmLocale=en](http://www.louvre.fr/llv/commun/home_flash.jsp?bmLocale=en)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art—

[www.metmuseum.org/home.asp](http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp)

The Museum of Modern Art—[www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)

The Virtual Diego Rivera Web Museum—

[www.diegorivera.com/index.php](http://www.diegorivera.com/index.php)

through online stores/retailers. After the art prints have been chosen and ordered, teachers can search online for information about an artist, the cultural period in which a work was created, and historical notes and analyses of artworks. Write a summary of this information, attach it to the back of each art print, and then laminate the prints for durability.

Thin portfolio boxes from artist supply stores have handles and are sturdy holders for the contents of each kit (select boxes large enough, 36" x 48", for poster-size prints to lie flat). Include in each kit a list of its contents, all numbered (see "Art Kit Contents"). Use small containers to hold children's art materials, such as markers, watercolors, paintbrushes, chalk, oil pastels, reusable clay—modeling and compound.

A comprehensive book on art history and artworks, such as *The*



## Art Kit Contents

- Front label for the portfolio box: art kit title, titles of art prints/sculptures in the kit, and grade level. If a sculpture is part of the kit, note that it is located in a separate box.
- Poster-size, laminated art prints: five or six; reproductions of paintings, drawings, wood blocks prints, photographs, sculptures, and so on.
- Small sculpture(s): stored in a separate box with padding.
- Art docent script: one or two pages long.
- Background information on artists: one or two pages long; focused on genre, theme, medium, and so forth.
- Key art concepts: listed on poster board, taken from "Elements of Art" or "Principles of Design" (pp. 94 and 95).
- Large color-wheel poster.
- Art activity outline: step-by-step directions, a list of suggested materials, and one or two laminated samples of children's artwork.

*Annotated Mona Lisa: A Crash Course in Art History from Prehistoric to Post-Modern*, by Carol Strickland, can provide additional background information for teachers and parent volunteers. The school librarian and district art teacher can help identify additional books and Web sites.

### 5. Develop donor support.

Local businesses and organizations might donate funds to pay for sets of art prints. Some larger retailers, such as Target or Sam's Club, provide community grants for the purchase of educational materials. In addition, teachers can research various grant opportunities at the school district, state, and national levels to fund the parent art program.

**6. Create art learning experiences.** A local teacher supply store is a useful outlet for purchasing art materials and teaching resources (see "Teaching Resources"). Outline teaching and learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate for the age level each kit addresses. Online resources, such as your state's visual arts content standards and curriculum

frameworks, provide information on concepts and skills that are developmentally appropriate for each grade level.

Additionally, the Web sites of some museums, such as The Getty, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, provide information for educators (see "Links for Online Art Research," p. 91). Typically, there are links to lesson plans, teacher resources, free lending libraries, and hyperlinked Web presentations that can serve as starting points for the art activities. Check your local museum's Web site to learn what resources may be available; many have programs for teachers and children. Plan a museum visit to enhance art docent activities.

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**The classroom teacher will be present while the volunteer introduces art concepts to the children, will help children during the art activity, and will handle classroom management.**

## Teaching Resources

- Epstein, A.S. 2001. Thinking about art: Encouraging art appreciation in early childhood settings. *Young Children* 56 (3): 38–43.
- Evans, J., & T. Skelton. 2001. *How to teach art to children*. Monterey, CA: Evan-Moor Educational Publishers.
- Johnson, M.H. 2008. Developing verbal and visual literacy through experiences in the visual arts: 25 Tips for teachers. *Young Children* 63 (1): 74–79.
- McAuliffe, M., & M. Black. 1999. *Busy teacher's guide: Art lessons, grades 1–3*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources.
- Thompson, S.C. 2005. *Children as illustrators: Making meaning through art and language*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

**7. Recruit volunteers.** Send a letter to families explaining the program and requesting volunteers, have classroom teachers contact families directly, and ask for volunteers during Back to School Night. Later, as more grade levels participate in the art program, make a request for volunteers at a schoolwide parent-teacher meeting.

Volunteers can help in a variety of ways: leading art experiences with children, developing a potential donors list, contacting businesses for donations, preparing materials at home as content for the kits, designing lessons and activities, helping teachers develop the kits, and researching Web sites to gather information, images, and lesson ideas from museums.

### **8. Plan an orientation meeting for parent volunteers.**

Demonstrate how to introduce children to the art prints and a corresponding art activity (see the next section, “Using the Art Kit with Children”). Give each volunteer a packet of information (for example, a written teaching outline and background information). Explain that the classroom teacher will be present while the volunteer introduces art concepts to the children, will help

children during the art activity, and will handle classroom management.

### **9. Set up a master schedule.**

You can introduce the art kits throughout the year. Include a rotation plan for the days/times the kits will be used in each classroom.

**10. Prepare and update ongoing displays.** Post children's artwork created through the program in the classroom and school hallways.

## Using the art kit with children

The art kit is the volunteer parent/adult docent's teaching resource. The basic four-part process involves a presentation, a demonstration, an art activity, and a dialogue/discussion with children.

**Show the art prints** to the children and ask, “What do you see in the art?” Then point out a featured art element, such as *texture*, or a principle of design like *repetition* in each print and engage the children in a discussion about the art by encouraging them to comment on the elements and principles they notice. For example, in a lesson on *line*, the art docent can explain there are different kinds of lines (straight, vertical, diagonal, squiggly, zigzag, and so on) and ask what type of lines the children see in the work of art.

**Introduce the artist(s) of the works** depicted in the prints. Tell the children about the key concepts and the materials, such as oil paints, watercolors, ink, or pencil, that the artist was known to use, plus other facts about the artist. Discuss themes

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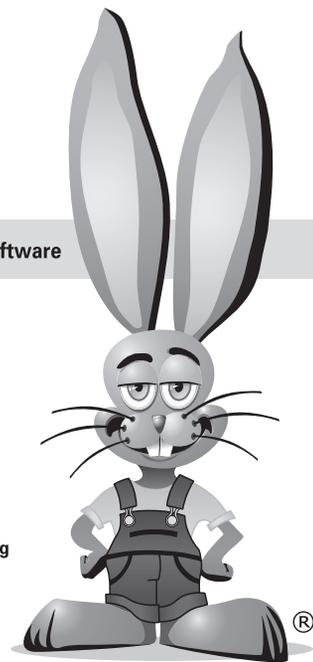
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—Frank Sahlein, WingsCenter.com, 3rd Level Consulting

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used (“Did the artist paint people, animals, shapes, buildings?”) as well as the style (such as abstract, modern, realistic, impressionist) and feelings portrayed (like happy or sad). Exploring ideas in art engages children’s interest because they can then point out what they see in the prints, prompted by questions like, “How do these colors make you feel?” “Does this painting look like real life?”

**Explain the art activity** the children will engage in and how it relates to the prints and what they have learned about art elements and design. An art activity, such as mixing primary paint colors with white and then painting a simple picture of

an animal or flower, lets the children apply the use of tints, just like the impressionist painters did.

To start, briefly review the steps in the process, like “First, make a line drawing; next, create a color background using chalk; and then paint using tempera.” Prepared samples may be helpful for some activities, but limit the number. You want to stimulate children’s imaginations and individual creativity. For younger children, the art docent might need to demonstrate the process.

**Talk with the children.** After demonstrating the steps of the activity, move about to listen to children’s ideas about art making. Respond and assist or guide the children as needed.



lives. Children can discuss the idea of three dimensions and look at the height, width, and depth of the small sculptures or ones in their community. They can contrast the two-dimensional quality of paintings with the three-dimensional quality of the sculptures.

Next, children receive a container of reusable modeling compound and learn how to create a simple pinch pot, coil pot, and slab pot by following step-by-step directions. Later, the children use ceramic clay to create pots that are fired in a kiln by their teacher. A simple explanation of how to create three types of pots is given in art/craft resources for children (see Carlson 2003).

After this activity, one first grade teacher commented, “My children were talking about the last class for two days! They even coiled their jump ropes during recess to look like the coil pots!”

### Elements of Art: *Line* (first or second grade)

This art experience focuses on the art element of *line* as found in impressionist paintings by Monet, Cezanne, and others. The parent docent asks the children to point out various types of lines they see in selected art prints. The children then practice drawing different types of lines on sheets of recycled paper.

For the art activity, children study samples of clip art images that have simple lines, such as a butterfly, a bird house, a shamrock. The children create simple line drawings on white construction paper using a black medium-tip permanent marker. They

## Principles of Design

Introduce a design principle, using words the children are familiar with, and engage them in a discussion that helps them understand its meaning.

**balance**—*equilibrium (asymmetry, symmetry, radial)*

“How do you balance a teeter-totter?” (One child sits on each end.)

“How do you balance a scale in math?” (You have the same amount on both sides.)

**contrast**—*opposites*

“See how this artist uses light and dark colors for contrast?” (Light is the opposite of dark.)

**dominance**—*importance of one aspect*

“See how large this flower is in the painting by Georgia O’Keeffe?” (The artist wanted it to be the most important part of the painting and made it many times bigger than anything else.)

**movement**—*either implied in the painting or the way the eye travels when looking at a work of art*

“See how the sail on the sailboat is diagonal instead of straight up?” (This makes it look like the wind is blowing and the boat is moving.)

**repetition**—*recurrence of element(s) of art*

“See how the artist uses color (line and so on)?”

**theme**—*subject of a work of art*

“This artist often painted animals/people/flowers.” (This is the theme.)

### Children’s learning experiences in art: Examples for two age groups

The two art activities described below were adapted primarily from ideas in art teaching guides. Each learning experience provides a brief overview of principles and elements of art and an activity.

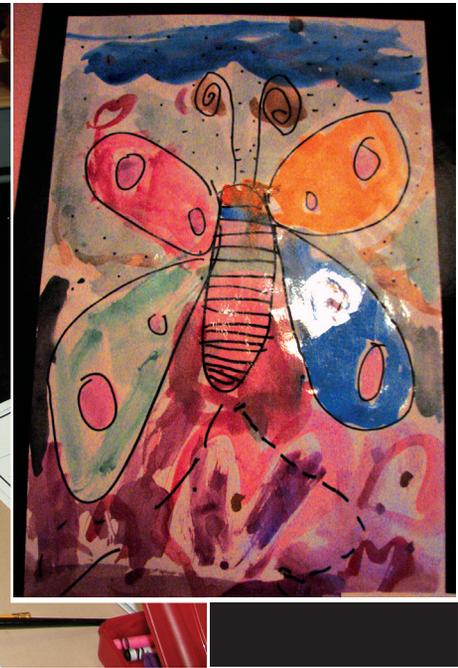
#### Elements of Art: *Form* (pre-K, kindergarten, or first grade)

In this experience the children examine and touch small-scale sculptures and discuss larger sculptures like those found in public spaces by looking at photographs of these works.

Using pictures of sculptures that are in or near the children’s own community connects art to their

work slowly and carefully, because they understand the lines cannot be erased. Extra sheets of construction paper are available in case children want to start over. The permanent marker works really well, because the lines stand out and the children's drawings flow.

Later, the children paint their drawings with watercolors. The classroom teacher displays the children's line drawings/paintings in the school hallway or on a classroom bulleting board. This is important because the children can show their work with pride to family and friends during an Open House or Back To School Night.



## Elements of Art

**color**—reflection or absorption of light

**color hue**—the name of the color  
(for example: red, blue, orange)

**color value**—lightness or darkness  
of a hue or neutral color

**form**—three-dimensional characteristics (form is solid, not flat)

**intensity**—brightness of a color (add white or black to change)

**line**—varies in width, length, curvature, color, or direction

**shape**—two-dimensional characteristics (shape is flat)

**space**—emptiness between, around, below, or within objects

**texture**—surface quality of the materials (tactile = actual; visual = implied)

One first grade teacher shared her appreciation for the program: “Many of our children have never been to an art gallery or museum, and bringing art to the classroom and making it real to them will impact their lives forever. Dedicated parent support is integral to the program’s success.”

*Drawing a Japanese woman was really a challenge, and painting poppies was fun because we were learning about plants in science.*

—Third-grader

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## Conclusion

A parent art program is one way to enhance the visual arts curriculum in early childhood settings while promoting positive home-school connections and interactions with the community. The participation of teachers, families, and children in our school district resulted in mutual enjoyment. And the children learned about color, line, texture, dimension, and various art forms. They mixed colors, made sculptures, and observed and discussed many works of art.