

# Fine art

Painting lets children express themselves, engaging both brain and the body, writes *Nicole Weinstein*

**P**ainting offers children the opportunity to combine all the elements of creative learning and discovery by communicating their thoughts and ideas through colour and mark-making – on different scales and using a variety of painting techniques and tools.



Ammie Flexen, freelance artist and early years trainer, says, 'As an artist working with young children, I find that painting is a particularly expressive, tactile and immersive process because each mark made is uniquely personal. Painting is a form of communication that can enrich and facilitate conversations that wouldn't otherwise take place. It opens the door for attentive adults to listen and ask questions that give an insight into children's thinking processes and experiences.'

Small-scale painting with small brushes, fingers or even wooden tools involves fine motor skills, which, in time, form the basis of mark-making and pre-writing. As well as providing opportunities for whole-body movements, working on a larger scale – on the floor, using large brushes, rollers and sponges, and even bare feet and hands – promotes negotiation skills, kindness, empathy and a respectful awareness of personal space.

## INVITING CURIOSITY

The opportunities to paint must be 'inviting and increase curiosity', explains Ms Flexen. 'Sometimes the way we present opportunities could be limiting the depth to which children can fully explore the medium of painting. For example, painting easels have their place in pre-school settings, but if we offer similar paper, and

a limited palette of paint pots in the same position each day, the painting easel becomes a part of the furniture.'

There are barriers for adults too, she remarks: 'Lack of confidence with using materials; being cautious about working with a wider palette;

and dealing with mess. I've met practitioners who don't feel they are good at art and can feel scared when offering an activity to children. Remember that it's about facilitating the children's painting, and that you are not being judged.'

## PRACTITIONER'S ROLE

Practitioners have a vital role in the painting process by being encouraging and supportive. Young children often look for affirmation and sometimes the practitioner's role is to acknowledge the child's efforts gently.

Ms Flexen explains, 'When in the painting zone, I have observed that children can be completely lost in the moment and the activity. Painting is a continuous sequence of mixing colour and selecting the colour, making choices, adding the mark to the paper and then observing and reflecting. Being present, sitting quietly and acknowledging when a child looks for confirmation is enough.'

And she warns, 'However tempting it may be to whisk away a painting before the beautiful colours become the muddy mix of brown, remember that it's all part of the discovery.'

## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH PAINTS

The world we live in is made up of vibrant colours, so imagine how frustrating it must be for a child to express themselves in a limited palette. Ms Flexen says, 'Research suggests that children differentiate tones



## MORE INFORMATION

- Ammie Flexen is a visual artist and ceramicist and has an MA in early childhood studies. In recent years, she has been running training sessions for practitioners on developing confidence in creativity. She is inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, [www.reggioemiliaapproach.net](http://www.reggioemiliaapproach.net)
- Nursery World's art series is at: [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/art-in-the-early-years](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/art-in-the-early-years)
- McTavish, A (2016). *Expressive Arts and Design in the Early Years: Supporting young children's creativity through art, design, music, dance and imaginative play*. Routledge
- Earlyarts, [www.earlyarts.co.uk](http://www.earlyarts.co.uk)

and subtleties of colours very early, long before they can articulate the names of colours. By offering them ranges of tonalities, not only are they able to experiment with a more sophisticated range of colours but we can support them to develop a richer use of language – for example, green can be minty, earthy, leafy, grassy, bluey-green or emerald.'

## Colour mixing

Primary colours – red, yellow and blue – form the basis of all colours. Mixing them in variations should create most colours, with additions of white or darker colours to create lighter and darker tones. Powder paints are great for mixing activities. While not great for colour mixing, ready-mixed paints come in lots of fun, vibrant colours.

## Supporting painting

To make painting more fun, manageable and rich in learning:

- Experiment with adding materials to the paint, such as sawdust, glue, sequins, string, shredded paper, compost, leaves. Adding PVA glue makes paint waterproof when it's dry, so painting papier-mâché or tissue paper will make it quite hard.
- Provide good aprons, waterproof outdoor suits or painting clothes to avoid ruining children's clothes – and parents' support.
- Black paint doesn't wash out very well, even if it's water-based.
- Work on a big scale if you can. Tarpaulins can be bought from the

pound shop and taped to the floor.

- Lining paper is really cheap, and allows children to negotiate each other and the space.

## RESOURCES

### Types of paint

- Powder paints: Powder Colour Assortment, 12 for £13.49, [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk); Powder Colour, £9.49 each, [www.hope-educational.co.uk](http://www.hope-educational.co.uk); Powder Paint Value Tube, six for £19.99, [www.bakerross.co.uk](http://www.bakerross.co.uk).
- Ready-mixed paints: TTS Ready Mix Assorted Pack, £13.49 for 20, [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk); Ready Mixed Paint – 5 Litre Single Colours, £7.99, [www.bakerross.co.uk](http://www.bakerross.co.uk).
- Acrylic paints: Chromacryl Acrylic Essentials – Assorted, £34.99, [www.hope-educational.co.uk](http://www.hope-educational.co.uk).
- Watercolour paints: Liquid Watercolours, £13.49, [www.cosydirect.com](http://www.cosydirect.com).
- Palette paint: Colour Blocks in a Tray, £1.99 each, [www.hope-education.co.uk](http://www.hope-education.co.uk); Snazaroo Large Paint Pot Palette, £24.99, [www.bakerross.co.uk](http://www.bakerross.co.uk).

### Painting tools

Provide brushes, fine and thick; household paint brushes; paint roll-

ers; large car sponges; sticks; twigs; brushes attached to sticks to use outdoors for moving; wheels and tyres.

- Palmer Grasp Brushes (two per pack), £2 for two; Brush Painters, eight per pack, £8; Brushes and Mark Makers (15 per pack), £15; Toddler Handled Mops (four per pack), £9.25; Rollers on Poles, four for £11.49; Pendulum Painter, £27.99; Art Spinner, £5.99; paint squirt bottles, £1.99 for four; art sprayers, three for £4.99; textured wand kit, £6.49 – all from [www.cosydirect.co.uk](http://www.cosydirect.co.uk).
- For class sets, try the Exploring Paint and Patterns Outdoor Kit, £50.95; the Giant Outdoor 'Big Art' Tools, £39.95; the Wheelie Painter, £69.95; and the set of six Easy Grip Brushes, £5.99 – all from [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk).
- Fly Swatter Painters (20pk), £9.99, and Spray Bottles with Caps, 12 for £7.99, can be bought at [www.hope-educational.co.uk](http://www.hope-educational.co.uk).

### Painting surfaces

- Provide easels and other spaces such as the Cosy Creative Corner, £275, from [www.cosydirect.com](http://www.cosydirect.com); the Easel Banner, £5.99, from



**TTS's Clear Mark Making Panel (top left); Hope's Fly Swatter Painters (bottom left); The Cosy Creative Corner (above); TTS's Outdoor Toddler Mirror Table (below)**



[www.hope-educational.co.uk](http://www.hope-educational.co.uk); and the Double Sided Easel With Dryer, £299.95, from [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk).

- Don't just stick to traditional easels – create painting surfaces on walls, fences and dividers. Try Cosy Direct's Perspex Easel Fencing, £349.99, and

trellis panels such as the Moreland's 2's Panels, £79.95, also from Cosy, which can be easily fixed to walls and fences to make a painting wall.

- Add a Self-draining Fence Easel, £49.99, from [www.cosydirect.co.uk](http://www.cosydirect.co.uk), and some hanging paint pots for large-scale and collaborative painting opportunities. Try painting on alternative surfaces such as the Round Mirror for Outdoors, £20.49, from Cosy, or the Outdoor Toddler Mirror Table, £499.95, from [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk).
- Use Perspex, fabric and trays: Clear Mark Making Panel, £37.95, from [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk); Self-Standing 3 Person Paint Frame, £129.99, or the Rainbow Perspex Rectangles, £38.99, and Long Narrow Trays 10pk, £7.85 (great for marble rolling or printing) – all from [www.cosydirect.com](http://www.cosydirect.com). ■

## CASE STUDY: PAINTING WITH BERRIES

Practitioners from Eureka! Nursery in Halifax set up a berry-painting activity, following a child's interest in his sibling's weaning.

Rebecca Caswell, head of play and learning at Eureka, says, 'Parents told us that their three-year-old was interested in exploring the fruits that his sister was having at mealtimes, with his hands. This activity started with a trip to the supermarket to buy the fruit.

'We are a Reggio-inspired nursery so we always set up the activities in a similar way: in a circle, which represents a community approach. We find that it's really important that the space looks inviting.

'We nearly always use white paper and never use pre-printed or paper cut to a shape – so there are no expectations about what we want the children to produce.



'All the resources were laid out before children came into the space and the staff spoke to them about the fruit, the colours and textures, and encouraged them to start mark-making.

'We follow the children's leads. There's no right or wrong way; it's about the process and not the end product. This links with the Reggio approach, whereby creativity is viewed as a form of expression.

'One girl came in without her shoes on. She started to dab her toes into the fruit and, by the end of the session, all

the children had followed. The children were really engaged in this activity, exploring the texture of the fruit, smelling it and eating it. Lavender sprigs were provided to use as paintbrushes, but the children didn't use them.'

Elsewhere in the nursery, which is on the site of a disused railway station and attached to the UK's only children's museum, children can freely access resources for painting in the creative area. There are double-sided easels with paintbrushes, sponges, pine cones, lavender sprigs and twigs that can be used for painting and there are a variety of squeeze bottles, pallets and paints, predominantly in primary colours.

In the baby room, there are large sheets of paper on the floor and practitioners often let children explore paint with

their whole body when they place them in a builder's tray. Outdoors, children also explore painting on a large scale with rollers, large sheets of paper and sheets of polythene.

'My biggest tip for practitioners and parents,' explains Ms Caswell, 'is to not worry about getting messy. There can be fear around creativity among adults, but we have found that training has really helped.

'We recently ran some clay training sessions with staff before introducing it to the children. It helped them understand the feelings of empowerment that the children get from their artwork – and it's also therapeutic.'

For more information about Eureka! Nursery, visit [www.eureka.org.uk/eureka-nursery](http://www.eureka.org.uk/eureka-nursery). For training opportunities, visit [www.earlyarts.co.uk](http://www.earlyarts.co.uk).