

Creative play: In praise of getting messy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If your Mother's Day flower looked more like a squashed bug or you thought that cardboard Easter bunny your pre-schooler bought home was a bunyip, that's OK, in fact, top marks.

Early childhood educators say there is too much pressure on young children to replicate craft activities that say more about their parents' egos and less about learning the mechanics of paint and paper or expressing their creativity.

Many teachers say the biggest problem is parents who expect their preschooler to bring home something pretty to put on the fridge at home, and want to see their little ones' creations on display in the kinder room, looking exactly like everyone else's.

Professor Kay Margetts, an associate professor in early childhood studies at Melbourne University, says craft activities that involve children copying precisely a model presented by the teacher risk stifling creativity and imagination, as well as deterring children from experimenting with materials and learning new techniques.

Even worse than expecting every child to turn out exactly the same art work, is when teachers "fix up" the finished product.

"There should be lots of opportunities for young children to pick up art and craft materials and go with the flow. Of course, there's a place for adults to introduce and explain new techniques but allow them to choose colours and if they make a mistake it doesn't really matter, they'll learn it eventually."

Professor Margetts, formerly a teacher, also said she was seeing less craft in kinders and prep classes based around recycled bits and pieces such as boxes bought in from home. "Maybe they don't want the mess?"

"When I walk into a classroom and there's 30 rabbits that all look exactly the same, where's the individuality in that? It almost sends a message that you're no good unless you do exactly what the teacher says. It's very stifling. It limits children in their creativity."

Local concerns over craft in early childhood education tap into a debate that has flared in the US recently, with the battlelines drawn over "process versus product".

Many US parents and educators are arguing that preschool craft has become too focused on the end product and not enough about the creative process. Pinterest boards and blogs have sprung up, dedicated to process art ideas for preschoolers.

You won't find identical cardboard rabbits, 'finished off' by the teacher at the East Burwood preschool. As well as a making table filled with recycled materials and boxes bought from home, the three and four-year-old kinder groups enjoy plenty of messy outdoor play, including in the hugely popular mud play area.

The kinder's education leader, Jan Carroll, says the guiding principles are child-led, open ended and creative, avoiding activities that are more about parent-pleasing or teacher-pleasing.

"The old way is you'd stand up in front of them and say, 'this is how we make a tree' and then pass out the photocopies. We say, 'OK what do we want to make, and what will you need for that?' It's not about teaching them to make a tree, it's about teaching them to make choices, to share, skills like creativity and autonomy."

Ms Carroll says teaching "from the bottom up, not the top down" is a more spontaneous, exciting approach, hopefully developing children who will become more creative, problem-solving adults.

But as the debate rages among the pots of glue and crayons, some educators also caution that there is a risk of going too far towards anything goes, messy projects and forgetting to teach children the basics of different materials and how to use them.

US early childhood educator Erika Christakis, a keen critic of cotton ball snowmen and paper-plate Easter bunnies, says process art can risk leaving preschoolers in an unsatisfying middle ground, with too much emphasis on the boring mimicry for which craft was criticised without providing enough of the skills and imaginative thinking that young children need.

Christakis argues that a better way to go about art projects for preschoolers is to take the meaning of the "process not product" message more seriously, forget the pre-mixed paint and cardboard cut-outs and teach children key skills and knowledge of real art materials, such as clay.

Professor Margetts says the debate is part of a general concern, here and in the US, about a lack of understanding of the value of art, craft and music in the preschool years.

"The [government's] early childhood framework supports creativity [but] many of us are really concerned about the quality of the arts that are being supported in early childhood and primary schools. It seems to be an area where there's not as much passion for it by the teachers, it's seen as too difficult."

-reprinted from Sydney Morning Herald

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