

SECTION THREE: ART TO ORDER

Identical egg-box daffodils?

Each child deserves the opportunity to at least try out her original ideas. Each child deserves a teacher who honours flexibility and elaboration. Each child must be given the chance to find fluency in the process and originality in the final product. There is no right or wrong in artistic expression for the young child because art comes from within the child not from without. Creativity cannot be imposed from the outside by a well-meaning adult.¹⁴

There are many positive examples of truly creative activities in early years centres and schools. However, the practice of using templates, stencils and step-by-step processes is still common in many schools and centres, regardless of pedagogical guidance that advises otherwise. Perhaps some staff feel that it is easier and more beneficial to use tried and tested methods from a craft or template book than to allow time for original creative activity to take place. Or perhaps there is a lack of time and resources, or worries about fulfilling specified requirements, or a lack of confidence in the staff members' own creative abilities. Most likely there is a combination of all of these things. For staff who have never felt comfortable taking part in the arts and who don't feel they are particularly creative, it is this lack of confidence that can become a barrier between aspirations and practice.

Not all early years practitioners can become accomplished dancers, singer, performers, musicians, visual artists, sculptors or writers. Many talented, creative and hard-working staff are already implementing good practice in their schools or centres. With an open-minded approach and a willingness to believe that creativity is crucial to a child's development, everyone can learn from developing some new methods. It is not difficult to spark a child's imagination – children are natural creators. The job of the early years practitioner is to set these imaginations in motion through creative planning, observation and offering advice and suggestions when required, giving children the space and time to develop their ideas and so enhancing their creative play.

Step by step

Step by step procedures that lead children towards a finished product may help them to follow directions or learn certain sequences, but they cannot be considered as creative activities. These procedures may have a role to play in early years centres and schools. They may teach children how to:

- use scissors
- build a sturdy structure
- make a book
- keep themselves occupied on a rainy afternoon.

¹⁴ Edwards and Nabors, *The Creative Arts Process: What it is and What it is Not* March 1993

They do not, however, represent creative development. Many such step-by-step exercises involve an adult's perception of how an object or picture should look, how a piece of music should sound, how a dance should be danced, how a character should act. They allow little recognition of the importance of children's perceptions, their view of the world and their creative development.

Another disadvantage of product-orientated pieces of work is that they can lead children to believe that their work is never going to be as 'good' as that of the adult who has produced a perfect end product and is showing them how it is done.

Step-by-step projects that result in a room full of the same egg-box daffodils or identical crocodiles are, if anything, limiting. They create an adult's perception of what is 'right' or what looks 'good', not what a child might want to create. They develop adult skills, not creative skills.

Creativity offers the ability to produce something novel, something individual that is different from everyone else's. By using their own criteria, not externally imposed ones, children challenge their ideas, think creatively, question their choices and evaluate their outcomes by their own measure. This encourages the learning process.

The idea of making a token of love for a parent or carer is appealing, but if every child's token is the same and has been 'finished off' by a staff member, it is no longer the child's personal message to his or her own parent.

This issue does not apply only to the visual arts and crafts. The same problems arise when an early years centre or school is putting on a show or holding a concert. It cannot be assumed that all the children understand the story or what the performance is about and that they will relate to all or part of it. If staff choose the script, plan the dance steps, costumes and music in order to produce a nice-looking show for the parents, the experience may be a negative one for the children. The children might enjoy the process at the beginning, but if they do not understand the ideas behind the activity and aren't able to adapt the story, they may lose interest as rehearsals go on – sometimes repeating the same activities for several weeks. Using role-play, movement and free expression that develops from the children themselves will get more honest results. If parents understand how the children have worked to develop their own ideas, they may gain greater insight into the process from the children's point of view, even if the end product is less conventional.

Children need to experience things for themselves. And they need a range of these experiences and exposure to different forms of culture and different influences, from the Spice Girls to Debussy, folk to bhangra music. The customs of other countries and cultures are an important element of creative development.