

FIRST 5 S H A S T A

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From Crayons to Classics

Scribbling, fingerpainting, and squeezing play dough through pudgy fingers are all forms of artistic expression usually reserved for the very young. These early introductions to art and using tools like crayons, markers, paintbrushes or even the index finger help young children embark on a learning expedition that leads them to literacy.

To be “literate” is defined as being able to read and write. It was once thought that children were ready to begin learning to read and write at about 6.6 years of age. However, closer study has led to today’s broadly accepted concept of “emergent literacy.” Emergent literacy indicates that literacy develops through real life situations and “emerges” as a result of early experiences that show children a useful connection between language, text and the child’s world. Early literacy can be stimulated by lots of everyday conversation, storytelling, reading books with children and offering activities to children that inspire individual expression.

The process of creative expression may begin in infancy. According to Linda Cole, a child development specialist with Shasta Head Start, “When infants start flailing their hands, it is their first art expression. It is like writing in the air!” Parents and caregivers can nurture that expression by communicating with young children using words, gestures, songs and smiles – and encouraging infants to communicate back! Babies cry, they babble, using their earliest attempts at language to express themselves. Progressing as they grow to expression through art is natural for children. Cole suggests that as early as one year of age children may begin translating their expression through scribbling, the first definitive stage of art.

Carol Wheeler, director of Castle Rock Preschool, identifies art as an important piece of the literacy process. “Art is a good medium for teachers and parents to use to invite children into the literacy process” says Wheeler. “Children’s art should be viewed as the process, *not* the product!”

Wheeler integrates art projects into literacy kits available for check out through the Early Literacy for Families (ELFF) program, funded by First 5 Shasta. The kits encourage family literacy, offering easy readers that parents and children can enjoy together as well as art and skill building activities that relate to the theme of the books in each kit. Using the kit contents, parents are improving their own reading skills and nudging their little ones toward a literate future.

To promote pre-literacy skills, Wheeler encourages parents, caregivers and teachers to engage young children in art activities that appeal to the five senses – including smell and taste! For example, Wheeler has been known to prepare mounds of pudding so that preschoolers might indulge in edible fingerpainting! Sounds like great fun (getting messy usually is!) and gives children a chance to practice pre-literacy skills like “painting” shapes with their index finger, which will later be used to grasp a crayon or pencil.

A child's approach to art is gradual. It begins as exploration. For example, a child may play with clay just to see how it feels or learn to grasp a crayon in order to make colorful marks on paper. From unplanned scribbles, it becomes more purposeful and conveys more information. Children develop fine motor skills and begin repeating designs and experimenting with color, lines, sizes and space. Eventually, symbols or letters begin appearing amidst drawings as children begin integrating language into their artwork. The connection between art and literacy is revealed as a child's ability to express feelings and his view of the world develops and expands.

Just as words on the page of an illustrated book tell about its pictures, letters that evolve into words begin telling us about a child's drawing...and are a good indicator of literacy just around the corner. Today crayons - tomorrow the classics!

First 5 Shasta, the Shasta Children and Families First Commission, was established after California voters passed Proposition 10 in 1998, adding a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs to promote early childhood development for expectant parents and children up to age five. The Shasta Commission receives approximately \$1.8 million annually in Prop 10 revenues.