

The choice IS THEIRS

Whatever their age, encourage children to make decisions about their creative work, says **Robert Watts**...

The photograph at the bottom of the opposite page is of my son Joe, taken when he was nearly two. At the time it was simply a snapshot, a record of a pleasant afternoon spent in the garden, splashing around with paint. On reflection, I think it raises some interesting questions for teachers regarding planning, structuring and presenting creative activities for young children. But before we explore these questions, try a little task: look at the photograph, pick up a pen and make a list of decisions that you can see.

The activity Joe is engaged with is nothing complicated – it's one seen every day in Foundation Stage settings across the country – but I'm confident that you'll have compiled a fairly substantial list of decisions, ranging from the colours of the paints in the palettes to the scale of the brushstrokes on the paper. We'll examine these decisions more closely, but before we do, check your list carefully: who was responsible for each of the decisions you identified? Were they all made by Joe? Or were some of the decisions made by the

invisible presence in the photograph – the adult responsible for planning, monitoring and recording the activity?

It took me some time to realise that, when I arranged Joe's painting session, I took several decisions that I thought would make the experience easier and more enjoyable for him – but which may actually have restricted the range of possible outcomes of the activity. As a lecturer in education, I spend a lot of time in schools supporting student teachers, suggesting ways in which they might encourage children's capacities for individuality and self-expression. Yet, here I was, in the garden on a summer's afternoon, nonchalantly narrowing down Joe's options for his masterpiece.

In this article I'd like to explore some ideas about the importance of encouraging children to make



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ROBERT WATTS



Encouraging creativity

- Always offer children choices – beginning with the size, colour (and even shape) of paper.
- Encourage children to pause, look at their work and make decisions about what to do next. Two simple questions can help this dialogue: “What next?”, “What if?”
- Give children time to explore the potential of the materials they are using without too fixed an idea in your mind. This increases their confidence and can lead to more individuality in their outcomes.
- Remember that, while we often value the products of young children’s creative activities, they often value the process. If there’s nothing on the drying rack at the end of the lesson it doesn’t mean that nothing has been learned.

thoughtful decisions about their creative work. We’ll take a closer look at the evidence of decisions in the photograph of Joe, reflect on a few further examples of practical work before considering some advice for teachers on how planning, organising and teaching activities in ways that can encourage young children to make decisions about their creative work.

Making creative choices

Making decisions is a key part of the process of creating artworks. Even artworks that might appear to be quite random in nature often have, on close inspection, a structure that unites their various elements. Jackson Pollock’s abstract paintings, for example, made by dripping paint directly onto canvases stretched across his studio floor, have a strong underlying composition that makes them more accessible to the viewer.

Now, it’s possible that the three-and-four-year-olds in your setting may not be au fait with the subtleties of abstract expressionism, but rest assured that many of them wouldn’t hesitate to experiment with paint in ways that Pollock would have admired. But what kinds of decisions might they make in the process? Let’s look closely at the photograph of Joe painting, and at the visible evidence of decisions made both by him and, firstly, by his teacher – me.

Teacher’s decisions

The decisions I made relate to the aims of the activity, together with the environment and resources allocated towards it. My aims were for Joe to begin to develop his confidence in using brushes to mix and apply paint to paper and to work on a relatively large scale. Obviously, articulating these aims to a two-year-old wasn’t really an option, so my hope was that I would facilitate the creative experience for him by making the relevant preparations.

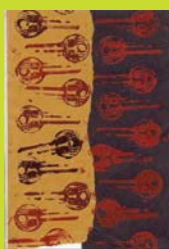
Taking advantage of the warm weather, I decided to set up an easel outdoors, enabling Joe to work on a scale that would be difficult to manage indoors. I decided to clip a piece of A2 paper to the top of the easel, arranged vertically so that it was taller than it was wide. I squeezed out some ready-mixed paint into two palettes, taking care to put red, blue and white paint in one and yellow, red and white in the other (hoping to delay the inevitable process of all the colours merging to make brown). I also decided to provide him with two brushes, one large, one small, and a pot of clean water, before stepping back and letting nature, in the form of Joe, take its course. It was now up to him to make a few decisions of his own.

Child’s decisions

The decisions Joe made during the activity



Why not try...



KEY PRINT: We often think about choosing different colours or shapes to extend an artwork: sometimes keeping the same shape but changing the colour of the background

can be effective, as this print demonstrates.

LEAF PRINT: All children make prints from leaves and other natural objects, but rarely do they get the chance to extend their prints by repeating and



rotating the same object to create complex patterns.



SPIN PAINTING: This painting was made by squeezing small amounts of paint onto paper before spinning the paper in a salad spinner. Importantly, ask children to look at

the results and reflect before deciding whether to repeat the process and develop the composition – or have it framed up and sent to the gallery!

relate to several specific elements of art and design: composition, mark-making, colour and tone. Each of these decisions, however, was influenced in some way by the decisions I had already made for him before he began the activity.

From the photograph we can see that the composition of the painting centres on an emerging cluster of overlapping brushstrokes of red, blue and purple. Why has Joe decided to concentrate on this part of the paper? Was it aesthetic judgement on his part? Or was it that he simply could not reach any higher up the paper? There are a few isolated brushstrokes towards the top of the page, but notice how pale in tone these are in comparison with those further down the paper, which was pinned so high that Joe could barely reach the upper half of it

At the point at which the photograph was taken, Joe's composition of brushstrokes looks rather effective: there's a nice balance between the various marks and between the different tones and colours. On reflection, this was probably what prompted me to take the photograph at that moment – another decision on my part – because I suspected that, if Joe continued in much the same vein, he would sooner or later obliterate the work he had made so far, as young children often do. Making the big decision – that an artwork is finished – is very difficult for children. Often, they simply want to keep on going. And while, as adults, we treasure the products of children's endeavours, children themselves are more likely to value the process by which they are made.

Decisions and discoveries

Some of Joe's actions during the making of his painting can be regarded as decisions,

while others are better described as discoveries. Every creative activity offers the potential for children to discover something new about the processes and the materials they are using. In our efforts to ensure that each child has opportunities to engage with new creative experiences in the classroom, we can often speed them through this process without offering them time to make decisions. Through making decisions they will make new discoveries about the processes and materials they are using – and unless we highlight these opportunities, they can easily go unnoticed.

It need not be a case of allowing children free rein over the contents of the art cupboard: simply start by providing children with an idea or stimulus – and then see where they want to take it. The important thing is for teachers to be aware of the choices they are making in planning and presenting creative activities and for children to develop their awareness of their capacity for making their own decisions. Try planning a creative activity with some idea of what you want the children to do – but nothing too specific. Begin by resourcing the lesson and offering a choice of materials, before letting children experiment and play with what you've provided. Take some time to observe their investigations then decide when to intervene. Ask children to reflect upon the effects of the decisions they have already made, and prompt them to consider further decisions. Two simple questions, "What next?" and "What if?", can prompt children to discover interesting and individual outcomes.

find out more

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Be Creative

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