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November 2007

Painting a Rosy Picture The Arts Advantage for a Lifetime of Enrichment

by Gina Hagler

In the push for greater competence in math, reading and sports, the fine arts are increasingly left behind during the school day and in our daily lives. With homework, practices and social activities leaving little time for additional after-school commitments, it's natural to wonder if our kids really need to study the fine arts. Could the benefits from art, dance, music and theater be important enough - both now and in the future - for us to make them a priority and incorporate some aspects of these disciplines into our day-to-day routines?

For a variety of reasons, ranging from future success to current enjoyment, the answer is a resounding, "Yes."

Arts Are Vital

From a purely pragmatic point of view, activities in the arts are vital to our kids' futures because participation in music, art, drama and dance requires them to use their imaginations. Since most of our kids' activities are adult-directed and/or task-oriented, there isn't much opportunity for imaginative play. They provide a natural way to foster the use of imagination, says Howard Spector, director of education for the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County. "The fine arts teach kids to think creatively. That ability will be the linchpin in the 21st century, the thing that keeps us competitive in the world economy when the careers of the future will be for those who are able to think creatively."

The careers he has in mind are not ones that are purely in the arts. Spector is talking about "new ideas related to any field, whether it be medicine, science or engineering." Carolyn Cohen, second grade teacher at Fallsmead Elementary School, agrees that the time spent now on arts education will lead our kids to a variety of career choices as adults. "Arts are important for developing the right side of the brain. We'll be missing out on future productivity as adults if we don't give children experiences in the arts. That creativity is where our designers, artists, Nobel Prize winners, inventors, research doctors ... come from."

Cohen also stresses that the arts are an important tool for learning new material because, "Children have different strengths. All children need to have their strengths applauded in some way. ...Some learn best visually (visual arts), while others may learn through a kinesthetic approach (movement, drama) or auditory mode (music). We need to capitalize on this pertinent information." If we do this, "All children will be able to express themselves and, in turn, learn the key concepts in the curriculum."

Certainly, the correlation between the study of music and success in mathematics has been well documented. "But for me it's more than that," says Jeanine Reinier, oboist and music teacher from Takoma Park. "Music is a way to express yourself and to experience moments of pure joy." Taking the time now to help your child find a healthy outlet for her feelings and a source of renewal can't help but be well worth the time and effort.

It's easier than you might think to expose your kids to arts-related activities as you run through your daily routines.

Candid Camera

You can give any child - from preschool through high school - a camera (disposable to digital - your choice!) and ask her to take pictures of the things around the house. If she has no ideas, tell her to photograph the dog. Or the kitchen. Or take the camera along when you head for the grocery store or a day of errands. When the photos are developed, look them over with her and compare the ones she thinks worked out - or didn't. By doing this she'll grasp the elements of composition on an intuitive level. Check out this site for more ideas: www.betterphoto.com/article.asp?id=79.

Arts on the Go

Next time you head for an afternoon of carpooling, bring along some paper and pencils. You can grab a pad, paper and clipboard, or buy some sketchpads with stiff backs at any art supply store. For pencils you can go as plain as #2 or as fancy as blendable colored pencils. The idea is to have your kids create their own images on the paper - not to color in what's already there or use special pens to discover what's hidden beneath the surface. All kids, from preschool to high school, are capable of drawing something on a blank sheet of paper. If they can't think of anything, suggest they draw a picture of what they see inside the car, or tell them to draw what they see when they close their eyes and think very hard. Still stuck? Hand them an inkpad, tell them to stamp a thumbprint on the paper and create a person or animal around that.

Music and Storytelling

Dancing and acting are easy and can include music, too. Explain to your child that hula is a dance form that uses motion to tell a story. Ask her to tell you about her day, using only motion. If her mind is suddenly blank, have her act out a story that you tell, and then make something up! If your kid isn't into that, put on some music and get her to dance with you. Still not working? Put on a classical piece and ask her what she "sees" when she listens to the music.

Another easy way to foster the use of your child's imagination is to wait until you're preparing or eating a meal together. Start a story and end your part where a choice needs to be made. With young children, keep it to a sentence apiece. With older kids, make each addition a bit longer. Have the story go around the table, with each child participating. Let them make up whatever they want when the turn comes to them. All they have to do is build on the words that came before.

Squish

Do you have a kid who likes to be hands-on? Get some nontoxic clay or squishable material and let her create her own mini-sculptures. If you get the type that dries and hardens, she can use paints to decorate them later. Or not. Follow her lead.

Once you realize how important the fine arts are to your kids for a lifetime, making them a part of your day-to-day routine is worth the extra effort. See what you can easily incorporate into your day and HAVE FUN!

Gina Hagler is a frequent contributor to *Washington Parent*. You can see more of her work at www.ginahagler.com.

Do your kids take pictures? Send them to contactus@washingtonparent.net and we will share them online with our readers. Be sure to include your children's names and ages.

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