

Art and Self Esteem

Susan Striker

"No! Don't touch, go to bed now, finish your dinner, take your medicine, do it this way, don't talk to strangers, listen to me." Is it any wonder that after years of obeying parents and teachers children hardly ever make a move that isn't an order from an adult, and are afraid to think for themselves? It is our duty as parents to protect our children from harm, but our even greater duty is to prepare our children to live in the world without us. Nevertheless, as we protect our offspring from harm we create children who wait politely for instructions before acting and are fearful of thinking for themselves. You can help rebuild your child's self-esteem while promoting critical thinking skills through art. Instead of presenting projects that can only be completed in one "correct", adult-directed way, offer activities that allow your child to think, solve problems in his or her own unique way and truly express what is inside. Unfortunately, those of us who were raised to believe we "couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler" tend to be the very ones who, because we feel inadequate when faced with the task of offering an art project to our offspring, too often rely on stereotypes, formulas and coloring books, and present our children with adult-created art projects that require nothing more than mindless completion, copying or coloring-in.

Next time you consider offering an art project to your child, ask yourself these questions:

- Does the art project come with a predictable set of expectations for completion? (Let your child set his or her own goals.)
- Is the project "clever?" (An art project should challenge your child to be clever, not be clever or cute itself.)
- Is this project really nothing more than a lesson in following directions? (A good project should provide an opportunity to explore art, not just another chance to follow someone else's directions.)

Set some parameters for a good project, such as deciding to offer only an opportunity to explore something like a color, texture or shape. This gives the activity a focus rather than a rigid set of expectations. Provide ample materials, time and space in which the child can work freely.

Like real life, a good art project is a challenge, an open-ended opportunity, and has no "correct" answer.

Susan Striker is the author of many books on creativity for children including the best-selling series **The Anti-Coloring Books®**. Her most recent book is **Young at Art®**, which is also the name of the art school she founded in New York City in 1986. The first franchise of Young at Art is now open in Westport. Visit her website at <http://www.susanstriker.com>