

The DOs and DON'Ts of Responding to Children's Artwork

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A piece of artwork is a piece of communication, not a piece of clutter. When a child (or anyone, for that matter) shows you her or his art, here are some guidelines for responding in a way that lets the individual know you are listening to her or him.

DON'T:

- make light of or ignore the work (“Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s really nice.”). *In doing this you communicate that the child isn’t important to you.*
- criticize or critique the work or compare it to other work (“Why did you make it look like that when you know you’ve done so much better in the past?”). *In doing this you communicate that the child must meet your standards rather than her or his own.*
- analyze or interpret the work (“I can tell by the colors you used that you must be feeling happy.”). *In doing this you communicate a preference to be perceived as an expert on the child rather than as a helpful resource to her or him.*
- praise the appearance of the work or the artist’s ability (“What a beautiful drawing!”). *In doing this you communicate that it is important for the child to please you rather than be honest with you and that ability, not effort, is what it takes to be successful.*

DO:

- express appreciation that the work is being shared with you (“It’s really great that you wanted to share this with me.”). *In doing this you communicate that you are interested in your relationship with the child.*
- accept each piece of art as valid in as-is condition (“I see this must be about something important, or you wouldn’t have made art about it.”). *In doing this you communicate that you accept the child as having validity and worth.*
- ask the child to discuss the work (“Can you tell me a little about this?”). *In doing this you communicate that you are interested in understanding the child’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.*
- recognize the effort that went into making the art (“You used up the whole sheet of paper—that really must have taken a lot of work!”). *In doing this you communicate that effort, not ability, is necessary for success.*

In short, the items on the DON'T list focus on you while the items on the DO list focus on the child.

Remember: appreciating a child’s efforts, not her or his ability, is what paves the road for the individual’s success. This applies to artmaking as well as to behavior in general!