

## [Art at the Center](#)



### **Creating with Kids: Talking about Art**

August 7, 2008 · [2 Comments](#)

Creating with Kids: Talking about Art

by Kathryn Horn Coneway

As an art teacher, I am thrilled when parents linger at drop off and pick up and want to see their children's art work and learn about the studio where we work. The children enjoy sharing and my co-teacher and I enjoy talking with parents about what they have heard at home about the work we do in the studio. This discussion helps us all to reflect on the process and the learning taking place through working with art materials. In our studio, the work the children do is displayed at the studio so there is not a product going home each day; at home discussions tend to focus on the children's stories and photos we send of their process working in the studio. Often when parents visit they are curious to see the products; I listen carefully as their child points out his or her creations and the parent remarks, "good job" and "isn't that beautiful," all positive and interested but very general compliments on the child's products. Somehow, once they are together in front of the products displayed on the wall the discussion becomes more difficult. I think of how few of us have had opportunities to really talk about visual art. Many people feel they are not artists or not educated about art and therefore not really "qualified" to talk about it. Parents want to be encouraging and supportive but may be missing an opportunity for deeper connection and understanding when they simply compliment their child. In his article, "Five Reasons to Stop Saying "Good Job!""

<http://www.alfiekohn.org/parenting/gj.htm>

Alfie Kohn argues against the over use of generalized positive praise. He argues that this sort of praise can be manipulating of children and can cause them to become too dependent on praise and to lose the sense of doing things for the intrinsic joy of the act itself. Additionally, rather than increasing their interest and achievement, this sort of praise can actually cause children to lose interest and achieve less in a given area because they feel they have already done a "good job."

In observing parents interacting with children in an art studio, it seems to me that parents find joy in their children's creations and want to be a part of that and share with their child. However many have not had practice talking about art so they rely on generalized positive comments which may come to frustrate children who feel that the deeper process they engaged in is missed by "isn't that beautiful." The challenge is finding the right words to foster and encourage that creativity and to find a new language to talk about art with our kids. A good starting point is "tell me about your picture" or simply saying nothing at all, pause a little longer than is comfortable while just looking and see what your child tells you.

Similarly when working as a family around the kitchen table listen and observe and see what your kids say and do to fill that silence. Even an open-ended question like “what are you going to make?” can be disruptive to a child engaged in the process of making. It puts the focus on what the result will be rather than on the process. Instead, notice qualities of the materials and comment on what you see the children doing with them. When children are working there is a fine balance to finding the right amount of adult attention. As soon as mom gets on the phone and her attention is distracted, someone gets inspired to paint the carpet. On the other hand, hovering over your child and commenting too much while they work can stifle creativity too. A good approach is to work with your children, either in the same media or maybe just taking notes on their process with pencil and paper; sit at the table with them but have your own task. Thus you are engaged enough in your own activity to give them their space but attentive enough to be a part of their process.

Whether working with your children or looking at the results, practice your skills as an observer and say what you saw. Instead of “what a pretty picture” tell your child how much you like all the blue they used. Notice the kinds of lines (straight, curvy, squiggly) in a drawing or the colors used in a painting. If you were present while they were creating, say something you noticed about the process, “It was interesting to me how you started with this mouse in the middle and then thought of all these details to add to give him an environment.” Practice asking open ended questions: what do you like best in this picture? What was the hardest part to do? What did you do first, second? What else could you add? This opens up for your child to tell you more about their ideas and process in creating.

Ask open-ended questions but encourage kids to be specific in their responses. So if you ask them what they like best and they say the flower because it is beautiful, ask what is beautiful about it, the color? the shape? This can also be a good tactic as children become more sensitive to the opinions of their peers or if children begin comparing their work to that of others. When a child reports that another child is the “best artist” or always has “the most beautiful work” in the class, press them to find out specifically what they think makes that work the best and most beautiful. In this way they can develop critical thinking skills and shift the focus from competition for the best to noticing specific attributes that are appealing and work unique. Talking about art takes time. The processing seems to be slower because we are shifting back and forth from the visual mode of looking (right brain) to the language mode of speaking (left brain). Take time to look and listen with your children when they are working with materials and when they bring their creations to share with you. One of the wonderful things about children and art is the desire to share the product; “look what I made!” invites interaction, discussion and connection. Also share your creative interests with your kids and let them know what it is you enjoy about your process whether it is cooking, gardening, sewing or writing; you may find family members express their creativity in different ways but can talk about the similarities in their process. How do you get started? What do you do when you get frustrated? Do you prefer to work alone or with others around? Sharing your process with your children can help them reflect on their own process. The problem solving and creative thinking you talk about can then be transferred to other areas of work and learning.