WOW WITH PAM
WORDS OF WISDOM

Art is Fine Motor Gold for Little Hands

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

When my daughters were little, I remember taking them to Michael's or Hobby Lobby to pick out paint and canvases to just create. We would use the newspapers that were thrown on our driveway, cover our dining room table, and go to town. As they got older, we would have painting nights (something they still do!) and look for "classes" on Youtube. Kind of like those painting places that I can't seem to find anymore that give you step by step instructions to make the painting of the night. Sure I knew the importance of the skills being used and practiced, but for us, it was just fun!

It's easy to see a child smearing paint or happily ripping paper as "just play." But we know every artistic endeavor is actually a powerful training session for their brain and the body. At the Early Learning Center, we see firsthand how art activities are engaging, fun, and effective ways to develop those fine motor skills—the foundation for a lifetime of learning and independence.

Fine motor skills use those small muscles, mostly in the hands and fingers, in sync with their eyes. These skills are essential for their academic success. Of course, you might not be writing a great deal anymore. Typing on a laptop or texting might be your primary way of communicating. But even now, children are writing in school, reading physical books, using rulers, calculators later on and building. Then there is the independence with zipping a coat, buttoning a shirt, tying their shoes, all important skills.

Think about it: the journey from holding a chunky crayon to neatly writing their name is a massive developmental leap! And the best fuel for that leap isn't a worksheet—it's art. Worksheets have a place and for some children, having the parameters of "this goes here and that goes there", is comforting. Often as children get older, those set "rules" are helpful and even necessary. Just don't discount the more free form exploration.

Art allows us to naturally build these muscles and hand-eye coordination starting with babies. At this stage, art is all about exploration and strength.

Activities like finger painting, squishing play-dough or edible sensory materials (like mashed bananas), and using jumbo chalk on pavement are great ways to start this process. These opportunities for exploration encourage reaching, grasping, and releasing, building up the strength in their tiny palms and wrists. Smearing paint helps them control arm and hand movements, preparing them for more precise actions later on.

Think about the amount of mess that makes you comfortable, beforehand. Find that outfit with the stains you couldn't get out or strip him down to his diaper and find a dollar store table cloth

to cover the space. Then let him do his thing~

As your children enter the preschool stage, around 3 or 4, this is when you can introduce tools and focus on developing their pincer grasp (the neat hold between the thumb and index finger) and bilateral coordination (using both hands together). The pincer grasp began when they started to feed themselves finger foods in the high chair, but now it is becoming more developed to hold that pencil for controlled movements.

Great ideas for activities that you can do at home include proving child-safe scissors for them to go to town. Those newspapers are still being left on the driveways! Cutting (the act of opening and closing is a fantastic hand workout!) really strengthens those muscles! Give your daughter the grocery ad, when you are done, and let her make her shopping list, complete with pictures, with the assistance of a glue stick. Beading is also a wonderful way to develop this skill. While buying colorful, shiny beads is an option, consider using yarn and circle cereal pieces; art, fine-motor skill building and a snack! Pasta shapes are a more “permananent” option.

By kindergarten, children are ready to focus on control and endurance—being able to perform detailed tasks without their hands getting tired.

The Internet is great for finding complex coloring pages that encourage staying within the lines but even more fun (in my humble opinion) is looking for origami projects. Paper airplanes are probably one of the simplest ideas and hours of fun.

Other activities that demand precision and visual planning strengthen their control. Trying to accurately place a small sticker or drawing a spiral is preparing their little hands and minds for the rigors of formal handwriting.

The next time your child asks to paint, or you see a huge mess of craft scraps, remember that they aren't just creating a picture—they are engaging in vital developmental work.

I encourage you to embrace the process, not the product! Give them the time, the space, and the materials to squeeze, tear, cut, and scribble. By supporting their artistic expression, you are laying the groundwork for literacy, independence, and a future full of possibilities. Go ahead, make a beautiful mess! And of course, strengthen their *Bal Tashchit* (do not destroy) and their responsibility for their environment by cleaning up.

#ShabbatShalom