

Sometimes a **Smudge** Is Just a **Smudge**,

and Sometimes It's a . . .

Saber-Toothed Tiger

Learning and the Arts through the Ages

Resa Matlock and John Hornstein

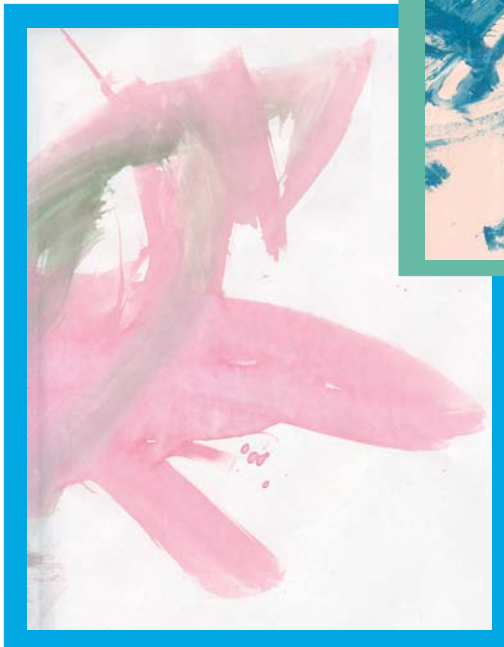
Adults who spend time playing with, talking to, or thinking about young children, react and express themselves as differently as the blind men of Indostan. Upon encountering an elephant, the first man patted the animal's sturdy side and exclaimed. "It's a wall!" "No, it's a spear," said another, feeling the tusk. The one who held the trunk was sure the elephant was like a snake. "No," said the man who

touched an ear. "It is a fan." "A tree," pronounced the man touching the knee. And the one holding the tail was convinced it was a rope.

For teachers and parents attempting to make sense of what research tells us about how children learn to think and solve problems creatively, it can be helpful to remember that from Peoria to Indostan, humans are programmed to make sense of confusing data by turning them into stories (Bruner 1990). Stories stimulate not just the imagination but also our ability to organize a range of material into coherent units that make sense on an emotional and rational level (Egan 1988).

When you're four, as was Kalieb on the day he dictated the following, you might string your units together like this:

I took myself for a walk for awhile and I found a snail who was right in the road and I saw a truck coming and then I saved him. And then we went for a walk and he had feet and he talked. And he had hands and eyeballs. And then we went home and started playing. Then that's it.



Resa Matlock is a codirector of The Child Care Collection at Ball State University. The Child Care Collection, with the help of the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, is producing three training videos to document ways in which the arts can help young children learn self-regulation, improve their communication skills, and become more adept at making friends and getting along with peers.

John Hornstein, EdD, is an assistant professor in early childhood education at the University of New Hampshire and a research associate at Children's Hospital in Boston. His research focus is emotional development in young children. He helped develop the Touchpoints program based on the work of Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, which combines relationship building and child development in a framework that professionals can use to enhance their work with families.



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But these days, if you're teaching 4-year-olds, or 14- or 40-year-olds, and if you know the value of integrating play and the arts throughout the early childhood curriculum and life, your story might sound like this:

Once upon a time, long, long ago, many men, women, and children lived happily in cliffside caves carved by rain and wind. The men and women were of many different shapes and sizes, and the children were mostly small and noisy.

One day a hunting party limped home with thorns in their toes. Half of them whimpered in pain; the other half tried to remove the thorns while comforting the suffering hunters.

On this rainy afternoon the children ran in and out of the caves, dripping drops, tracking mud, and singing songs about old men snoring. One of the children, Culpepper, slipped and fell into the cold ashes from the previous night's campfire. Anvil, the father with the largest thorn in his biggest toe, bellowed, "You kids get out of here right now, or I'll feed you to the saber-toothed tigers!"

The children fled, all except for Culpepper. As he struggled to get to his feet, he bumped into a wall, leaving a smudge of charcoal. Something about the

smudge looked familiar, as though a shadow had stuck around, even after the fire went out. It dawned on Culpepper that the smudge looked just like a mouse. "Hey!" he cried. "Look what I made!"

Palopeknee was so preoccupied tending to Anvil's toe that she failed to find any charm in the smudge. "Just wait till I show your father what you did to the wall," she yelled.

Culpepper scurried out the door. When he caught up with the rest of the group, Plinth noticed the black footprints that had followed him along the path. "Look what you made with your feet!" she exclaimed.

A sudden downpour obliterated the tracks, but not before Culpepper's brain made a lightning-like connection between shadows, smudges, and footprints. The drenched children ran for their play cave, where Culpepper told the others about the mouse he had made. The group's collective mind needed only seconds to embrace this new concept, and soon the children were daubing stories on the walls of the cave with mud and crushed berries as well as ashes. An hour later the walls were covered with black and purple handprints and footprints and smudges from elbows and knees.

In the midst of all the clamor and joy, one child suddenly stopped in mid-drawing. "A saber-toothed tiger! I made a saber-toothed tiger!"

The drawing and footprinting and smudging came to an abrupt halt. A tiger in the cave? Surely that was too dangerous! A sense of uneasiness spread through the children, and soon the youngest was crying and calling for his mother. The older children were unable to console him, so they all ran off to the main cave to find their parents.

That night around the evening fire, after the hunting party had danced and sung the Hunt Dance and choreographed a new Toe Thorn Trot, the children told the story of the images they had made. The adults, now blessedly thorn free and able to process new information, recognized at once that the children had stumbled upon an exciting way to share joyful experiences and make meaning of unsettling encounters.

An age-old tool

Humans have always used the arts to share and make sense of their deepest joys and fears. When we bring the shadows out of the caves and turn them into story, dance, song, or picture, we transform our emotions into something to share with others. And on those rare days when all the planets are perfectly aligned, we react in ways that lead to a greater understanding for all.

We begin asking questions at a very early age, and the search for answers goes on until we die. Why am I here? How powerful am I? What am I capable of? Do you really

love me? Do you see what I see? Will you still love me if I draw on the walls? Why are there monsters? Can you make them go away and not come back until I'm ready?

In 2004, many thousands of years after that first mouse smudge, adults are still trying to help themselves and children make sense of the world—to come to grips with the joyful and the unsettling. As researchers like Gardner (1982) remind us, the best way to help children process their lives is *not* by insisting that they sit quietly and passively.

Some of us accept that messiness and inappropriate behavior have meaning and realize that children's most important play and stories often include troubling and perplexing actions and ideas (Bruner 1990). Others of us, wanting to keep children safe and healthy, often try to eliminate trouble and perplexity. But sometimes the stories that help all of us grow *are* disturbing. If we want children to develop the capacity to find new, creative solutions, we must constantly search for ways to manage, even embrace, the disturbing parts of life.

Integrating the arts

The arts play a critical role in the human need for self-expression, for sharing thoughts and ideas, and for challenging old ways of thinking. One organization that supports early childhood professionals in their attempts to help children make sense of the world is the Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts (see below for more information).

Now that we are out of the cave, let's peek into a preschool classroom where a Wolf Trap teaching artist is visiting. Lorena Racanelli, a professional dancer, is dancing and singing with the children.

More on the Wolf Trap Institute . . .

Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts was founded in 1981. The institute provides arts-in-education services for children ages three through five and their teachers and families. Collaborations between performing artists and early childhood professionals are designed to enrich and motivate teachers' professional development and engage young children in active, creative learning experiences. For more information, visit www.wolftrap.org/institute.

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"Good morning, toes," she sings.

"Good morning, toes," the 19 children reply. Some of them can sing in tune; some cannot. All of them know how to move, although some prefer to first observe and give their movements some thought.

The drum-filled song chosen for the warm-up activity has a compelling beat. Most of the children join in willingly, even when Lorena asks them to lie down on their backs, stick their feet in the air, and pretend to pedal their bicycles.

"Good morning, bottom," sings Lorena.

"Good morning, bottom," echo the children.

The adults sitting around the room are a tad ambivalent. You can almost hear them thinking: "Movement—what a wonderful way for children to engage their bodies and minds, but I'm pretty sure I can no longer do the bicycle pedal."

Those of us who care for young children are concerned about many things, not the least of which is whether we can still do the bicycle pedal. By the time we reach a certain age, we have fewer synapses in our brains than when we were four, and we have devised a system of shortcuts to get us through each day. These shortcuts, especially for adults who work with or around large groups of children, often seem to be all that stand between the children and terrible consequences. "Stop!" is all we have time to get out before it's too late: Sally has already pushed Kanisha off the climber, and Ben has bumped into Abdul while running past him. We inquire sternly, "What were you thinking?" but the answers children give tend to involve saber-toothed tigers, dancing mice, and robots that sprout pogo sticks that allow them to leap buildings in a single bound.

We adults who are committed to finding more creative ways to help children consider their thoughts and actions might want to spend a day with Sean Layne, another Wolf Trap Institute teaching artist. A professional actor and director, Sean tells a story in which the word *fierce* appears, then helps the children explore the meanings of the word.

"OK, my friends, let's see what we have in our shoes. Can anyone find a *fierce* face in his shoe and put it on to show his friends?"

Of course every child has such a face in his shoe, and hissing and growling ensue until Sean waves his magic wand and asks the children to look for a *quiet* face.

Steve Elm is a teaching artist with the New York City Wolf Trap Institute's creative arts team. He and his colleagues devise creative ways to use stories and drama to help young children develop critical problem-solving and thinking skills.

As the children try to decide whether to be enraged or overjoyed at the trick that Steve ("Sangura") has played on "Bui Bui," the spider that used to be their teacher, the spider/teacher has an epiphany: Lugging an imaginary bag of rabbit costumes into circle time can transform the classroom into an engaging universe where social and educational issues can be explored in ways that allow children to discover for themselves how their actions affect others.

Preschoolers know they can talk to their toes. When adults endorse that belief, children are free to explore powerful ideas as well as silly, fun ideas. Little twists in thinking or perception are what push humans into what we call *creativity*. Adult artists strive to maintain the freedom of thought that is natural to the preschooler. For all of us who manage to keep the creative windows open, helping children identify and expand odd connections is a powerful tool for making sense of daily life.

Sharing the wonder

Art with children works best when adults share in the discoveries. Teachers must bring their own curiosity and awe into the classroom and be prepared to acknowledge that children often lead in the discovery. One ongoing challenge is learning to recognize the moment of engagement, to embrace that physical and psychological place in which adults and children are free to make discoveries, and to look for opportunities to use materials in new ways.

Creative acts incorporate previous learning and experiences as well as new expressions. The surprise of peekaboo leads to the discovery of a mouse smudge on the wall and ultimately to inventions that can change the way we all live. The willingness of adults to consider new ideas allows children to enter magical rooms where new ideas sprout springs and wings and begin to bounce and fly. Through interactions between children and adults, both in the home and in the classroom, one generation builds a legacy for the next, and we all contribute to a changing culture (Rogoff 1990).

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Exploring emotion and context

Emotion and context, inside us and thousands of miles away from us, work together. Weather researchers recently noted that Edvard Munch painted *The Scream* after witnessing terrifying atmospheric effects in Norway following the eruption of Krakatoa volcano in Indonesia in 1883 (Radford 2003). A seismic occurrence

on the opposite side of the globe prompted one of the most striking creative statements in history. Through art we find meaning in the interactions between emotion and context. For children struggling to understand a smudge, a shadow, the television news, or parent fears, arts-based activities can provide the means to make sense of the emotions and context (Gross & Clemens 2002).

Creative, Arts-Based Activities for Teachers to Consider

Use stories to make any activity more interesting. For example, before children begin an active, structured movement activity, tell a story to help them remember the warm-up sequence.

Use drama to help children think about issues such as anger management, conflict resolution, or respect for self and others. Invite children to make changes in the story's direction and outcome. For example, for a story in which someone's feelings have been hurt, one group of children may decide that an "I'm sorry" is needed, along with an offering of pretend candy and flowers. Another group might decide to spend its choice time making heart-covered cards for the person whose feelings were hurt.

Solicit children's input for every activity you plan. If you are making an obstacle course for the gross motor area, ask children what objects they would add. Is there a story that explains why the brown bear is in the cardboard tunnel? Can they make up a song to help everyone remember to hop on one foot three times before they crawl into the tunnel, just to make sure the bear is awake?

Learn to improvise well. This will allow any classroom event to become an occasion for learning. Children's play is a collectively produced, improvised activity. Consider taking a workshop or class in improvisation. You can learn basic performance and improvisational skills and use them to create a collaborative classroom environment in which everyone can take risks, think on their feet, and exceed their own expectations.

Encourage imagination. Props are a lot of fun, until you run out of places to store them.

Imaginary bags of rabbit teeth, paws, noses, and whiskers take up a lot less room.

Offer new building materials.* Provide cardboard cartons and tubes, index cards, molding clay, and wood scraps instead of the blocks that the children have been playing with for months. Create a house or town. What about a bridge?

Play music to stimulate children's thinking. Observe the differences between the drawings children do while listening to a violin solo and ones they make while listening to Raffi singing "Baby Beluga in the Deep Blue Sea."

Make language portable. Has the sign that says "Wall" been hanging in the same place for more than six months? Ask the children to find a new place for it. Write the words of a simple poem on pieces of paper and have the children line up the words to make a different poem.

Let children experiment with movement or sound as a means of communication.* Can they send messages by drumbeat? With movements they make up and then combine to make a sentence? How difficult is it for their friends to understand them?

Teach creative problem solving.* Use two paper plates and some ping-pong balls. Ask the children to look for items in the room that they can use to move the balls from one plate to the other without touching them with their fingers. What will they think of, besides drinking straws, masking tape, string, or pipe cleaners?

* Adapted from *Project Spectrum: Early Learning Activities*, edited by Jie-Qi Chen (New York: Teachers College Press, © 1998 by Teachers College Press, Columbia University), 37, 123, & 46.

Creativity is often social. Culpepper's discovery of the mouse smudge became far more meaningful when he shared it with his peers. It became the means by which the children addressed their fears about saber-toothed tigers. Trusting children with each other, without trying to control their discoveries, yields a richness rarely achieved when children work alone or under close adult supervision (Paley 1981).

Early humans sensed the connection between creativity and meaning making. But they perhaps were not fully aware of how art can go beyond a prescriptive use of basic materials to a place where tomorrow's leaders first experiment with ways of addressing fundamental questions about individual identity and what it means to live in harmony with other people.

Conclusion

Saber-toothed tigers and terrorists, Legos and missions to Mars, children and adults solving problems and discovering new worlds: the work of learning in early childhood settings involves far more than providing developmentally appropriate materials or teaching pre-academic skills. It maintains intellectual possibility and emotional connections (Egan 1988). It involves—today and all over again tomorrow—children and adults working, playing, and thinking together, struggling to face real and imaginary joys and fears, sharing exciting discoveries and disappointing dead ends, with the help of pen and paper, music and movement, and story, song, and dance.



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