



# GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR STUDIO EXPLORATIONS

To learn to speak a language, we begin with the foundational sounds. We experiment with how to shape our mouths and tongues; we play with tone and inflection. We listen to other people, mimicking the sounds we hear. We begin to weave sounds together—vowels and consonants forged into words. After time, we no longer feel clumsy and this new language becomes familiar. Eventually, our dreams unfold in this new language. We've claimed it as our own.

In just this way, we learn the language of art. We explore the physical qualities of a particular medium: how it feels on our hands, how it moves across paper, how it holds its shape. We experiment with tools and with techniques. Through many encounters and engaged exploration, we become comfortable with this new art medium. We begin to think in terms of color, texture, movement, and sculptural image. We've claimed the language of art as our own.

To learn the language of art, we create studio spaces, or areas set aside for art exploration. We develop practices that guide our exploration. We collect notes and photos and samples of children's work to use in written documentation, displays, and portfolios. We make time to reflect on our studio work with families, with teachers, and with ourselves. The following guidelines offer suggestions for ways to begin this work.

## THE SPACE

### *Creating a Studio*

A studio can take many forms. In your program, you might have ample space, enough that you can dedicate an entire room to art, creating a full-fledged studio. Or you might have a corner in a classroom or in your family child care home that you can set apart from the hustle and bustle of the room's activity with several simple screens or shelves. The experiences you and the children share in the space are what matter, not the formality of the studio space.

An art studio needs a few basics:

- a tile floor, because many encounters with art are messy;
- a table with plenty of work space for four or five children and you;
- good light from both natural and artificial sources;
- storage shelves for art materials: these shelves can be at the children's level—materials don't need to be kept in a closed cupboard that is inaccessible to children;
- space for paintings to dry: this can be a drying rack, a clothesline from which paintings can be

hung, or a shelf system with lots of space for large paintings;

- space for three-dimensional sculptures to dry: shelves spaced so there's plenty of room between them work best for this.

Find a way to set the studio space apart from the rest of the classroom. Some programs use tall, open shelving to create a “wall” around the studio space. Other programs use simple free-standing screens made of wood frames and sheer white fabric. Hanging screens, like those designed for outdoor patios, are another option. Vines planted in a box on the floor can grow up a trellis to create a living wall. The intention in dividing the studio from the rest of the room is to invite focus and attention and to communicate to the children, “You can immerse yourselves in this work. You can linger here, uninterrupted. We honor your work here.”

Make the studio space beautiful, a place that nourishes the spirit and senses. If you have the resources, store paint in clear jars to bring vibrant color into the room. Bring lush green plants into the space. Pour glitter into glass jars and set them on the window ledge to sparkle in the sun. Arrange shells, rocks, or branches on shelves, or hang them on the wall. Tuck unexpected treasures into the studio: a vase of feathers, a basket of sea glass, or an abandoned bird's nest. Store paintbrushes in pottery jars. Create a space that stirs the imagination and awakens the senses.

As you create your studio, remember that “studio” is as much about how we think about art practices as it is about a specific place. Barbara Burrington writes that “studio” is “a name that implies work, study, and art all in a breath” (2005, 56). A studio stands for a way of experiencing the possibilities of art materials in community with others.

## Setting Up the Space

As you prepare to invite children into the studio, arrange the work space in a way that creates focus and attention. The table ought to be cleared of all but the materials you'll need at the beginning of your exploration; these materials can be displayed with order and beauty in the center of the table: a few jars of paint, perhaps, or one lump of clay, unwrapped and waiting for the children. Each child's work space can be defined with an echoing simplicity: a piece

of white paper with a brush laid across the top, or a piece of canvas awaiting clay. In the way that you arrange the space, you create an invitation for children to bring their full attention to the art medium they are about to encounter.

If you cover the table, use a simple plastic tablecloth or big pieces of butcher paper. Choose a neutral color—white, light tan, or black—and avoid patterns or designs that visually take over the work space. The table covering should emphasize the materials and the children's work, not distract from them.

Be thoughtful about the sound in the studio space—again, with the intention of creating an environment that fosters quiet concentration. You may strive to create silence in the studio space. Or, if your studio space is part of the larger classroom, you may use a CD player to play quiet, rhythmic instrumental music that brings focus to the space.

Have a plan for cleaning up before you begin! As children finish fingerpainting or working with clay, how will they wash their hands? How will they dry their hands? Where will the children's paintings go to dry? Where will you set the clay pieces? How will you label each child's wire sculpture when it's completed? Create a system for cleaning up and for tracking art pieces before you invite the children into the studio space, so that you're not scrambling to figure this out when the first child finishes her work! (More guidelines for cleaning up can be found on page 12 and in the chapters on specific art media.)

## MATERIALS

You'll use some materials in a number of art explorations, and a few materials that are specific to particular art media. Each chapter lists the materials needed for that specific exploration. You can use these lists to stock your studio.

Gather materials from places like hardware stores, restaurant supply stores, kitchenware shops, and yard sales, as well as from the more typical art supply stores and educational provisioners. A search on the Internet will lead you to companies from whom you can order many materials. Inexpensive art materials are available at Discount School Supply ([www.discountchoolsupply.com](http://www.discountchoolsupply.com)), Creation Station ([www.creationstationinc.com](http://www.creationstationinc.com)), and Dick Blick Art Materials ([www.dickblick.com](http://www.dickblick.com)).

## THE PROCESS

### Gathering the Children

Certainly, we want all of the children in a classroom community to have lots of opportunities to explore each medium. We also want each child to receive the luxuries of time, space, and attentive support, which allow deep relationships with art media to grow. For this to happen, children ought not to be competing for resources and for a teacher's attention. Small groups of no more than six, and optimally four, children are best.

This may feel like a daunting task. Most classroom groups hold many more than six children. Here are some strategies teachers have used to bring a small group of children together for studio explorations:

- If your program has two adults, make a plan to invite a small group of children into the studio space with one adult while the other adult works with the other children. You might schedule this during a time in the day when children are typically doing “free choice” sorts of activities. Another option is to schedule studio work during a time in the day when children typically do small-group work.
- Ask each parent to spend an hour in the classroom every few months. With the support of even one parent a week, you can carve out weekly small-group experiences in the studio.
- Consider using “floater” positions as classroom support to allow the regular classroom teacher to work in the studio with a small group of children.
- In some half-day Head Start programs, teachers offer each other regular support by “trading time.” A teacher responsible for an afternoon group has planning and preparation time in the morning; that teacher could step into the morning classroom once or twice a week so that the morning teacher could work in the studio with a small group of children. The morning teacher would then offer the same support to the afternoon classroom during his planning and preparation time.
- In some programs, administrators establish regular schedules to be in the classroom once or twice a week, adding an extra adult into the ratio for that hour.

When you gather children in the studio, you may decide that the group will stick together: you and the children will head to the studio at the same time and stay in the studio as a group until everyone's finished with the exploration and the studio is cleaned up. Or you might decide to create a more fluid coming-and-going between the small group in the studio and the rest of the children in the classroom. As each child finishes at her own pace, she neatens her work space, and then heads back to the classroom, allowing another child to join the studio group. Either way works fine—but it's best to have a clear plan at the outset.

Do keep track of which children have spent time in the studio exploring a particular art medium. Make sure that every child has a full turn with each art medium, then move through the list one or two more times, so that each child has several encounters with the medium.

### Introducing a New Art Medium or Material

What if we introduced children to a new art medium as if we were introducing them to a dear friend, someone we expected would become a treasured companion to them? What if that sense of hopeful anticipation infused our introductions between children and paint, or clay, or wire?

*I'm glad you're in the studio today. I'm eager for you to know about paint—how it feels on your hands, how it moves on paper, how its colors come together to create new colors. Get comfortable so that I can show you the beginning of our work today.*

We want our introductions to be simple and direct, marking a beginning and focusing the work.

*You are artists, and there are some tools you need to know about. Today, we'll experiment with an important tool for clay that artists use, so that you can use it in your work.*

It's helpful to use “technical” language with children, giving them the real names of the media and materials in the studio: “tempera paint,” “a size 2 paintbrush,” or “wedging clay to get the air bubbles out.” We want to give children a full and accurate art vocabulary, which provides them access to the medium and allows them to talk with each other with detail and specificity.

## The Teacher's Role During Art Explorations

Several goals about children's studio work help us understand our roles as teachers:

- We want children to explore the sensuality and beauty of color, texture, movement, lines and curves, and space through encounters with a wide range of media and materials.
- We want children to strengthen the dispositions of artists and scientists, dispositions to look carefully, to pay attention to detail and nuance, and to work with intention and awareness. We want children to reflect on their experiences, to use their reflections to guide their explorations. And we want them to collaborate with each other in ways that honor each person's work.
- We want children to become knowledgeable about a range of media, developing skills that allow them to use each medium with ease.
- We want children to be in dialogue with each other, to take new perspectives, and to deepen their relationships with each other.

With these goals to guide our work, we have some specific roles to play during children's studio explorations.

Encourage children to slow down, to take plenty of time with their work.

*You can take a very long turn in the studio, so you really get to know about tempera paint.*

*I appreciate the way you're spending a long time with that clay; that's just what an artist does.*

Sometimes, a child rushes from one painting or clay sculpture to the next, getting caught in a fast-moving effort to produce many finished products. When you see this happening, or sense that a child is paying only superficial attention to her work, you can ask her to stop and refocus herself. Listed here are some examples of things you might say to her. Study these examples and the other examples throughout the book, paying attention to the underlying tone, intention, and values. These examples can help you get started in your conversations with children; over time, you'll find your own voice.

*I see you moving fast to make lots of paintings. I'd like you to try taking a longer time with one painting.*

*Before you decide you're finished with this painting, let's look at the work you've done and see if there's anything you want to add or change. I see that you've used mostly red and orange, but that you've also got purple on your palette. I wonder if you want to use the purple paint somewhere on your painting.*

Another way to encourage children to slow down and take time with their work is to invite them to draw on all their senses to explore the medium.

*What does the paint feel like as it moves on the paper?*

*Is the clay cold on your skin?*

*I wonder how you'd describe the smell of the clay.*

*Look at how the colors of the watercolor paint swirl together.*

*Listen to that squishy sound when you mush the clay between your hands!*

Or you might help children notice different elements of their work. Call attention to the details you see, and encourage the children to look at their work more closely.

*I notice that you've created spiky lines with your paintbrush by pressing it down on the paper.*

*Your clay is getting softer and softer; it's easier to move it into new shapes.*

*You've bent the wire nearly in half.*

You might ask questions that help the children reflect on their work.

*I wonder what your idea is for the clay, now that you've rolled it into a long, thin strip.*

*You've been adding so many dots to your painting. How are you doing that?*

*What are you discovering about watercolor paints?*

Call children's attention to each other's work. Help children see what their companions are discovering, and encourage them to serve as resources and teachers for each other.

*Pattiann has found a new way to use that tool. Let's take a break from our own work for a*



*minute so that she can teach us what she figured out.*

*You want to attach that tube to the box to make a chimney. I see that Alex has a tube on his construction; I bet he can show you a way to make your tube stay on.*

Coach children about how to work with a medium or tool. Children need and deserve direct teaching about how to use the materials and media we give them. Stay alert for times when they get stuck or run out of ideas about how to use the medium, and offer them specific coaching.

*I see you're having a hard time with that tape. Let me show you a way to tear the tape off the tape holder.*

*I think you're ready to learn about a new tool to use with clay. This will help you with the sculpture you're trying to make.*

At times, a child will use art tools in unexpected ways—dipping the tip of a brush handle into the paint, for example, and using that to make lines on paper. When this happens, observe for a few minutes to understand what the child is trying to figure out. Is she discovering a new possibility in the tool? Is her use of the tool helping her discover an intriguing or important quality of the art medium? Once you have a sense of what she's working on, you can reflect with her about it.

*Look at the thin, thin line you made with the tip of the brush handle! It looks different than the thin line that the hair of the brush makes. Did you notice that?*

*It's interesting to paint with stiff tools, isn't it. Not like the soft hair of a paintbrush, but hard and strong. Let's try some other tools that are stiff like the brush handle. How about a twig? A piece of wire?*

Sometimes, the unusual way in which a child uses a tool can break the tool or mess up the art medium: sticking a delicate paintbrush into clay, for example. When this happens, gently coach a child about how to best use that tool.

*That thin paintbrush works best for making lines and adding color to paintings. When it gets*

*stuck into clay, the hair on the brush becomes tangled and gooped up with clay. And the clay gets hair in it. We'll save the paintbrushes for paint, and the clay tools for clay.*

Offer the child another, more appropriate tool to use.

*It looks to me like you're curious about how to make deep holes, like tunnels, in the clay. Let's find a tool that will help you do that.*

Sit with the children as they work, minimizing your movement around the room. You might paint or sculpt alongside the children. When we sit with the children, we communicate that the work of art is important—that it's worthy of slow, deliberate attention, that it's worth sitting down for! When we move around the art space tending to little details, leaning over the children's work briefly to check in, we discourage quiet focus and disrupt children's work.

Keep the work space uncluttered and inviting. As the children work, keep an eye on the table. You may quietly neaten the space, so that the children are able to sink into their work without clutter or mess getting in their way. Or you may call children's attention to recurring issues so that they can learn how to best manage a particular medium.

*I notice that your canvas keeps slipping over the edge of the table, and when that happens, bits of clay roll onto the floor. Pay attention to the edge of your canvas. When you see it coming over the edge of the table, pull it back like this.*

Pay attention to time. You want to be sure children have plenty of time to bring their work to a close.

*This is a good time to start thinking about how you want to end your work with clay today.*

It's important that children don't start a new undertaking right before cleanup time. It's awfully frustrating to just get started with something and then be asked to stop.

*The painting that you're working on now will need to be your last one today. We're coming close to lunch, and there isn't time to start another painting now.*

Noticing how long a particular exploration takes will give you a sense of how much time to set aside

when you next take up this exploration with children, which will be helpful as you plan your work.

During an art exploration, consider what you would find helpful from a teacher if you were learning how to use a new art medium. Most likely, you'd look for some specific coaching about tools and techniques; you'd appreciate gentle feedback and correction when you struggled. You'd look to the teacher for clear guidance about this unfamiliar medium—and you'd expect the teacher to offer that guidance with deep respect for your ability to wrestle with something new and to stick with challenges. You'd want to leave with a sense of increased skill and expanded possibilities. You'd probably be frustrated if the teacher simply glanced at your work occasionally and made vague comments about “nice job” and “interesting colors.” We can offer children the specific, generous, respectful coaching that we would hope to receive as learners.

### **Cleaning Up**

Before you begin, have a plan for how you'll clean up. Devise your cleanup system as you set up for the exploration, before children arrive in the studio. There are suggestions for cleanup systems in the chapters about specific art media that follow.

As you set up the studio, consider where children will put their paintings, sculptures, collages, or constructions as they finish. Think about what will best preserve the integrity of the work: if children are painting with tempera paint, for example, then you may want a drying system that allows the paintings to lie flat, since tempera paint tends to run. Will children be returning to work on their clay sculptures another day? If so, you'll need some plastic wrap ready to drape over their clay to keep it moist. Set up these systems for drying and storage as you set up the studio.

Consider how you'll keep track of the children's projects. Again, it's important to respect the integrity of a child's work. We often write a child's name on a painting or drawing; consider doing this on the back of the painting or drawing, in ballpoint ink rather than with a marker that bleeds through the paper. With a clay sculpture, you can carve a child's name on the bottom. With loose parts, collage, and wire, consider writing a child's name on masking tape and taping that loosely to the sculpture, so that it can be removed easily.

As you decide on a labeling system for each medium, keep in mind that we want people's eyes to go to the work itself, not to a child's name written in some overbearing place. Sometimes, children want to write their own name or symbol on their work; give children a ballpoint pen and have them write on the back of their painting or drawing, or invite them to write on a piece of tape that can be attached to their work. We want to honor children's eagerness to write their names on their work, claiming with pride the art that they've created, and, at the same time, we want the viewer's eye to fall on the work itself.

## **EXTENSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP**

### **Inviting Children to Revisit Their Work**

We want to encourage children to take time with their work in the studio—time that may extend over several days or weeks. When children revisit their work over time, they are able to view it through different lenses. Seeing it from new perspectives, they may decide to add to it or change it.

Create storage and labeling systems that allow children to save their work and come back to it later. Some programs use “saving cards,” simple index cards with children's names that children can set on their work to indicate that they're planning to return to it and would like it to be left as it is. Other programs have art cubbies set up in the studio in which children can save their work in progress. The studio-saving system ought to be flexible enough to allow for work done in a range of media to be stored for later work: paintings, clay, wire, loose-parts construction, and even easel paintings. These systems communicate to children that we expect them to revisit their work over time.

Teachers can take the lead in urging children to continue with their work later. When a child declares she's done with a particular creation, we can encourage her to take a break for a few minutes, and then to look at it again to see what she might want to change or add:

*How about getting a drink of water, and then coming back to this painting to see if there's any more work you'd like to do on it?*

When a child is engaged in her work as cleanup time rolls around, reassure her that she can save her

work and come back to it later, so she doesn't feel rushed to finish a piece.

We emphasize the importance of lingering with and revisiting work not to stop children from finishing their work, or from ever taking anything home, but to create a spacious sense of time in which children can immerse themselves in their studio work, allowing it to unfold through a relaxed and thoughtful dialogue with the art materials.

### **Creating Opportunities for Many Different Encounters**

It's important for children to have many different opportunities to explore a particular art medium or material. Just as it takes many encounters for a deep friendship to grow—many opportunities for conversation, for shared experiences, for storytelling—it takes many encounters for a child's relationship with an art medium to grow into easy familiarity.

Plan a range of ways for children to explore an art medium or material. Begin by inviting children to explore a medium through their senses, without a great deal of teacher instruction. Early encounters with clay, for example, may include opportunities to work it from stiff coldness to warm pliability by rolling, pounding, and stomping on it; investigation of what happens to clay when it meets water—a little bit of water, and then a little bit more, and then a lot more, until there's a puddle of gooey water and not much clay at all; exploration of how it feels to lay clay on our faces, or to wrap it around our arms, or to mold it around our feet.

From these first sensual encounters, we can build other explorations of a medium. What tools are useful with this medium? How do they work on the medium? How is this medium used for representation? These sorts of encounters involve teacher guidance, as children apprentice themselves to learn specific techniques for using tools.

Another way in which children become intimate with an art medium is by learning how to set up a work space to use that medium. What's needed for watercolor painting? For clay? For loose-parts construction? Where are those materials kept? How are they best arranged on the table? And how do we clean up these materials after studio work? Our aim is for children to develop familiarity with art media so that they can take a project from start to finish with a particular medium, gathering the materials they need,

setting up the work space, and carrying out their vision for their work.

### **Representing and Re-representing an Idea or Experience**

We can extend children's thinking by encouraging them to represent and re-represent their ideas and experiences in a range of art media. For example, you might invite a child to create a black and white sketch of her clay sculpture, or to translate her marker drawing into a watercolor painting. This practice of using multiple media to represent an idea or experience can take place over several days; it is another strategy for inviting children to take time with their work, embracing the process of thoughtful creation rather than a finished product.

When children move from one medium to another, or work on different scales, or move from two to three dimensions, they see their work in new ways. They take different perspectives. They notice new details. They develop new understandings of the relationships between elements of their work. They come to deeper awareness of the role of color or line or texture. The practice of representing and re-representing an idea or experience often sparks a transformation of thinking.

## **DOCUMENTATION**

### **Creating Written Documentation about Children's Art Explorations**

Art explorations are rich experiences for children. They inspire scientific investigation, as children seek to understand the qualities and uses of an art medium. They spark collaboration and strengthen relationships among children, as children share discoveries, coach each other about strategies to try with an art medium, and work together on a creation. They demand focused attention and physical finesse. They stir the senses and emotion, delighting eyes, hands, and heart.

Art explorations hold many stories worth telling: stories for children to hear about themselves, stories for families to hear about their children's art learning, and stories for program administrators and other adult visitors to your program that challenge them

to see the importance of art in children's education. Written documentation is a way to tell those stories.

There is an increasing emphasis in early childhood programs on written documentation of children's exploration and learning. Some programs use written documentation as part of formal developmental assessments of children. Some programs use written documentation for curriculum planning. And some programs use written documentation to bring the stories of children's work and play to their families, to visitors, and to children themselves.

If you work in a program that emphasizes checklists and other formal developmental assessments, you may find yourself frustrated by the sense that these tools are disconnected from the daily experiences you share with the children—experiences of curious investigation, belly laughter, triumphant achievement, heartfelt tears, satisfying discovery, and full-bodied engagement with the smells and textures and messes of the world. These stories need to be told—and you are the person to tell them. I invite you to step into the role of storyteller, taking up that work as a form of deep regard for children and for yourself, and as an act of advocacy for the rights of children. Children deserve to have their stories—not just checklists and assessments—anchor our programs. The suggestions and guidelines provided here and in each chapter following will help you experiment with how to give form to the stories of children's encounters with art media.

If you work in a program that hasn't yet experimented with written documentation, the suggestions and guidelines in this book will help launch you into this important practice. And if you work in a program that is already engaged in the process of creating and reflecting on written documentation, the thoughts offered here and in each chapter will help you deepen your practice.

There is a wide range of possibilities for collecting written documentation. You might collect written documentation in a binder that you keep in the studio or in the area where families sign in each day. You might create a journal for each child. You might add written documentation to children's portfolios. You might send written documentation home with families. You might create handmade books for the studio about particular art explorations. Each of these ways of collecting and organizing written documentation honors children's investigation and discovery.

At Hilltop, we've developed a structure for written documentation that helps us organize our thinking

and shape our stories. In our written documentation, we tell the story of children's explorations and play, we reflect on their play, we share our plans about how we will extend their play and explorations, and we invite families to think with us about the children's play.

### Tell the Story

- Include many details to bring the story to life.
- Capture the children's dialogue; use their real words.
- Use lively, engaging language and conventional grammar.
- Emphasize description rather than interpretation.
- Consider including sketches, scanned copies, or photocopies of children's work.

Isaac and Ian arrived in the studio this morning eager to paint. They slipped on smocks and looked at each other and at the easel with its big sheet of white paper.

"We're gonna paint a picture at the easel together, right, Isaac?" said Ian in a hopeful invitation to his friend.

"Yeah, sure we are! Let's do it!" Isaac replied with a grin.

They took the lids off the jars of paint at the easel and gathered brushes, and then paused.

"How about a tornado?" Ian proposed.

"Yeah, a tornado! A really big one!" Isaac agreed.

And the two companions began to paint, filling the easel paper with swirls of color, their bodies moving together, their arms reaching up and over and around each other.

"We're artists together, right, Ian?" suggested Isaac.

"Right—artists together," Ian confirmed.

### Reflect on the Story

- Describe the meaning you make of the story.
- Share your questions about the story.



When Ian and Isaac arrived at the easel at the same time, both eager to paint, I anticipated conflict: who would have the first turn at the easel? How long would the other person have to wait? But Ian sidestepped that conflict with his proposal to work together, surprising both me and Isaac. I shouldn't have been surprised, really. Ian and Isaac are good buddies; their play is often quite physical and always full-throttle, and they know how to figure out problems together.

I was curious about how they'd negotiate the space at the easel. Though the easel stands tall and the paper it holds is large, the space becomes tight with two children standing side by side, extending their bodies to the easel. As I watched Ian and Isaac, I wondered if this effort to share the space and the creation process was, in fact, the most important part of their easel work. It seemed to me that their work together at the easel was like a dance, a way to engage with each other physically and, together, to engage with the easel: the broad arm movements, the turn of a torso, the leaning close and stepping back, moving color across the paper.

The physical dance with each other and with the paint speaks volumes about Ian and Isaac's friendship. Their affirmation to each other that they are "artists together" moved me. It seemed to me to capture the strength and intimacy of their connection, deepened by their collaborative easel work. And it reflects an important value in our studio: that art is not necessarily a solitary endeavor, but one that is anchored in relationship.

### Describe Next Steps and Further Plans

- How will you follow up on the children's explorations, questions, and discoveries? Will you add materials to the classroom? Will you offer specific activities?

- How will you pursue the questions that this experience raised for you?
- How will you make the children's learning visible to them? How will you use this experience to invite them into further exploration and reflection?

I've been thinking about how I might grow Ian and Isaac's artistic collaboration, and how I can use their work to nudge other children into collaborative work. I hung the photos I took of Ian and Isaac next to the easel, with the story of their work together. I added another hook and a second smock to the wall next to the easel, to suggest the possibility of two children painting together at the easel.

I want to think more about how we can build collaboration into our work with each art medium we take up. Next week, we'll begin exploring clay in the studio. I want to give each child time to work on his own, to get to know the clay, but I also want to offer opportunities for children to explore and shape the clay together. When I was learning to be a teacher, I was taught to make sure that all the children have plenty of materials, so that they don't have to worry about taking turns or sharing. I've questioned that conventional notion, though, as I've worked with children. I see great value in collaboration, in focusing on shared effort and shared accomplishment. Ian and Isaac's work at the easel rekindled my commitment to keep questioning my practices, and to push myself to create more opportunities (and expectations) for collaboration.

### Begin a Dialogue with Families

Invite families to share their thinking with you. Include questions like these in your written documentation:

- Have you seen your child engage in this sort of play or exploration in other contexts?

- How does this play reflect or challenge your family's beliefs, values, or practices?
- What do you think is meaningful about this play for your child?
- What are you curious about in relation to this play or exploration? Does anything about this play surprise you?
- How would you like us to explore the ideas embedded in this play together as a community?

I'm curious about what you think of the balance between individual effort and collaboration. How does Ian and Isaac's work as "artists together" fit with what you hope for for your child? Does it leave you with a sense of what you want me to do as their teacher? I'd really like to hear your thoughts about this. I'm tucking a piece of blank paper into your children's journals, just after this story; it's for you to write on! You can also call during my planning time, from 1:30 till 2:00, or send me an e-mail.

Written documentation is not a final, stale product. It is a lively tool for communication, for new learning, and for advocacy. Written documentation has a range of uses:

- We share written documentation with children, reading the stories and looking at the photos together. When children revisit their experiences this way, they often decide to take up a project again from a new perspective or to invite other children into an extension of their earlier work. They reconsider their theories and explore new understandings.
- We share written documentation with families. Our stories create windows for families, letting them see into their children's experiences during their time apart. And our stories invite families to share their thoughts and questions with us, a way for them to help shape our programs.
- We use written documentation to meet program requirements for keeping records of children's

learning. Our observations and reflections create meaningful stories that capture details of children's thinking and their relationships with one another, specific elements of their physical and sensory development, and verbatim examples of their language development.

- We use written documentation as a tool for social change. The stories that we tell of children's investigations and play have the potential for changing how people understand and value childhood. We can share our stories with other early childhood professionals, with program reviewers, and with visitors from the community. Our stories call attention to the too-often unheard or disregarded voices of children.
- We use written documentation to record a shared history for ourselves and for the children and families in our programs. Participation in an unfolding story is a cornerstone for creating community. Our documentation tells the stories of these shared experiences, which, woven together, become the fabric of community.

Each chapter contains specific questions and suggestions to help you create written documentation. As you write the stories that make children's experiences visible, keep in mind the deep value of your work. Telling these stories is an act of respect for children, for yourself, and for the community in which you work.

## Displaying Children's Work

Display is different from written documentation. Written documentation refers to the process of collecting observation notes, still photographs, transcriptions of children's conversations, and samples of their work. These traces of children's work become written stories that bring the children's experiences to life for the reader. Display refers to the visual arrangement—usually on a large scale, like a bulletin board—of paintings, prints, sculptures, photographs, observations and reflections by children and teachers, and questions for viewers. The intention of display is to create a visually beautiful presentation that invites viewers to look closely at children's work and that awakens new understandings of the meaning of children's work.

There is an art to display—especially to displays of art! We can be creative in how to tell the story of art explorations, whether on a bulletin board, a classroom wall, or a long shelf. Display is a visual art: photos, prints, and samples of children's work are the primary components. Text is a secondary emphasis.

Display catches the attention of families, visitors, and children. It sparks conversation and exchange and inspires new insights into the meaning of children's work. It instills pride in children—and in their families. It invites children to revisit their work, and it can invite families to participate with them in that revisiting.

As you consider ways to display children's art, think about the story you will tell in your display: Was the children's studio work primarily about the sensory experience of color? About using color to represent experiences and observations? Or about mastering tools like paintbrushes? Let your display tell a specific story, choosing photos and samples of children's work that bring that story to life. In each of the following chapters, you'll find suggestions for organizing your display around a compelling story.

A few general guidelines to keep in mind as you create displays of children's art:

- Create a display against a neutral background. Consider covering bulletin boards with cream or ivory paper, or with a light-colored or undyed burlap. If you are creating display boards, choose black or white. A neutral background keeps a viewer's attention on the images and text.
- Include close-up photos of the children at work on their art. Print these photos as 5 x 7 or 8 x 10 images; the bigger the print, the more eye-catching it is.
- Keep text to a minimum. Provide a simple, brief overview that gives the viewer a context for the display. Emphasize children's observations and reflections, and include a few of your own observations and insights about the children's work.
- Use a large font (at least 18- or 20-point), if you're typing your text. If you write your text by hand, use large, bold, black print.
- Consider giving a title to the display: "Portraits of Sunflowers" or "Exploring Line and Shape." Headings give focus to a display.
- Consider "framing" children's two-dimensional art by placing black paper behind it. This creates a small, simple border around a painting or sketch that lets it step forward to catch a viewer's attention.
- Weave poetry or other writing into a display. Invite children to create a poem or story as a companion piece to a mural, for example. Or include the work of a writer that speaks to some element of the art. For example, the poems of Mary Oliver are natural companions to paintings, sketches, or sculptures of the natural world.
- Include questions that invite a viewer to reflect on the children's work. You might ask the viewer to make connections between his or her experiences and the children's art, or to study the children's art from a particular perspective. Consider making space in a display for viewers to write their comments and questions—and for you and the children to respond.

## Creating Portfolios

Artists keep a representative sample of their work in portfolios. This collection of work allows an artist to revisit earlier work, noticing themes that have held constant through her work, or different techniques that she's tried, or changes to themes or style over time. Consider creating portfolios for the children in your group: simple easel-sized cardboard folders in which representative samples of a child's work (paintings, drawings, photos of three-dimensional work) can be collected. You can think with each child about what to include in his portfolio; these conversations provide an opportunity for you to highlight important elements of a child's work, and to hear from him what he considers important about his work.

*I'd like to make a copy of this drawing for your portfolio. I've seen you working hard to learn how to draw people's faces from the side; you've tried and tried and tried, and I think you've got it figured out! This drawing shows what you've learned.*

*This is the first wire sculpture you've created! I want to take a photo of it for your portfolio, and I'd like to write down your ideas about this work to go with the photo. What do you want*

*people to know about your work with wire in making this sculpture?*

Be sure to set aside regular time to look through each child's portfolio with the child, perhaps every six weeks or so. Use this time to reflect together on themes you notice in a child's collection of work, specific media and techniques that he's explored, and ways that his work is changing. Invite the child to share what he remembers about his work and what he notices as he studies the collection in his portfolio. Take notes as you talk; the child's thoughts can become part of the portfolio!

It may be a new practice for you and for families to keep children's work in the studio or classroom rather than taking it home right away. Talk with families about your intention to have children revisit their work and build on their earlier thinking. And assure families that children's full portfolios will be theirs to keep at the end of the year or when children leave your program.

When you do invite children to take their work home, suggest ways that families might honor their children's work:

Dear families,

Your children are proud of their art. They've invested tremendous energy and effort in it and are excited to share the results with you. They talk about you as they create: "My mom is gonna love this beautiful canoe!" "My dad will be so surprised when he sees my painting!"

It's challenging, though, to honor your child's work when a lot of it begins flooding your home.

Here are some ways you can support your children's important representational work when it comes home:

- Create a special display space at home, like a shelf with room for one or two sculptures and paintings and title cards: "A Truck, by Dylan." You and your child can choose the creations to display.
- When an art piece first comes home or when an art piece is replaced on the display shelf, take a photo or make a drawing of the creation. Keep these photos and sketches in an album: "Emma's Art Book."

- Invite your child to teach you how to make a sculpture, a drawing, or a painting like the one she brought home. Gather similar materials and follow your child's directions as you build, draw, or paint. Take notes as your child talks you through her process, or make a step-by-step sketch as your child describes the process she used.

We are always eager for conversation with you about what you see when you look closely at the children's representations. What ideas are they expressing? Which details surprise or delight you? What do you think we might pursue next together?

Consider inviting families to meet with you, either one-on-one or in small groups, to review children's portfolios. During these meetings, you can look at children's work through the same lens you use with the children when you study their portfolios.

*What themes do you see in the content and in the aesthetic captured in your child's work? What seems to particularly engage your child? What art media particularly draws her? What have been landmarks for her, in her work? What changes do you notice when you study her work as it unfolds over a period of months?*

## Reflecting on Your Work

Many of us are hesitant to call ourselves artists. It's often quite new for us to use real art media, like oil pastels or porcelain clay or sculpting wire. Most of us take our first uncertain forays into this new terrain in the studio alongside the children.

Don't wait until you feel that you've mastered an art medium before trying it with the children. Do some initial exploration yourself, certainly. But be bold: bold and intentional—not bold and unprepared. Set up the studio space using the suggestions in each chapter and invite children to join you in an exploration of an art medium. Stay curious and aware as you and the children work. You'll have small disasters and large triumphs, moments of uncertainty and moments of great joy and discovery. You'll come away



from your exploration with new understandings and new questions—and will feel more confident in your ability to journey into this new terrain. The only way to begin is to begin.

Reflection is an essential element of this bold work. After each art exploration, take time to reflect on what happened in the studio. On page 20, you'll find reflection questions that you can use after each exploration. These questions are intended to help you track what works well for you in your particular context and what doesn't work well, what you want to do differently next time and what you want to be sure to do in just the same way. When we reflect on our experiences in the studio, we begin to grow our own understandings and routines. Reflection helps us invent our way into studio practices.

## GETTING LAUNCHED

The studio explorations are divided into four chapters: "Exploring Textures and Movement," "Exploring Color," "Three-Dimensional Media," and "Representational Drawing and Painting." In each chapter, you'll find sections on specific art media, with guidelines for creating a studio exploration with each medium. Here's how each art exploration is organized:

**Materials:** a list of the materials that you'll need for the exploration and for cleanup. You'll likely invent your own systems and strategies over time; my suggestions are to get you started.

**Setting Up the Studio:** suggestions for how to arrange the materials and set the table for the exploration. I encourage you to set up the studio for children's first encounter with an art medium; then, during each following encounter with that medium, coach the children about how they can set up the work space for themselves. This invites the children to claim the studio and the art materials as their own.

When you set the table with work spaces for each child, include a work space for yourself. If space is tight around the table, group a set of materials on a tray that you can set on your lap, or tuck a set of materials on a nearby shelf to pull onto the corner

of the table for your own use during the exploration. This lets you explore the materials alongside the children, and also gives you a set of materials to use for demonstration.

**Exploring and Creating:** steps to follow, questions to pose, and aspects of an art medium to emphasize as you introduce and explore an art medium. You'll find lots of detail and very specific suggestions about how to move through an exploration. My intention is to help you get launched into art exploration by giving you a clear starting place. I expect that you'll revise and reconfigure these suggestions over time as you invent your way into your own studio practices.

In this section, you'll also find many examples of things you might say to children during an art exploration. This isn't intended as a script to follow word for word, but as an example of how to talk with children about the art medium in a way that invites exploration, reflection, and collaboration. You'll find your own voice as you become at home in the studio and with the art media.

**Cleanup:** a few simple suggestions about how to coach children about the immediate cleanup of an art medium. Again, please adapt these to fit your specific context.

**Documentation and Display:** suggestions for how you might focus your written documentation and display about the art exploration. You'll find a sample piece of written documentation from my teaching experiences at Hilltop in this section of each chapter. I share these as examples of how we can communicate with families about the dispositions and skills that children acquire during studio experiences and how we can create a history for the children of their work in the studio.

**Ways to Build on This Exploration:** suggestions for how you might use this art medium to expand children's learning and to strengthen their relationships with each other.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### *Inventing Your Own Studio Practices*

How did children use this medium? Was their focus primarily sensory? Did they venture into representational work?

What seemed to impede the children or to detract from this experience?

- Skills that children needed but didn't have?
- The set-up or the materials?
- The cleanup process?

What worked well for you as you guided the exploration?

- The language you used to describe the materials?
- Suggestions and guidance you offered?
- Questions you asked?
- Notes and photographs you collected?

What didn't work well for you during the exploration process? What adjustments did you make?

What might the children want to do next with this medium?

What do you want to remember the next time you work with this medium?

What questions do you want to ask another teacher about this medium?