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## Art as Therapy in the Montessori Classroom

A Montessori classroom is a perfect place for children to express themselves freely through art. Giving opportunities for process versus product art is very important because process art is art therapy. Creating freely without any preconceived notion about how something should look is therapeutic in and of itself. Art as therapy can be very helpful for young children who aren't able to express how they feel with words. Or, even if a child does not want to discuss feelings through words, art can become their way of coping and dealing with discomfort, stress, anxiety, fear, anger, and even joy. There are many benefits of process art. Process art can be done independently, improve concentration, lead to greater concentration, be very satisfying, and set the child up for success. There is no right or wrong way to make art that emphasizes the process. Now more than ever, children need an avenue for healthy self-expression.

Typically, a well-prepared art shelf can enhance and promote self-expression and process art. But because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year was anything but typical. Most of my students did not come back into the classroom until the end of January.  And, per COVID-19 district protocols, children were not allowed to share materials. Materials also had to be sanitized between each use. This made it very challenging to have an open art shelf. But we made sure each child had a set of colored pencils, crayons, scissors, and watercolors of their own to use when they wanted. We had various templates for cutting and different types of paper the students could choose from the shelf. We also had markers, chalk pastels, and oil pastels to rotate if our sanitizing schedule allowed for it. Paper tearing was another choice on the art shelf. We even used some of the paper the children tore up to make new paper during our week on recycling. The sensory experience of paper tearing can be very therapeutic to the children. Some children will tear or cut paper into tiny pieces for hours and that's ok. This is their therapy.

I think we often get worried about the mess art is going to make, but we need to remember that sometimes creating the mess is the very thing that's therapeutic. As teachers, we also need to remember to play with the art materials ourselves. We need to remember to take time to make art without having any outcome in mind. Scribbling can even be therapeutic! When we speak to children about their art we must be specific and let them use their own words. We can say things like "Tell me about your art." or "That pattern is eye-catching!" or "I see you used a lot of colors." It's good to avoid putting our judgment onto their art. This can be discouraging to the children. We must never write on a child's art, throw it away, or put holes through it.

We will see what next year brings, and hopefully, COVID-19 will be under control and we will be able to have an open art shelf with many open-ended and process-oriented art materials to choose from.  But if not, I'm already thinking of new ideas that could be COVID protocol friendly or don't need to be sanitized, such as making homemade dough so each child has a piece to create with. Bubble wrap printing, putting paint in spray bottles for outdoor spray painting on butcher paper, and printmaking using recycled objects are just a few other examples of ways we can provide ways for the children to create and keep them safe at the same time.

Creating art can be therapeutic for children and adults. There is a time and place for painting a rendition of a Monet or drawing from nature. But, process-oriented art is very important for expressing emotions. We must give the children, and ourselves, opportunities to express ourselves freely with various art materials. When I have a student that is upset or sad, I like to offer art as a means for them to express themselves. Art could also be a great addition to the peace corner. Let's be playful and make messes. And let's give space for our students to do the same.