

The Art of the Matter

When kids learn to draw, should they receive formal instruction or be allowed to express themselves freely?

"I'm going to put mohawks on them," said the third grader sitting next to me at the art table. I smiled, reached for a sheet of paper, and selected a black felt-tipped pen from a box in front of me. Then ten of us—four children and six adults—began to draw. Our model was a picture of

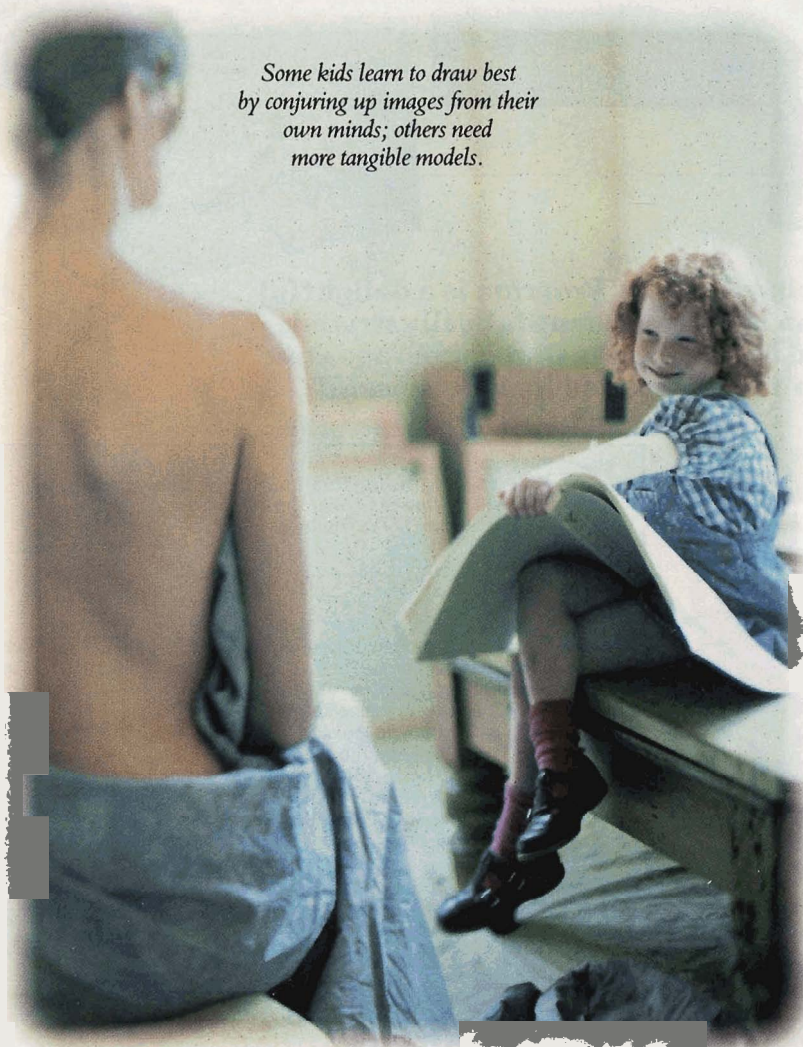
two exotic parrots sitting on a tree stump.

"We *always* start with the eye," began the teacher, "because it tells us where the rest of the body goes." I thought to myself, Hey, I'll start where I feel like starting, yet for lack of knowing what else to do, I proceeded to draw an eye on the page, just as she'd commanded. Line by line, the teacher led us through a complete composition of the birds, and as we drew, a growing discontent filled my artistic soul. Was this a class in drawing, or a class in copying? What was this slavish approach to drawing doing to the creativity of the children in the room?

Toward the end of the class, which I was attending to find out how drawing is being taught today, we all held up our work. Sure enough, my young table-mate had created some punk birds, complete with unique head-dresses. And the other kids had drawn birds that were equally original in color, shape, and form. Clearly, nobody's creativity was being destroyed. But as I walked out of the room, I was still bothered by some lingering questions: Isn't it stultifying for children to copy other people's work? Shouldn't kids be allowed to paint and draw spontaneously, from their own inner worlds? How much formal instruction should we provide for children who are just learning to draw?

Drawing by the Book

The source of my ambivalence was Monart, a new approach to drawing developed by Mona Brookes, author of the book *Drawing With Children*. Brookes claims to be able to teach children as young as three to go beyond stick-figure art to drawing representationally and realistically.



Some kids learn to draw best by conjuring up images from their own minds; others need more tangible models.

Her method is based on teaching five primary elements of shape: dot, circle, straight line, curved line, and angle line. These five "families" of form, according to Brookes, constitute a primary visual alphabet that lies at the heart of all other shapes. She encourages students to notice these elements in everyday life and to use them to build their own artistic creations. Students in Monart classes begin by copying simple illustrations based on these forms, eventually building up to more

complex pictures and finally drawing from real life.

Monart is one of several drawing techniques that have become popular in recent years. These methods range from pure copying to completely free expression. At the "you draw what I draw" end of the spectrum, there's the Ed Emberley Drawing Books series, consisting of simple, step-by-step instructions for creating imaginary creatures, faces, and buildings. Developed for children from kinder-

garten to third grade, Emberley's method, like Brookes's, uses an alphabet of shapes and takes the reader from first stroke to final product in a series of increasingly complex drawings, pointing out exactly what to draw and where to draw it.

At the other end of the continuum, art educator Viktor Lowenfeld, in his book *Creative and Mental Growth*, exhorts parents and teachers not to interfere with what he describes as the child's natural tendency to draw. Lowenfeld maintains that a child's drawing is a spontaneous reflection of his maturity level—if children are taught to draw something they are not developmentally ready for, it won't enhance their drawing ability. He criticizes the emphasis adults place on producing "nice products" and insists that a child's own learning process is what's most important.

Somewhere between the extremes of Emberley and Lowenfeld lie Monart and a structured approach to drawing based on Betty Edwards's million-copy best-seller, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. Edwards believes that children need to be taught how to draw, but she disagrees with Monart's premise that they need a visual symbol system or alphabet of shapes to help them draw more effectively. "People need to be taught to set aside the symbol systems and to see what is really in front of their eyes, what is actually there," Edwards says. The exercises she uses include copying upside-down pictures, drawing a common object such as a paper bag or a household utensil without taking one's eyes off it, and paying attention to "negative space," or the empty space between solid objects. Edwards feels that the best age for children to begin learning to draw this way is around ten. "It's at this point that kids really want to draw; they have a passion for realistic drawing."

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Doctor Recommended PREPARATION H Suppositories, Ointment and Cream

Bringing Art to Life

A parent confronted with such a variety of drawing approaches needs to make some decisions about which one to use with her child. Most often, the child herself will indicate which method is best, by showing a preference for a more structured approach or by choosing instead to be left alone to express herself more freely. Regardless of the philosophy or method, there are certain prerequisites for drawing instruction that most of these art

Educators would agree children need: The first is interested and involved parents. Brent Wilson, professor of art education at Pennsylvania State University and coauthor of *Teaching Children to Draw*, suggests that parents—even those who don't draw well—carry on a graphic dialogue with their kids. "Draw stories together, and simply make your figures a little more elaborate and complex than the children's, just as you do in conversation when you use a syntax and vocabulary slightly more complex than that of the kids' without even knowing it. In this way, you move them to a higher level."

Many art educators also believe that children need to have rich perceptual experiences. Before a child draws a picture of a tree, for example, it helps if he's been exposed to trees: touching them, climbing them, smelling them, examining their leaves, looking at them from varying distances, and so forth. The knowledge gained by such interaction enables the artist to inject more life into a drawing.

Finally, children need to be provided with plenty of art materials and oppor-

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tunities to draw at home. For young children, Mona Brookes prefers colored felt-tipped pens, to allow for easy expression of detail and to discourage erasures, which can slow down a budding artist. Other fine drawing tools for kids include sturdy pencils whose points won't easily break, crayons, and even colored chalk. Sketch pads, available at art and stationery stores, reams of inexpensive photocopy-

ing paper, and rolls of butcher paper provide drawing surfaces of varying dimensions to accommodate a child's different needs. Set aside a time during the week when the whole family can draw together, and make sure your child has a space she can work in when she wishes to draw in privacy.

Drawing is a skill that all children and adults should have at their command; it's not just for those who are "artistically inclined." Most children stop drawing early on because they become frustrated with their graphic efforts. Yet with today's emphasis on technology and rational thinking, the ability to draw is more important than ever. It provides a much-needed balance for our culture's predominantly verbal and numerical thinking process, giving children another way of communicating ideas and serving as a kind of oasis in which kids can begin to nourish their artistic selves. □

Thomas Armstrong is the author of In Their Own Way: Discovering and Encouraging Your Child's Personal Learning Style.



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