Why Are Children Playing?
For the young child, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Is the Art Center?
The art center in the early childhood classroom contains a wide variety of materials to promote creativity and expression through art by young children. The area normally includes child-size easels, tables and chairs, and accessible storage. Experimentation, discovery, and experiencing the creative process itself are important and valuable art and craft activities at an early age. Children learn to control the medium, to care for the materials, and to clean up after themselves. Satisfaction comes with this learning and with the creation of something that is uniquely one’s own.

What Are Children Learning?
*Children express feelings and ideas* through a variety of creative media. Through art, young children are able to express individuality and creativity, and they expand their imaginative powers. Via the process, they reveal a personal understanding of the world and of self by creating works that are independently conceived and executed.

*Scientific learning takes place* in the art area as children experiment with paint to learn about primary colors and how they combine to produce other colors. The physical senses are stimulated when children see colors and shapes, touch textures, and smell different art materials. Children learn about the physical properties of matter when they are invited to explore a variety of media – liquid paints, malleable playdough, sticky glue, or solid wood pieces.

Whether children are painting, drawing, making collages, or building three-dimensional constructions, *math concepts are being explored* in the art center. When children create designs, they are experimenting with geometric shapes and working with proportions and quantity.

*Art activities promote large motor and fine motor (eye-hand coordination) development.* Tearing or cutting paper with scissors, drawing with markers or crayons, and forming shapes from clay or playdough are all activities that require skills using hands and fingers. Easel and mural paintings train arm as well as hand movements.
The art area is a learning center where **social interaction and communication skills are practiced**. Children may talk about and describe their work to others. When doing murals and other group art and craft projects, children learn to express their ideas and negotiate with others as they plan and work together to make joint decisions.

**Art activities help children make connections with other curriculum areas** and are a natural part of an integrated, developmentally appropriate environment. Printing with leaves, creating puppets, or making rubbings all invite closer exploration of the subject being investigated.

As children plan and work out how they want to accomplish the ideas they have about their artwork, they are gaining practice with **problem-solving skills**. When children envision a process and achieve their goals, they are stimulating **visual and spatial representation** and refining their **planning abilities**. Other learning that takes place through art activities includes building a **sense of aesthetics** and developing **concentration and attention span**.

### What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?

- Set up a center for young children with a good variety of age-appropriate creative materials. Include washable paints and a variety of brushes, sponges and other paint applicators; crayons and markers; papers of differing textures, colors, and patterns; scissors; playdough, clay, and modeling tools; glue, paste, and lots of exciting craft and collage supplies. Put out adequate amounts of each type of material so children feel free to explore. Provide an area with enough space to work in and an easy-to-clean floor. Furnish with comfortably sized tables and chairs and sturdy easels to make the art experience enjoyable and successful for children.

- While activities may at times be suggested or planned to some extent, work should always be that of the child. When there is a wall of “art projects” that all look alike, the children have not had true art experiences. (Paper pieces made on the copier and cut out are not art materials.)

- Art at every age – and especially for young children – is about the process. It is about the act of creating, about self-expression, and about making choices based on personal preferences. The end product is a happy result – not the purpose of the activity.

- Put out a variety of art materials and rotate them for children to create freely. It isn’t always necessary to have an “assignment” associated with art. Some of the most imaginative and instructive learning through art can happen as children experiment on their own.

- Using the art center is a fun way to make connections to curriculum areas. These activities should involve valid art experiences. It is more appropriate, for example, for children to use paper bags and paints, markers, crayons, and collage materials to make a thematically related puppet of their own design than to be given precut shapes to glue in designated places to make teacher-determined animals. Children should also have the option of choosing to make a picture instead of a puppet or to draw rather than make a collage. If children choose not to participate at all, that’s okay, too.
• Give children encouragement as they create. Critical comments are not appropriate. It doesn't matter if the dog is blue or has three eyes. Comments specific to what a child is doing are more valuable than empty praise. “Look at the wonderful colors you’ve chosen to fingerpaint with!” or “I see you have drawn a big yellow flower,” are more beneficial remarks than observations such as “What a pretty picture,” or “That looks good.”

• Children may need some adult direction at times. For example, they may need some instruction about the mechanics of using the materials – how to squeeze just a little glue, or how to hold scissors. Asking open-ended questions can also encourage learning: “What do you think is going to happen when you mix the red and the blue paint?” Sometimes a child may feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the process or by too many choices. Help may be needed. Simple questions can ease a child’s anxiety: “What is your favorite thing on the art table? Would you like to pick the three things you most like to work with?”

• Treat children’s artwork with respect. Display it where they and their families can see it. See-through, wall-mounted displays hung at the children’s eye level make it easy for children to see their artwork while also keeping it protected. Most wall displays in the room should be children’s work rather than teacher-made or store-bought bulletin board cut-outs and posters.

• Adults can help foster children’s positive self-esteem as well as learning across curriculum areas by giving young children the time and space to work, by providing them with interesting materials to explore and to create with, and by respecting their abilities to be creative.