

How to Talk to Kids About Art

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On a June morning two years ago, 3,000 schoolchildren poured into the pristine art galleries of London's Tate Modern. They were guests of honor—the first public visitors to experience the contemporary art institution's freshly minted extension. In the museum's famed Turbine Hall, a lucky 300 children could be found giddily rushing down the sloped floor, waving signs and gleefully chanting the phrase: "All schools should be art schools."

The parade-slash-protest was an artwork orchestrated by British artist Patrick Brill, who's better known by his pseudonym Bob and Roberta Smith. "I think [what] the Tate wanted to say was that art is itself a kind of education," Brill explained.

While the piece advocated for making art classes integral to grade-school education, Brill also proposed that "the whole world is an art school—we just need to engage with it in a creative way." That engagement is particularly transformative during early childhood.

Kids who grow up making and seeing art—be that visual art, music, dance, theater, or poetry—are not only more empowered to express themselves, they also have stronger language, motor, and decision-making skills, and they're more likely to excel in other school subjects. And, as they grow up, creativity is an asset for prospective jobs—not just in the arts and creative industries, but beyond it.



Bob and Roberta Smith, Art Makes Children Powerful, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and von Barth.

“There are so many reports about the skills required for jobs of the future, in the age of technology, and there’s not one report where I’ve *not* heard that creativity is the key skill employers are seeking,” said Andria Zafirakou, a London-based arts and textiles teacher who won the Global Teacher Award in 2018. Creativity should be fostered at home, too, particularly as schools are increasingly pressured to meet curriculum demands, she added.

Given this, the idea of introducing artworks and artists to kids raises a few questions. What types of art should you show them? How do you keep them engaged? What about artworks that seem inappropriate—should you avoid them? Where do you even begin? To help, we spoke with artists, educators, and other arts professionals to put forth strategies for talking to kids about art.

We share their advice below, which can apply while seeing art a museum or gallery; looking at artworks online or in a book; sitting with your child as they make art at home; or taking note of photographs or illustrations you see in everyday life.

Ask What They See

When talking about art with kids, let them lead the conversation. It might be tempting to tell a child what you know or think about a given artwork or artist, but it's more fruitful to open the conversation by asking a question. Tried and true among them, art educators assert, is: "What do you see?"

This approach, known as visual inquiry, is common among art museum educators, including those at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Its family programs, like Lil' Studio—in which families create art projects inspired by the museum's artworks—begin by asking children to take a moment to sit and look at art, then reflect on it.

The Studio Museum's education manager, Chloe Hayward, compares visual inquiry to opening the refrigerator in your kitchen, seeing what ingredients you have, and figuring out what dish you can make. "You're saying to the children: 'What do you see? What do you notice? Can you tell me more about that? Does this remind you of anything?'" she explained. She'll develop a dialogue, asking follow-ups and sprinkling in her knowledge of the piece. "You sort of build up this recipe of what is in front of you," Hayward continued. "It's a way to really allow children to connect to what they see, but also give them sort of a confidence in what they know."



Photo by Elan Ferguson. Courtesy of the Studio Museum.

Artist Jil Weinstock, who is also curator and director of museum and public programming at the Children’s Museum of the Arts (CMA) in New York, emphasized that adults should be active listeners and keep the questions coming. “You never want to say: ‘This is what it’s about’ or ‘This is what’s going on,’” she explained. If kids pick up on a color in a piece, you can ask them where they see the color, how it makes them feel, and why they think the artist used so much of it.

Questions can also spark kids’ imagination. Tamar MacKay, senior museum instructor and family programs coordinator at the Brooklyn Museum, noted that asking kids to make guesses about the subject, location, or events in an artwork can encourage them to create their own narratives—even if it’s just an image of a hippo. “It’s actually amazing how kids will find stories in a really natural organic way,” she said. “They’re not thinking about right or wrong.”

Artist and professor Lisa Jarrett, who co-runs the King School Museum of Contemporary Art (KSMoCA) in a public school in Portland, Oregon, adds that you're also demonstrating to children that their opinions matter. "You're letting them know that what they think about [an artwork] is equally as important as what someone might tell them it means," she explained.

And if at any point, a kid asks a question you can't answer, that's okay. "Say: 'I don't know,'" Jarrett offered. "Say: 'I'm not sure, but let's see what's here. What does this make you think about?'"

Don't Dumb It Down

If an artwork deals with difficult subject matter or has a complex backstory, you may feel a little flummoxed trying to address it to a wee audience. But just because they're children doesn't mean you have to strip away the work's meaning, or try to make it more palatable.

Artist Oliver Jeffers has become quite accomplished in this area, having written and illustrated 17 children's books alongside his conceptual painting practice (all of which is explored in his new monograph). He authored his 2017 book *Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth* after becoming a father and thinking about how to explain everyday, given truths to his son. "It's about living on this planet—being socially, ethically, and environmentally responsible—and then also about cosmology and Earth's place in space," Jeffers explained. And the book is written and illustrated in a way that's earned enthusiasm from both children and adults.



Illustration from Oliver Jeffers’s picture book *Here We Are* (2017). Courtesy of Penguin Random House.

“I think that’s why my picture books work so well for children—because I don’t try to dumb it down,” Jeffers explained. “I think children are a lot more intelligent than they’re often given credit for.” And that can become quite apparent when they’re given the opportunity to talk about art.

With more difficult subject matter, adults have to decide what they’re comfortable showing the child. You may well encounter art that includes nudity, sexual content, violence, or something a child might find frightening. It’s just as likely that you’ll find pieces that are rooted in politics. First, be honest with yourself. “If you’re not comfortable with it yourself, how will you pretend to be comfortable with it in front of a kid?” Jeffers reflected. If it’s something you do feel comfortable with, you can still approach it by asking questions.

Hayward recalled a memorable experience with a work by one of the Studio Museum’s artists-in-residence, EJ Hill, who created an installation entitled *A monumental offering of potential energy* (2016). The piece, a large wooden roller coaster lined with purple neon lights, included a performative element—Hill would

lay still on a platform at one end of the piece and stand up at the end of each day. “He was thinking about who he is, as a queer person of color in the world,” Hayward explained, “and sort of the energy, effort, perseverance, and determination it takes to get up every day.”



EJ Hill, *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy* (installation view), 2016. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Adam Reich.

One Sunday, she was looking at the piece with a group of children who were delighted to see the roller coaster, and then a bit shocked to find Hill laying on it. Hayward asked the kids what they saw and what they thought was happening. As she recalled, one child told her: “I think the rollercoaster got him...but his eyes are open, so I think he’ll be okay.” “I thought that that was such a beautiful metaphor, for life as a rollercoaster,” Hayward said, “and that translated to the smallest little person; they had to be five or six years old.” Afterwards, she taught a project where kids made their own wood platforms and talked about the things they stand up for.

“It’s just about honoring what you see and leaning into it, not shying away from it,” Hayward explained, adding that children encounter many provocative works that address the realities of the world. “Yes, you want to be developmentally appropriate,” she continued, “but children are very aware—they’re very conscious little humans and they see what’s happening. So why not provide a space for them to talk about what they’re actually witnessing, and sometimes experiencing?”

Just because they’re children doesn’t mean you have to strip away the work’s meaning, or try to make it more palatable.

In some cases, it’s impossible to talk about an artwork without addressing the heavy subject matter it addresses. Jarrett noted that she recently completed a weeklong residency (separate from KSMoCA) as a teaching artist at Montana’s Holter Museum of Art, working on an exhibition called “Speaking Volumes.” The premise of the show, she explained, “is a large group of artists working with white supremacist texts and physically transforming those texts into thought-provoking, meaningful works of art.” She was tasked with explaining the work to hundreds of kids—from fifth graders to high schoolers—who came through the exhibition over the course of a week.

“In almost every case, the students came with little to no prior knowledge of the exhibit, so as the artist, you’re in the position of talking to children about things that are really relevant, but *really* challenging,” Jarrett explained. “There’s no way to talk about this work without talking about those ideas....You find yourself talking to children in the way that you would talk to adults because it’s what’s there, and it’s what we’re dealing with in society.” In cases like this, with older kids, addressing issues head-on is it a sign of respect, and “it recognizes that they actually do have an ability to think abstractly and about complex issues.”

Show Them the Art They’ll Find Interesting

There’s no formula when it comes to the type of art a child *should* see or *will* like. You don’t have to stick to imagery that feels “child-friendly.” Rather, consider the child: How old are they? What is their background? Their interests? What might they find fascinating? Who are artists they might relate to?

One approach is to show kids art made from unusual materials or objects they're familiar with. Look beyond traditional paintings and sculptures. "Kids don't have a preconceived notion of what art is, so they're always game to go with us," MacKay said of her experiences at the Brooklyn Museum.

Recently, during workshops for children between ages four and six, MacKay has discussed several works from the museum's current exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power." Among them is a dynamic sculpture by the artist Senga Nengudi made from several pairs of pantyhose. MacKay brought pieces of pantyhose into her workshops as "touch objects"—items the children can handle and engage with while looking at the art. Later, they used the material to create their own short performance pieces.



Courtesy of the Children's Museum of the Arts.

Zafirakou, who teaches at a secondary school in London, recommends discussing art forms and techniques that address familiar subjects. "I try to avoid movements like the Renaissance, unless they are really with me," she explained.

Instead, she often covers more modern movements like Pop and Op art, which present accessible subject matter (commercial objects and optical illusions, respectively).

You should also be open to what might spontaneously attract a child—no matter their age. In the stroller tours MacKay leads at the Brooklyn Museum, parents and their newborns are offered dedicated time and space, where screaming crying outbursts aren't disruptive. Recent tours have included an installation by Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña made from colorful swaths of natural wool and a sound element, which has been resonating with babies.

“Babies respond to the sound and naturally tend to mirror it,” MacKay explained. “It’s amazing to see the way that children at different developmental ages respond naturally to artwork.”

Treat Kids Like Artists



Photo by Kara Birnbaum for the Brooklyn Museum. Courtesy of the museum.

An effective strategy for getting kids to care about art is to combine looking and making. By showing kids the work of professional artists and giving them tools to create their own, you're showing them that they can be artists, too. Art teacher Maria Richa, who works with students at the Bank Street School for Children in New York, noted that it's fruitful to see children as artists—empowering them to take ownership of their work and share it with others.

Making art opens up more opportunities for self-expression. Some kids might have a hard time verbalizing their ideas and emotions, and drawing or writing might come more naturally. This practice is common among art classes and museum family programs, but if you're simply at home or taking your kid to a show, you may want to give them a sketchbook and a pencil to use, if they so wish.

Brill is a strong advocate of this idea. He thinks parents of young children should do what his mother did—give them a pencil and tell them: “We want to find out how you view the world, what you think about things.” He added, “I think it's not necessarily about taking kids to museums....I think it's all about developing a lively rich conversation between parents and children, using the pencil as the main tool.”

Talk About Contemporary Art

While it may not always feel accessible, the beauty of contemporary art is that it reflects the time we live in; while historical artworks might seem more important or easier to show to children, the work of living artists could be more relatable and meaningful.

At KSMoCA, Jarrett and her co-founder Harrell Fletcher (also an artist and professor at Portland State University) organize for established contemporary artists to visit the public school. This past spring, for example, Brooklyn-based artist Byron Kim visited for several days and showed students paintings of the sky that he makes each Sunday; then, he worked with students as they made their own.



King School Museum of Contemporary Art (KSMoCA) docent gives a tour of Byron Kim’s exhibition, “Sunday Paintings,” at the opening reception. Photo by Anke Schuettler.

Learning about the artists themselves can be compelling. Jarrett and Fletcher make a point to involve artists who are good role models; who challenge conceptions of what art can be; who have national and international recognition; and to whom the student body—primarily children of color—can relate. “We’re always looking for a really rich dynamic where the students are being exposed to things that, in theory, they could see themselves in, places and roles, so that it’s easier to identify,” Jarrett explained.

After each workshop, the kids curate an exhibition of their own work and that of the artist in the hallways of their school. The students act as docents, guiding teachers and parents through the show. “It’s a really great opportunity to step back and see what they do when they’re in charge,” Jarrett reflected. It’s also a

confidence-building exercise, she noted; the kids walk away feeling proud of what they've learned, and are able to share it with adults and peers.

While you may not be able to personally introduce your kids to living artists, you can introduce them to their work via exhibitions, or by looking them up online. This, too, can be a confidence-building exercise, whereby children can learn about an artist—just as they might about an athlete, actor, or musician—and then feel compelled to tell others.

Contemporary art is also a valuable means through which to understand current events. Richa recently introduced a class of 9- and 10-year-olds to the work of Oakland artist Favianna Rodriguez, who creates murals of butterfly wings to discuss migration. In another lesson this year, she introduced a class to the quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama, to discuss community.

Make Looking At Art Feel Comfortable



Photo by Kara Birnbaum for the Brooklyn Museum. Courtesy of the museum.

Making galleries and museums feel warm and welcoming goes hand in hand with showing kids art they'll connect with. Kids won't like being there if they are told all the things they cannot do: speak loudly, run, touch the art, or sit down. If the art space feels unfriendly or dull, it'll be harder to have a meaningful experience with a child.

There are several ways to make them feel at ease. First, be conscious of the amount of time you're spending looking at art, and take cues from the kids—if they're losing focus or getting antsy, it's time to move on. Additionally, don't try to see too much; even adults are familiar with the visual overload and fatigue that sets in after seeing a lot of art.

Jeffers noted that he's learned to be careful not to overdo it with seeing and making art with his 3-year-old son. "I don't want to force him into doing something that I want him to like, because that's the fastest way for somebody to resent something," he said. "So it's just all on his own time, his own terms."

A tack that Weinstock recommended is going into the museum with a plan to see one thing—be that one exhibition, one gallery space, or one work of art. She has done this with her own children; they would often go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, write and draw in their sketchbooks, and then they might talk about what they saw in the days that followed. "If you make it a part of their daily routine, it doesn't become this specialized, weighted thing that creates stress," she explained.



Photo by Valentina Vidusin for the Brooklyn Museum. Courtesy of the museum.

When it comes to telling kids about how they should behave in a museum, MacKay recommended that you also emphasize the things that they *can* do—like laughing, talking, and making their own art (again, bringing sketchbooks and pencils along can help).

MacKay also recommended a simple scavenger hunt approach, which could mean seeking out a certain color in various artworks (she often sources paint swatches from hardware stores to guide the exercise at the Brooklyn Museum), or playing the familiar game “I Spy”—for example, saying “I spy a cat,” then searching for artworks with cats in them.

Adults stand to benefit from this approach, too. “What’s really nice about going to museums with children is that we often tend to binge in museums as grown-ups,” MacKay reflected, “and I think it’s really nice to have that time to slow down and to look at artworks more closely.” It is refreshing to approach art in this way—at a calm pace, with an open mind; asking questions, rather than passing judgment. We could all stand to take this approach to art, with a child or otherwise.

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