

JUDITH ARON RUBIN

# CHILD ART THERAPY

Understanding and  
Helping Children Grow  
through Art



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# PART I: THE CONTEXT

## CHAPTER 1.

### Framework for Freedom

Three years after the profound painting experience and reflections on it described in the Preface, I was invited to participate in a seminar on the arts in education and to think and write on the topic of "order and discipline in art as models for effective human behavior." I did not consciously recall the painting paper, long put aside, but instead thought over my then-notions about order, and found myself continually thinking of freedom as well. Feeling by then more secure about the ideas hinted at earlier, I searched the literature to find what others had concluded about freedom, order, and control in art, especially as they related to conditions for creative growth for children. This later attempt to review and organize ideas around a central topic, was a more precise and academic one than my earlier expression of my vague thoughts. Though different in style, the two stem from the same source and soul, and represent different stages in an ongoing problem solving process. The following represents an attempt to clarify ideas about a still-vital concept.

For me, the notion of order in creative activity is intimately and inextricably intertwined with that of freedom. Man's religious mythology, after all, describes the Almighty as creating a world of order out of a universe of chaos. Neither the extreme of order—rigidity—nor the extreme of freedom—chaos—is conducive to creative function. "The forces of the imagination from which [the artist] draws his strength, have a disruptive and capricious power which he must manage with economy. If he indulges his imagination too freely, it may run wild and destroy him and his work by excess . . . Yet if he plagues his genius with the wrong kind of drill, and uses too many contrivances and refinements, the imagination may shrivel; it can atrophy." (Wind, 1963, p. 2) Yet in most definitions of the creative process, whether by psychologists, aestheticians, or artists, we encounter seemingly opposed and incompatible states: reverie and alertness,

## 22 CHILD ART THERAPY

fantasy and reality, disintegration and integration, unconscious (or preconscious) and conscious thought. Art, so often defined as characterized by order and discipline, is as frequently related to "chaos" (Peckham, 1965) and "anarchy" (Wind, 1963).

There is no clear agreement on the precise relationship between these two sides of the creative coin. They are sometimes described as simultaneous and coexisting, as in "relaxed attention" (McKim, 1972, p. 33), "contemplative action" (Milner, 1957, p. 153), or "unconscious scanning" (Ehrenzweig, 1967). Often they are seen as alternating, as between free association and critical scrutiny. The creative process requires a "flexible alternation of roles [because] it is impossible to produce free associations, to be freely imaginative, to be freely creative, if at the same time and in the very moment of 'freedom' one attempts to maintain a watchful, critical scrutiny of what one is producing." (Kubie, 1958, p. 54) Barron has described this alternation as an "incessant dialectic and an essential tension between two seemingly opposed dispositional tendencies: the tendency towards structuring and integration and the tendency towards disruption of structure and diffusion of energy and attention." (1966, p. 88) At times the emphasis is on a more sustained attention or passive receptivity to spontaneity and freedom, as in the "creative surrender" of Ehrenzweig (1967), followed sequentially by more ordered activity. "In other words, succeeding upon the spontaneous is the deliberate; succeeding upon total acceptance comes criticism; succeeding upon intuition comes rigorous thought; succeeding upon daring comes caution; succeeding upon fantasy and imagination comes reality testing . . . . The voluntary regression into our depths is now terminated, the necessary passivity and receptivity of inspiration or of peak-experience must now give way to activity, control and hard work." (Maslow, 1959, p. 92) It is my own feeling that the relationship between these two clusters of experiential states may be at one time simultaneous, at another alternating, and at yet another sequential, as true for children as adults.

What seems most critical is the recognition that in creative expression there can be no true order without some experience of genuine freedom; and that the provider of art for children must make possible a productive and integrated relationship between the two. Barron, discussing "the paradox of discipline and freedom," describes the job well: "The task we face is to avoid sacrificing one possibility to the other. We must be able to use discipline to gain greater freedom, take on habits in order to increase our flexibility, permit disorder in the interests of an emerging higher order, tolerate diffusion, and even occasionally invite it, in order to achieve a more complex integration." (1966, p. 86) If the control, order, and discipline are to come from within the creator, then that child or adult must be enabled to confront whatever confusion, vagueness, or inner reality he needs to understand and organize, if it is at all possible for him to do so.

Without passion, energy, intensity, or absorption, the process of working with creative media can hardly be called "art." One cannot be "on fire" with

inspiration (Dewey, 1934, p. 65) or "lose oneself" in an aesthetic experience (Neumann, 1971) without free access to joy and spontaneity. "Art is the quality that makes the difference between merely witnessing or performing things and being touched by them, shaken by them, changed by the forces that are inherent in everything we give and receive. Art education [or therapy] then, means making sure that such living awareness results when people paint pictures . . ." (Arnheim, 1967, p. 342) I do believe from my own painting experience as well as from work with others, that learning how to "let go" is necessary to genuine absorption in a creative process. Even in work with children and adults who have lost confidence in their own creativity, it has been my happy learning that it is not destroyed, but simply dormant, capable of reawakening. While creativity "may be weakened . . . its expression *may* also simply become muted, or be altogether behaviorally silent, while the capability remains." (Barron, 1972, p. 162)

Why then, do we so often find in our rearing and teaching of children a "restriction of a natural tendency . . . towards play, music, drawing and painting, and many forms of non-verbal sensory grasping and symbolizations?" (Barron, 1966, p. 87) What has made it so hard for us to provide children with an opportunity to freely "let go" and to express themselves openly in both the form and content of their art? While the puritan value of work vs. play is perhaps partly to blame, it seems to me that a more fundamental problem is our natural human "fear of chaos" (Ehrenzweig, 1967). We are afraid, for ourselves and for those in our care, of the consequences of loss of self, of fusion, of dissociation, of disorganization, and of regression.

While regression may not sound as dangerous as disintegration, we *do* fear the tantrum and other forms of disorderly infantile behavior. We conceive rightly (but rigidly) of regression as associated with conditions of stress, as in the "Q" paintings of the Easel Age Scale which are said to indicate disturbance (Lantz, 1955). But we forget that periods of stress also frequently coincide with increased creative productivity. "Every challenge and every emergency in man's life may lead to new creative behavior. Let us not forget that creativity is often closely linked with periods of biological upheaval." (Meerloo, 1968, p. 11) We forget that, even in the development of graphic skill, there are periodic returns to earlier forms of behavior; and that in art, as in all normal growth, "while the child attains more mature levels of action and cherishes his recent acquisitions, there is also a continual homecoming to earlier gratifications." (Peller, 1955, p. 3) We fear that the learner is "losing ground," forgetting that in work with any new medium at any age level it is natural to begin with a period of free, playful exploration and experimentation.

Regression in the creative process was first described as "regression in the service of the ego" (Kris, 1952), regression, in other words, that is symbolic, controlled, and voluntary. We forget too that in any transitional growth phase, in order to restructure, previous structures must be in some way broken down.

Arnheim illustrates progress toward three-dimensional graphic projection in a child's drawings, noting the many intermediate forms of disorientation. He stresses the necessity, during a time of risk and growth, of some degree of "ugliness." (1969, p. 266)

All who work with children in art, have seen many instances of both temporary and prolonged regressions in the service of growth. For the child who finds security in rigid structure and control, this may be seen in a return to compulsively careful work. More often, it is evident in a return to a less structured and perhaps more playful use of materials. For some very constricted children, forced too early perhaps to be clean and neat, the capacity "to enjoy constructive work with clay or paint is possible only after a veritable orgy of simple messing with the stuff." Similarly, "a very angry child may not be able to settle down to work unless he first gives vent to his anger directly." (Kramer 1971, p. 160).

For many children, both hyperactive and inhibited, experimenting with a freer, more honest form of creating may be essential to convince them that, in this symbolic mode, they can indeed let go, express strong feelings with free movements, and remain in control of impulses which turn out neither to be as destructive nor as disorganizing as anticipated. It is only after such a symbolic "letting loose" that familiarity with the feared experience permits them to freely grow.

Both regression and aggression are difficult for adults to handle. We fear the violence, as well as the vitality of children's fantasy life. Even those trained in clinical work at times have difficulty controlling their inner disgust and horror, in response to the mess and mayhem of a disturbed child's inner life. One helpful beginning is to recognize one's own honest responses, to get in touch with one's own feared feelings and impulses, through introspection if possible, through therapy if necessary. Indeed, it is my sincere belief that the adult who has not yet made some kind of open-eyed peace with his own fantasy life is ill-equipped to help children deal with theirs.

Given an acceptance of one's own violent propensities and most bizarre fantasies, the task is to create those conditions under which freedom can be safely and supportively facilitated. What Milner has said of her own creative efforts applies equally well to the provision of an appropriate environment for children: "the spontaneous urge to pattern in the living organism . . . comes about not by planned action, but only by a planned framework, within which the free play of unplanned expressive movement can come about." (1969, p. 263) The framework is thought of broadly, "in time as well as in space" (1957, p. 157). If indeed there is, as she suggests, "the necessity for a certain quality of protectiveness in the environment," it is because "there are obviously many circumstances in which it is not safe to be absent-minded; it needs a setting, both physical and mental." (1957, pp. 163-164)

The provision of limits and of structure are vital in creating a framework for freedom. "Limits define the boundaries of the relationship and tie it to reality . . . they offer security and at the same time permit the child to move

freely and safely in his play." (Moustakas, 1959, p. 11) Overwhelmed and frightened by the sometimes "undisciplined outpourings of the unconscious" (Bettelheim, 1964, p. 44) often caused by lack of appropriate limits, workers in both therapy and education have too often "overstepped their function of providing a secure frame for the free activities and tried to dictate the activities themselves." (Milner, 1957, p. 105) Worse yet, they may prohibit certain activities because of their anticipated disorganizing effect on the child, prematurely restricting and constricting his world. One cannot help but agree with Bettelheim that all too often, "despite loud assertions to the contrary, these adults . . . remain afraid of permitting children to think and act for themselves." (1964, p. 60)

Perhaps, the most critical psychological variable in the freedom/order equation is the adult worker—his attitudes (trust vs. mistrust), expectations (positive vs. negative), and personal qualities (empathy vs. distance). If he hopes to promote individual independent growth, he must learn to trust the child as a human being with an inherent and natural tendency toward growth, order, and integration. He will not be able to provide opportunities for choice, for independent movement, and for self-initiated decision-making without "faith in the inner potential of [his] students so that [he] will trust them when they wish to explore on their own." (Haupt, 1969, p. 43) He must be able to trust each child to make decisions which are best for himself, under optimal conditions for that child.

In my own work with seriously ill schizophrenic children, where they had freedom of media choice, it was striking that those with poor ego boundaries consistently avoided such fluid materials as fingerpaints. They often provided their own kinds of structure, such as one regressed twelve-year-old who always pulled a chair up to sit at the easel, in order to "contain" his usual aggressive hyperactivity. He further controlled his work through repetitive movements, letting his arm go up and down, rhythmically, calming himself with a motion like an infant's rocking.

Another child, blind and retarded, "contained" his experimentation with fingerpaint, previously threatening to him, through the use of a tray. He had chosen fingerpaint and paper at the first group session; but had been both excited and frightened by the texture and by the threat to control posed by the hard-to-find edges of the paper when covered with paint. He had ripped up the product, quite agitated. An observing child psychiatrist had advised against allowing fingerpaint again. Not having heard the doctor, however, the next week Bob requested the paint. When it was refused and alternatives were suggested, he put up a loud fuss. Because of his exasperation, he was again given the gooey substance, this time in a plastic tray hastily borrowed from the school cafeteria. He was surprisingly calm and relaxed throughout, the physical boundaries of the tray apparently allaying his anxiety about edges, thus permitting him to enjoy tremendous sensory pleasure and delight, frequently repeated in subsequent sessions. This boy had once told of accidentally squeezing a soft,



gushy worm to death in bed, a memory stimulated while manipulating water-base clay. Perhaps fingerpainting was a way of working through some of the feelings associated with that event, this time under his control and now demonstrably safe and bounded.

Another blind boy contained his exploration of the effects of mixing clay and water within a bowl. (Fig. 1-1) In fact, when a group of totally blind children were given the choice of a tray or paper for fingerpaint, all selected the tray with its clearly-defined edges because, as one of them explained, "it helps you to stop."

Clearly-defined limits of time also facilitate creative work. Mary, a blind teenager, once explained to me how she created with plasticine what she called "personality globs," and drew with markers "mind pictures." In both cases, as she proudly demonstrated, she would pause, close her eyes, sit meditatively still, and then with clay or marker do "whatever my brain and hands tell me to do." She made a distinction between drawings done under these conditions, in which she was relaxed and unconcerned about realistic rendering, and those produced with eyes close to paper, a strained attempt at reproduction of the visual world. "I'm more free," she explained, "like I feel more like *myself* when I draw something indirect . . . I feel good, you know."

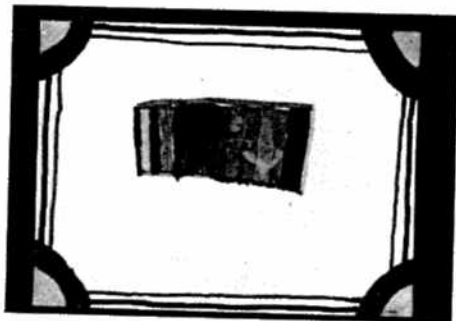
Such concrete means of organizing time, space, and the self are often supplemented by symbolic means through art. For art itself offers a kind of protective framework, a boundary between reality and make-believe, which enables the child to more daringly test himself and more openly state his fantasies than is possible without its aesthetic and psychic "distance." "Only in protected situations, characterized by high walls of psychic insulation" can a person afford to let himself "experience disparities, tensions, etc. . . . art offers precisely this



Fig. 1-1. A blind boy mixing clay and water in a bowl

kind of experience." (Peckham, 1965, p. 313) Thus, it was possible for Don, a constricted ten-year-old boy almost crippled by compulsive tension, to explore symbolically in clay the impulse to hurt his younger brother, then to explore smeary-messy "uncontrolled" painting, and finally to achieve a freer kind of order in his work. (Fig. 1-2)

Similarly, Dorothy, a psychotic girl of ten with a serious speech defect, spent several weeks in the rigid and repetitive representation of birds (Fig. 1-3) with whom she identified, then boldly experimented with the free use of paint and brush without her usual prior pencil drawing. This venture, both exhilarating



a



b



c

Fig. 1-2. (a) A tight drawing; (b) a bloody sculpture; and (c) a free painting by Don, age 10.

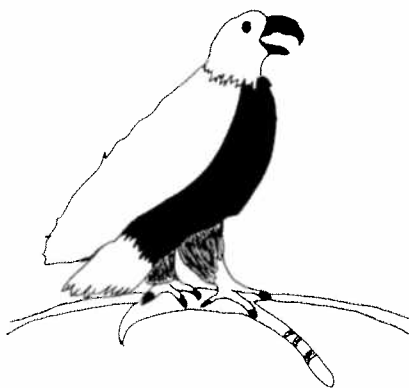


Fig. 1-3. One of Dorothy's many bird drawings. Pencil. Age 10.





Fig. 1-4. The Eagle and the Dummy by Dorothy. Crayon and tempera.



Fig. 1-5. Dorothy's pencil drawing of a destructive eagle and his victim.

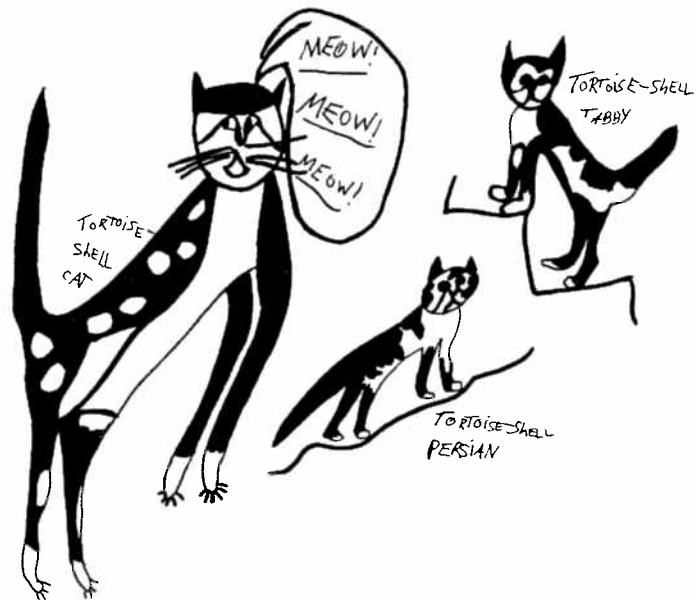


Fig. 1-6. The "tortoise shell family" of cats by Dorothy. Marker.

and fearful, was followed immediately by the pictorial expression of powerful unconscious fantasies of monsters and birds (Fig. 1-4) which her inarticulate tongue had never spoken. (Fig. 1-5) This outburst, lasting several weeks, was succeeded for many months by an attempt to make sense out of the real world in which she lived, through pictorial "lists" of cats, clothes, and the other children on the hospital ward. (Fig. 1-6)

One day another schizophrenic child, a boy of eleven, spent perhaps a half hour in the careful mixing of brown paint (his first attempt at combining colors). Then, rhythmically and somewhat compulsively, he covered the entire surface of a large white paper with the brown mixture, followed by the linear depiction, along with an elaborate verbalization, of his central unresolved (oedipal) conflict. The painting was of a dead king in his coffin underground, who, according to the long and complex story, had been accidentally killed off and then succeeded by his son, the prince. Having succeeded in articulating at least a part of his inner wish-world, he was then free to begin to organize the outer one, creating pictorial diagrams and maps of concepts, places, and ideas.

In art or play the child may do the impossible. He may fulfill symbolically both positive wishes and negative impulses, without fear of real consequences. He can learn to control the real world by experimenting with active mastery of tools, media, and the ideas and feelings expressed in the process. He can gain symbolic access to and relive past traumas, and can rehearse and practice for the future. He can learn to be in charge in a symbolic mode, and thus come to feel competent to master reality.

But it is my firm belief that the child cannot learn to control and organize himself, if the structure does not ultimately come from within. It has been argued that prepared outlines are useful to children because they need to learn motor control. Yet a careful look at what children produce spontaneously in the course of their graphic growth demonstrates the normal self-creation of boundaries or outlines within which they color, actualizing an age-appropriate desire for self-set limits on their own strong impulses. One brain-damaged boy might have escaped into abstraction, rather than struggle with his confused body-image. Given a secure, dependable setting and adult, he was able to confront his confusion graphically, to work to clarify his conception, to make sense out of what was formerly chaotic by "figuring it out" on paper. (Fig. 1-7)

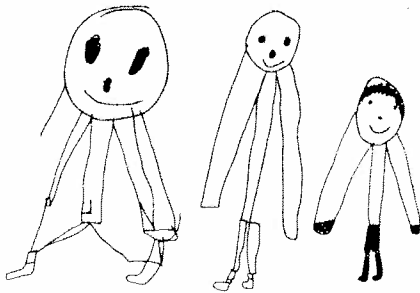


Fig. 1-7. Three drawings of a boy by a brain-damaged child, age 9.

Because a child is small and dependent, however, he needs an adult to provide him with the physical and psychological setting in which he can freely struggle to order and control. He needs an adult to provide empathic support, accepting understanding, a reflective mirror; to be a "container," a vessel into which he can freely pour his feelings and fantasies; and a reflective, articulate voice which can help him to clarify, explain, and make sense out of them.

So it follows that the adult offering art must provide a framework or structure within which the child can be free to move and to think and to fantasize, not a structure which imposes, controls, and makes a child dependent, for such a framework is a straightjacket and not conducive to growth. Such a restrictive framework may take many forms, from the use of prepared outlines, kits, and step-by-step guides, to generalizations about the best size of paper or brush, or an invariant description of the "right" way to teach art to children. The arrogance of those who have found the one correct way to work with all children in art is equal only to the disrespect on which it is based.

Surely an adult has both the right and the responsibility to set strict limits on destruction of property or dangerous ingestion of art media; but does he also have a right to decide that preschoolers should be restricted from free access to tempera paint because he fears that the child will "drown the graphic patterns of its scribbling in water colour?" (Grözinger, 1955, p. 91) Although the supposedly limited capacities of a retarded child are often used to justify constant supervision, does any human being have the right to decide for another that "creative activity must be held to a reasonable minimum?" (Wiggin, 1962, p. 24)

Fortunately there are many who still believe in the often untapped creative resources of all human beings, who assume the growth potential of others; like the teacher who works with "slow learners" and feels sure that the "children have a rich inner life waiting to be developed in a classroom setting of love and approval." (Site, 1964, p. 19) But "love is not enough" in many cases (Bettelheim, 1950); and what is also needed is a safe and supportive framework for freedom in growing. As Milner discovered in her own struggle to paint: "Fearful subservience to an imposed authority either inside or out, or complete abandonment of all controls, neither of these was the solution." Instead, she found that it was necessary to "provide the framework within which the creative forces could have free play." (1957, p. 101) In therapy as well as in education, in art as in any other form of creative expression, this concept continues to deepen in meaning and validity for me.

## CHAPTER 2.

# Conditions for Creative Growth

"To create conditions which assist children in releasing that which lies dormant and waiting within them so they may paint their impressions on life's canvas in rich, bright, bold, brave colors is the challenge for all who guide children." (Nixon, 1969, p. 301)

A "framework for freedom" is one way of thinking about appropriate facilitating conditions for growth, something I assume necessary in order to help human beings to actualize their inner creative potential. One must provide a physical and psychological setting which makes it possible for each person to become himself. One must think about materials, space, and time. One may need to provide alternative expressive modalities, like music or drama, for those who cannot find their way comfortably in paint or clay. In order to help individuals discover their own style, one must accept and value whatever they do or say that is genuinely and truly their own; thus, individuality, uniqueness, and originality are prized and rewarded. Similarly, autonomy, independence of thinking and function, and the taking of risks are to be stimulated and reinforced when they occur.

*Materials* are of many sorts: those to draw with, those to paint with, those to model with, and those with which to construct. Children need to have at least some of each available, as well as surfaces and tools with which to use them successfully. If art materials are cared for lovingly by adults, they will not only remain most usable, but children will then learn respect for the tools of the trade. If they are available in a state of readiness, children may then use them spontaneously without unnecessary frustration or delay in the actualization of a creative impulse. They must be appropriate for the children who are expected to use them—appropriate to their developmental level, degree of coordination, previous experiences, particular interests, and special needs. They are best if primarily unstructured, allowing maximal alternatives for idiosyncratic expression. If

## 32 CHILD ART THERAPY

materials are of sufficient variety, then children may discover and develop their own unique tastes and preferences, their own favorite forms of expression.

*Space* involves not only dimension, but also places and surfaces for materials, work, storage, and cleaning up. If basic expressive media and equipment are kept in consistent and predictable places, then children will know where to go to get and to use them. If they are clearly arranged and organized, it will be easier for children to make choices. If they are placed so that children may procure and use them independently, then excessive intervention will not be necessary. A child needs adequate, well-lit, uninterrupted spaces for art, with sufficient definition to provide closure when necessary. A child needs places where it is all right to spill or to mess without fear of adult disapproval. A child does best with options, choices in spaces as in materials, so that there are ways to be close or far, alone or with others. (Fig. 2-1)



Fig. 2-1. A girl who is absorbed in her work.  
(Photo by Jacob Malezi)

*Time* in art means often enough and long enough to sustain interest and become involved in a creative process. If the same basic materials are available all or most of the time, they will become familiar. Only then can children truly get to know them, and have sufficient opportunity to practice their use, and only through such practice can they achieve genuine mastery and competence. Children need to know how much time is available, and it helps to have a warning at the point where it is drawing to a close. Ending times are often hard for the young, and one must provide ways for them to adjust to such events.

*Order*, clarity, and consistency in the organization of materials, working spaces, and time can be helpful; for children with little inner order it is often essential. An alone-with-another time in art can be a powerfully peaceful organizing experience. Even in a group, such an atmosphere is possible. It is most probable where children's bodies, working spaces, materials, and products are protected from disruption by others. Psychological safety is as important as physical protection, for children's feelings need the same kind of respect and concern as their bodies or products.

*Safety* means that many kinds of expressive activity are accepted: bizarre as well as realistic, regressive as well as progressive, those with negative as well as positive subject matter. Limits help to protect children from their own impulses, so that while it is "safe" to smear chalk or to draw destructive fantasies, it is not safe or permitted to smear people, or to behave destructively toward property. In work with children, it is important to protect them whenever possible from outer as well as inner psychological dangers, such as people and practices which would limit or stunt their creative growth. One thinks especially of the danger presented when others impose outside ideas or standards on the child, invalidating or crippling his own developing images—people who tell him what to do and how to do it, or who supply coloring books and paint-by-number kits.

*Respect* for the child is shown by allowing him the freedom to choose to become involved or not to participate; to take a superficial and fleeting "taste," or to become deeply engrossed, to select his own medium and topic, to work alone or with others; to explore and experiment at his own pace and in his own way. Respect for each child's uniqueness is also shown by allowing and helping every one to explore and discover his own most congenial ways of expressing himself, his preferred modalities, personal themes, and style. Respect for the child's opinions is expressed through listening and interviewing in a way which encourages him to articulate his own thoughts and associations about both process and product. Respect for the child as artist is expressed through helping him to set his own goals and standards, and to evaluate for himself how well he has achieved them. Respect for the child's tangible productions, extensions of himself, is shown through handling and preserving, and perhaps sharing and displaying them with loving care.



*Interest* in the child and in his personal explorations and expressions must be sincere if one is to work with children, who are acutely sensitive to phoniness. Such interest may be expressed in sensitive, unintrusive observation, genuine listening, and gentle verbal intervention. Interest is shown by being available to him as a facilitator during the creative process, if he should express or show a need for the adult's help, support, or appreciation.

*Pleasure* in the child's creative work and growth, is felt often by those who truly value such expressions and experiences. Genuine enthusiasm for a child's involvement or his product is a joy for an adult to express and for a child to hear.

*Support* for the child's inner creative strivings is expressed through consistent provision of conditions like the above, and is distinct from a passively permissive attitude, which may represent (or at least communicate) a lack of interest or concern on the part of the adult. Support for all children requires awareness of normal stages of development in art, in order to help them to take "next steps." It requires further knowledge of each individual child's developmental and psychological state, his "frame of reference," within which you must meet if you are to lead him forward. Support for a child who is blocked or "stuck," requires especially thoughtful understanding and assistance from the adult. For a timid child, for example, active participation in the art work along with him, may be a helpful concrete expression of adult permission for his own involvement. Support for any child's struggle to grow in and through art requires genuine empathy on the part of the adult, and its communication to the child in a manner best suited to enhance his own expressive development.

I understand the role of a therapist or teacher as facilitator of another person's growth, the shape and form of which varies tremendously from one individual to another. If there are no big blocks to creative development, the provision of facilitating conditions like those noted above may be sufficient to enable the individual to flower. If the blocks are large and deep and severe, some reparative work is in order, and can vary in form depending on the capacities and needs of the individual. All people-work for me is a challenging, unpredictable, creative endeavor. Each new person is a new puzzle, like but unlike others, with untapped potential for symbolic communication and healthy growth.