

---

## Art and the Adolescent

The young adolescent is at a stage of great conflict. There are emotional and physical changes to deal with and social concerns which create tensions and pressures. Although these young people are growing into adults, they remain in a state of dependency. Adolescents are often confused about their role and search for models to emulate. Young people have a vast assortment of new emotions which they need to address and express.

This is a critical period of artistic development. In many intermediate school programs, the emphasis has been on the production of art rather than on the development of artistic attitudes. Adolescents are insecure about their art; it often appears childish to them. Adolescents struggle to achieve the technical heights of representational art and being unable to attain them, they sometimes give up. Their drawings begin to tighten up, becoming less spontaneous, smaller, and/or more detailed. Often adolescents opt for a geometric, abstract form of art in the belief that good and bad are more difficult to gauge. In fact, this means they are becoming further removed from their major interest, self-identification.

The most useful approach to dealing with art in the intermediate school is to teach students to approach art works as vehicles of expression. Art provides models of human experience which must be perceived, analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated. The individuality, originality, and emotional expressiveness of the artist/student-artist is of great interest to adolescents. A

substantial amount of relevant contemporary material must be included in the content of the art program. Where possible, comparisons may be made between contemporary art and historical works. The emphasis must not be on the student's art product but on the whole art process.

The specific developmental needs of the adolescent addressed by art education are discussed in the following pages.

### Physical Development

Through media work, art provides the opportunity for physical as well as mental activity. Studio work provides relief from academic pursuits in art and in other subject areas. Since the creation of art works depend upon the manipulation of materials, the importance of developing specific art skills cannot be overstressed. It is during the period of early adolescence that students must develop studio competence. If adolescent students cannot accomplish what they perceive to be good art, they usually become discouraged and abandon art making.

### Emotional Development

The adolescent's emotional confusion must be addressed in the classroom. The structure of the art curriculum is such that students are constantly dealing with their own emotions and the emotions of others. All art works carry emotional import. The development of self-confidence in verbal expression is promoted through emphasis on

the use of discussion in a high percentage of class time.

A strong art program addresses many of the emotional needs of the adolescent. For instance, because creating involves making choices and decisions, it promotes independence and self-confidence. Through discussion, expression, and individual approaches to problem solving, students exercise their capacity for independent thinking. They make their own judgment and become more capable of moving away from group conformity and dependence on peers. Sensitivity to individual differences and acceptance of them is developed. A healthy art program can help students explore new emotions and develop the ability to think reflectively.

Students are provided with the opportunity to stretch their imaginations through concrete, relevant problem solving. Through exploring the emotional source of their actions and inclinations, students learn to know and accept their individual identity.

## **Cognitive Development**

Many people who are not involved in the visual arts find it difficult to recognize the cognitive component of art making and art appreciation. This problem might be solved if people were aware of the process of creation and criticism in the art room.

The teacher sets a visual problem for the student group. No matter what visual problem is set, students must work within certain limitations. These may be limitations of subject matter or medium (material) or both. The difference between art and other subjects is that the solution will be unique. Individuality is encouraged in the art classroom.

Before students begin the studio portion of a project they must have input. Art cannot be created in a vacuum. The students have a lot of information to organize before deciding on the approach they wish to take in creating their art work. They must know the characteristics and possibilities of a medium, use the medium, know about visual design, know how some artists have worked with similar knowledge, and explore their own attitudes towards the subject matter. The latter requires a good deal of soul searching and self-analysis.

Subject matter should always be relevant to the student. Potential subjects are endless. Any subject is worthy of exploration as long as it is explored in depth. Student interests must be considered when planning the year's art experiences. The opportunity to explore alternate topics or issues in depth can be provided at the teacher's discretion. Flexibility is important in the program.

A wide range of student abilities and interests can be accommodated well in art. Ability levels of individuals will vary widely. However, each person is assured of some measure of success. In terms of group sharing, it is possible for **every** student to make valuable contributions and to have those contributions acknowledged. Each person is unique and every single point of view and new way of seeing everyday things should be appreciated and fostered. Whatever the art experience, the most important evaluation will be internal, not external.

To be successful at this stage, the art program must be based in the concrete. As pointed out before, specific art skills must be taught if the students are not to lose confidence in their art ability. Creative

freedom must not be confused with "anything goes". Structure and organization are important in the art curriculum.

## **Moral Development**

Art provides the opportunity to question values in a non-threatening atmosphere. Through class interaction, students exchange ideas, reevaluate their positions and those of others, and finally make their own decisions about their personal approach. Then they have the opportunity to express their position in their art.

## **Social Development**

Art reflects culture. Through art over time, students can see how attitudes and concerns of various societies change.

However, the art program supports the student's social development in another sense too. It provides an opportunity for students to socialize within the class group. Through group projects and group discussions, the ability to communicate, to summarize, and to appreciate individual points of view are fostered. In art, students are not in competition with each other. Achievement is measured through self-improvement.