

An Artists' Utopia

Creating "Artopia" at the Library

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What can you do with yarn and some tempera paint? A water cannon and acrylic paint? Clay and Perler beads? At the Ontario City (CA) Library, kids ages 5 through 12 are challenged to stretch their creative muscles with unconventional art materials.

When I learned about process art, I knew that this could be a way to empower young people to think outside of the box in a way that feels safe and fun. Process art is a style of artwork where the focus is on how a piece is made, not what the piece looks like in the end. It's taking a set of materials and experimenting with all the different ways to apply those materials. What happens if I lightly drag the brush across the paper? Now what if I really press down hard? How are these two marks different? It's through these experiments that children gain an awareness that the actions they choose matter.

I knew we could build an oasis where kids could self-determine, and that became Artopia—an unstructured exploration of artistic media where adult voices are silenced in favor of letting children discover the results of listening to their own voices.

In the process-driven Artopia program, children are presented with three art stations that always stay the same and one art station with more challenging materials that changes from session to session, and children are encouraged to explore these stations at their own pace, in their own time.

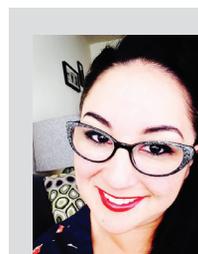
While process art is essentially the freedom and permission to create, there are some rules to follow to make a safe space possible.



Two sisters hard at work at the collage station.

Rule #1: Choose the right activities. Activities need to be open-ended, where a variety of methods and outcomes are possible. With open-ended activities, children are set up to succeed, no matter their age or ability level. In the spirit of keeping things open-ended, I never present examples. Parents sometimes look at me with panic in their eyes over this, but I don't give examples because I don't want to give the impression that children need to arrive at a certain conclusion. I also don't want children to feel frustrated if their project does not look like the example. The goal is to make children comfortable with asking those "what if" questions and feeling like their end product is valid and important.

Rule #2: Adults are hands-off. This is the part that requires the biggest change in mindset, but it is worth the commitment. I find that I usually need to prompt the beginning of an activity with a short introduction. I try to keep the instructions as minimal as possible. If you are not able to do the activity with minimal instruction, then it is probably not process art. But once the kids are let loose on their projects, any kid who walks in after that will see what everyone else is doing and pick up on the idea. Adults are mainly there to replenish materials and



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make sure that equipment is being used safely. Giving children this agency will help them develop a confidence in their own voices and intuition that will bleed into other areas of their lives.

Rule #3: Take a “Yes, AND . . .” approach. It’s important that children hear the word “yes” often. It assures them that what they’re doing is OK and that they can keep doing it. Conversely, we should set up the environment to make saying “no” less necessary. We make sure that we have thought ahead and have the proper safety precautions in place and that we have provided enough materials so that each kid can use as much as she needs. If there is something that is off-limits to the children or in limited supply, it needs to be put out of sight. My regular Artopians all know that when they are in the art room, they are free to create whatever they want with whatever is available. It’s completely self-directed, and they know that no one is going to interrupt them and no one is going to correct them.

Rule #4: Respect the artist! We take children seriously when they are talking about their process. We’re asking them about their choices and the steps they took to get where they are in their project. It breaks my heart when I see a parent look at something their child made and say that it’s not anything, sometimes even just tossing it in the trash. It is never nothing. It is *always* something, even if what you see is a brown blob on paper. There were a series of deliberate decisions that went into making that product happen. Remember, with Artopia, we are concerned with process, not product. Listening to a child talk you through her decisions tells you a lot about how her mind works.

With all of these rules put into practice, Artopia became a massive success. We average about forty children at each session. That number ebbs and flows based on school schedules and other things that might be happening around the city. During the summer, we averaged about sixty children per session.

When I wrote the grant proposal, I hypothesized that given our community demographics where 80 percent of our school-aged children qualify for free or reduced lunches, Artopia may be the only opportunity that children have to engage with art materials. When I started passing out surveys, I found that this

was an unfortunate truth. The arts are the first thing to go when decision makers at schools are looking for something to cut. For many children, the library has become the only place where they can practice and explore their creative side.

I didn’t expect the level of communication at which the children engage with one other, but it’s very exciting. They show one another what they’re making and they’re talking about their process with one another. They’re collaborating and coming up with new ways to use the materials. They help one another! When new kids come in to the session, some of my more outgoing Artopians often step in to explain what the materials are. It’s a tiny community.

Because the activities are open-ended, demographic groups that might feel left out in regular programming tend to thrive in Artopia. Two of those groups are non-English speakers and children who are deaf. There’s no instructions to follow so the language barrier is removed and they’re not left behind. The other group that benefits are children with special needs. Again, the open-ended activities make it easy for any child to succeed with the materials on hand. You don’t need to separate these kids out from the group. They are just fine in the integrated setting, which I think is unique to this type of programming.

Seeing how well Artopia worked for children with varying abilities inspired a new outreach model called “Artopia on the Go!” We saw that we had an opportunity to reach a dismally underserved population, and we

went for it. Two schools in our area have classes and accommodations for kids with special needs. We pack up a few activities from our arsenal, take them directly to the schools, and conduct an hour of Artopia with most of the same rules intact. It’s highly successful; the schools love having us there; and the kids are fearless.

Probably the most essential ingredient for a successful Artopia is generosity. Being generous with your time, materials, and what you are willing to allow in your space is what really makes this program shine. It’s going to be messy and loud, but it’s also going to be happy and rewarding. Our community is so appreciative of our efforts, and yours will be too. 🐘



Experimenting with bubbles and watercolors.