

The Arts in the transition programme

The arts are integral to the education of children, especially young children. In the years when children are developing their language, the arts offer a way for them to express themselves and communicate when words will not do or when they do not yet have the words.

For young children's learning, the arts cover:

- dance – specifically creative dance, meaning having freedom to move and a vocabulary of dance, so we can twist, curl, skip, stretch rather than learning a dance off by heart or dancing to age-inappropriate music (we can embrace less open, less creative ways of dancing – but we do need to offer dance as a means of expression too)
- drama – including role play and educator in role
- music – singing and playing instruments
- visual art – including free drawing, painting, collage and clay.

The underpinning purpose of the arts is that they are a way to communicate and to express ourselves and our uniqueness

The arts then are integral to a programme that encourages a sense of personal identity, belonging, relationships, communication and creativity.

The arts and competencies

Just about every competency and key skill set out in the OECD's educational research is covered by the arts. In authentically creative art experiences, learners encounter:

- critical thinking
- creative thinking
- learning to learn
- self-efficacy
- reflective thinking
- curiosity
- flexibility
- compassion
- mindfulness
- sense of identity
- open mindset
- proactiveness
- problem-solving skills
- self-awareness
- perspective taking and cognitive flexibility.

Dance

Young children naturally express themselves through their dance. When we intentionally introduce creative movement sessions or moments, we enrich a child's physical and verbal vocabulary. We may ask:

How does your body stretch?

Can you stretch in a different way?

Can you stretch different body parts – legs, arms, spine, face?

Can you stretch at a low level?

Can you stretch up high?

Dancing can be used as an art and expressive form in its own right. We can explore different ways to move: bending, curling, twisting, bouncing, jumping, leaping.

Dancing can be used to support and enhance learning in another area:

Let's move like caterpillars ...

Let's travel along different pathways ...

Let's move to this story about a cat: curled up asleep, stretching, prowling and leaping.

Let's bounce like bubbles.

Dancing can be used to enhance learners' understanding of words – especially adjectives, verbs and adverbs:

How can our body make these shapes: spiky, sharp, twisted, curved, huge, tiny, crooked, flat, round?

How can our body move in these ways: skip, jog, bounce, jump, walk, pounce, crawl, hop, march, stomp, climb?

Can we take a move and express it in different ways? For example, can we walk: slowly, quickly, softly, noisily, gently, angrily, calmly, quietly?

Dancing can be used to enhance learners' understanding of concepts.

Can we march like a soldier?

Can we bounce like an astronaut on the moon?

Can we stretch, flick and leap like fireworks?

Can we sway like a tree in the wind?

Can we curl up like a crunchy leaf?

Can we make the shape of a starfish with our whole body?

Can we move like waves in the ocean?

Can we dive like a dolphin?

Can we roll like a wheel?

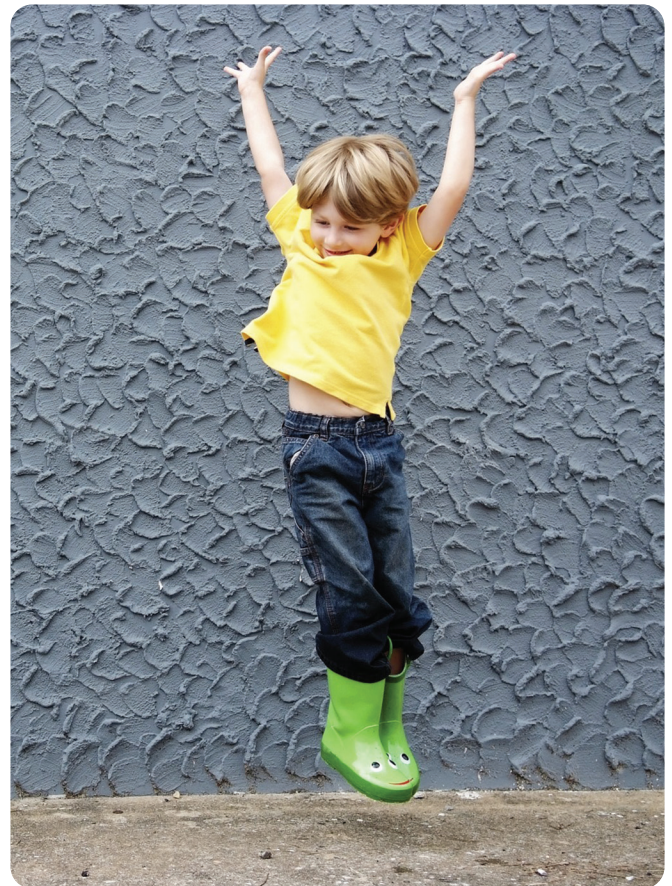


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Brain development and dance

Dance is an expressive art form. With young children, you need not assess it against a rigid rubric. However, some stages of development will become noticeable to the inquiring educator and you can introduce activities at each stage to extend your learners (see Chart 7).

Chart 7: Stages of learning in dance and how to extend learning

Age (general guidelines only)	Notice	Extend
3–4 years	Learners move and dance freely. They are developing an awareness of how their body moves.	Offer lots of opportunities to explore how the body moves: Can I jump wide? Can I jump with two feet together? Can I leap?
4–5 years	Learners become more aware of what their body can do and how they can get it to do that when dancing and moving.	Offer a range of music styles for learners to respond to: classical music, drum-based music, calming and relaxing music.
5–7 years	Learners move with much more intention. They may pause to think before they create a move or respond to an instruction. They can repeat movements. They are developing much more insight into and control of how their body moves.	Offer the ideas as for 4–5 years. Give opportunities to share movement ideas in small groups and to produce short creative dances in pairs or small groups.

Drama

For young children, process drama is a beneficial drama style, as a natural extension of their role playing and use of their imagination.

Give your learners many opportunities for a range of role play scenarios, for example, shops, cafes, hospitals, veterinarians, builders, architects, forest rangers and gardeners. Role play organically nurtures new perspectives and extends vocabulary. The words and ideas a learner uses in role as a builder will be quite different from those they use in role as a doctor, for example.

In process drama, you are involved in the play. The play may evolve from child-led play, a story, a book or a community event. You support your learners to get into a role, so that they can enter an imaginary world where you encourage them to think critically and solve problems. Here are some examples:

- You go into role as the director of the zoo. The director has heard the learners are experienced zookeepers so she asks for their help: the lions are not eating their food and seem sad. The director wonders if the learners have a solution.
- You tell the learners that Humpty Dumpty is leaving hospital because doctors have fixed his shell. However, he has to rest at home and never sit on walls again. You ask if the learners have any ideas about what Humpty Dumpty can do while he is resting as he gets bored easily.

The key is to introduce problems or issues that the children can relate to:

The dragon is lonely.

The puppy is going to a new puppy school.

The pirate wants to be a kind pirate, not a mean pirate.

The gardener is not sure why his plants are all shrivelled up – can the learners help get the garden blooming again?

For many specific ideas for drama and dance activities, see Frances Adlam's series, *Drama and Dance Nibbles* (published by Essential Resources).

Brain development and drama

Drama comes in many forms when working with young children, including:

- role play and dressing up
- acting out stories
- playing with puppets, toys and dolls
- imaginative and symbolic play.

Indeed, for young children, many play activities are infused with drama:

Teddy wants to come and play with us.

Let's pretend this box is where our shop keeps the money.

I've made some biscuits (eg, out of clay or leaves).

Drama is a unique learning device that engages (often all at once) the imagination, symbolic play, stories and the narrative tradition, multiple layers of language (speaking, listening, extending vocabulary), empathy (imagining someone else's point of view) and high levels of creative and critical thinking.

With young children, drama becomes much more than the traditional idea of acting or pretending. Drama is a complete brain work-out, using the whole spectrum of symbolic, imaginative, cognitive, creative and emotional engagement. Chart 8 sets out some strategies to consider to extend your learners at each stage of development.

A note on role play and numeracy

Just as young children are beginning to develop their numeracy skills, we seem to take away the fun activities. Yet drama activities, such as role play shops and role play cafes, are among the best ways for young children to practise their counting and number skills, as well as to build a love of numeracy.

In my first studio, on a small, low table, I would place: a wooden cashier till, some play money,

Chart 8: Stages of learning in drama and how to extend learning

Age (general guidelines only)	Notice	Extend
3–4 years	Learners initiate role play in the educational setting. They start to negotiate the play with a friend or small group of children: “You be the mum, I’ll be the shopkeeper. You will need this ...”	Offer a range of role play scenarios across a month; for example, week 1: setting for shops and cafes; week 2: setting for vet, zoo or pet shop ... Observe and listen to what the learners are interested in – and follow their lead.
4–5 years	As above. Some learners are developing more refined negotiating skills.	Observe the social dynamics. Do any children need some gentle guidance to build the skills to work in a group? Heighten language ideas. Could you set out paper for menus, shopping lists and receipts, for example?
5–7 years	Learners’ role play is becoming sophisticated in terms of their use of imagination, language and social skills. Role play may continue and evolve over many sessions.	Sensitively observe how aspects of the play could be enriched and developed. For example, could you quietly add toy money and a receipt book to the role play (the following day, perhaps)?

a few tiny boxes, some felt fruit and vegetables, some pens and little cards. Every (yes, every) child under the age of eight would immediately be drawn to this table and start writing and drawing. They would write labels for the food, coffee cards and numbers. They would decide how much everything was going to cost and write little dollar signs. They would count the money. They would sort, arrange and play.

As I observed them and often played shops with them, I could see which children:

- could count one to one
- were ready to add small numbers
- were playing with numbers (so had no concept of quantity yet).

If you want to observe a young child’s relationship with counting, understanding quantity and understanding numbers, play shops with them.

Music

In the music component of the transition programme, learners need to:

- mindfully listen or move to a range of high-quality music: classical music; ethnic music; circus music etc. Music supports the development of phonological awareness – the ability to differentiate sounds, which is of course crucial to successful reading and spelling outcomes
- have plenty of opportunities to sing, say nursery rhymes and chant in small and large groups.

It is important to include:

- songs and chants that reflect the culture of the children, family and community
- musical finger rhymes
- active musical games

- songs in languages represented in the community
- traditional songs
- rhyming songs.

Singing is an excellent way to enhance language skills and overall linguistic development. Singing immerses a child in words and rhythm. Rhyming songs build phonological awareness (see the previous page).

Singing with actions (whether finger actions or whole body actions) sparks numerous brain pathways to develop language, coordination, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, social skills, rhythm and timing – to name but a few.

Singing needs to be a priority in the transition programme, as it is a highly effective way to immerse learners in rich language experiences. It's also lots of fun and great for everyone's wellbeing!

Brain development and music

Playing instruments, listening to high-quality music and singing age-appropriate songs and chants are some of the most powerful tools educators have to nurture brain development in a fun and mood-lifting way.

If you are nervous about singing or about music in general, start out by saying nursery rhymes – they have their own rhythm. Introduce traditional finger and clapping games and rhymes. Invite a parent in to sing with the children. Singing and music are so important for a young child's brain that you need to thoroughly explore strategies to make them happen on a daily basis. Chart 9 sets out some strategies to consider to extend your learners at each stage of development.

Chart 9: Stages of learning in music and how to extend learning

Age (general guidelines only)	Notice	Extend
3–4 years	Learners start to build a memory of the words in familiar songs.	Offer lots of opportunities to repeat songs, so that learners can learn the words and actions. Use songs with simple hand and body actions.
4–5 years	Learners become more aware of the words within the songs, such as words that rhyme or start with the same sound.	Revisit songs learnt previously. Provide musical instruments for learners to use to support their singing. Heighten awareness of words that rhyme, the syllables in words and quirky patterns such as repetition.
5–7 years	Learners memorise words and actions with ease. They can clap back syllables of words. They can keep a beat while singing.	Introduce the concept of clapping syllables in words and phrases within songs. Keep extending the connections between words, rhythm, rhyme, beat and memory.

Visual art

Visual art is often referred to as “art”. However, when we are considering all of the arts, we distinguish drawing, painting and craft as visual art.

ECE settings are familiar and comfortable with offering art activities. Every day they make available crayons, paints, clay, scissors, sponges, easels and much more. Once a learner starts primary school, these resources can often disappear or come out only on special occasions. This practice makes little sense when we consider the significant learning that evolves from such activities:

- Drawing and mark-making underpin the development of writing skills.
- For many children, drawing their preferred way to communicate and express themselves through symbols.
- Drawing is innately pleasurable for most children. For this reason, it is an excellent way for them to practise their pencil grip, build fine motor strength and coordination, and explore how they can make marks. The “Literacy in the transition programme” section clearly explains why the more learners are allowed to explore in this way, the stronger the foundation for writing letters will be.
- Making the links between drawing, mark-making and writing is a key way to foster a positive attitude to writing.
- Offering a range of art tools – for example, scissors, sellotape, card, pens and pencils – helps to build fine motor skills in a robust way.

In the transition programme, you need to heighten the links between art and writing. Communicate the idea that writing is something connected to their drawing – not this disconnected, difficult thing learners need to do once they get to school.

Globally, the biggest barrier facing many young learners is that they are scared to write. Writing creates huge anxiety, even for learners as young as four and five years. I know – I’ve worked with them. How did we get to this place?

I believe it is because we adults offer a binary view of symbolic representation; drawing and mark-making are fun and possibly frivolous (this is frequently the hidden message). But when a learner gets to school, the fun is over and the real work has to start: learners must write letters, and write them accurately. I have worked with many young children who are anxious about writing at school – before they have been started school!

We need to reflect on the covert messages we offer about writing. In essence, we just want a learner to write. It does not matter if the writing is wobbly, wiggly or still a scribble; far better that the learner produces something on the page! We cannot extend the learner’s writing if the page is empty because the learner is paralysed with fear.

This visual art section has mainly focused on the importance of drawing and mark-making. However, it is clear that all young children need a range of creative art activities. These activities build:

- a language of expression
- a language of communication
- thinking skills and a way to make sense of the world
- a positive relationship with mark-making
- fine motor skills
- coordination skills.

Brain development and visual art

Visual art offers children a way to express themselves and a way to communicate, using symbolic representation. It builds fine motor skills and gross motor skills. Furthermore, like all of the arts, it has a powerful relationship with literacy. This relationship needs to be celebrated and respected as a key way to spark a love of writing and art in your learners.

Chart 10 sets out some strategies to consider to extend your learners at each stage of development in visual art.