

teacher tom

TEACHING AND
LEARNING FROM
PRESCHOOLERS.

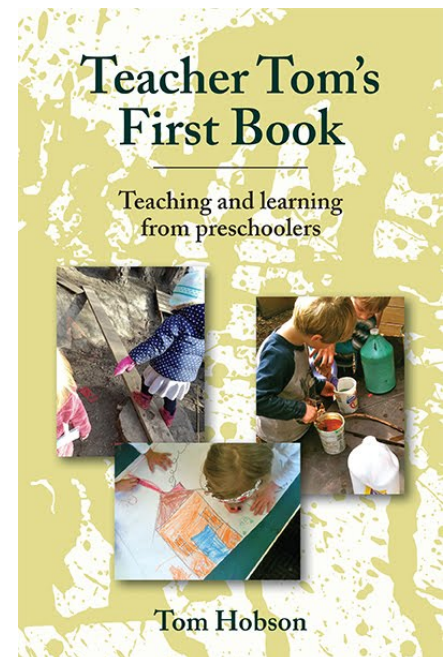
thursday, november 19, 2015

It's *Their* Process

19

In preschool the process of making art *is* the process of doing science, which is to say we do it every day not so the children will have something cute to show mom and dad, but purely for the exploration and experimentation. In fact, most of what we send home with the kids isn't at all cute, but rather something that is tattered and torn, unevenly covered in shades of preschool gray. A good percentage of it winds up going directly into the recycling bin after we take a moment to reflect on where we've arrived before setting out on our next journey.

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teacher tom's topics

art (364)
 blogging (28)
 circle time (128)
 community (654)
 conflict (175)
 construction/tinkering (402)
 cooperative (141)
 cooperative nuts and bolts (5)
 death (1)
 development (117)
 dramatic play (354)
 education reform (345)
 education transformation (91)
 emotions (232)
 fairness (134)
 fine motor (163)
 gardening (18)
 Halloween (23)
 kindergarten (53)
 large motor (348)
 life and death (140)
 Little World (19)
 love (140)
 media (26)
 Mister Rogers (55)
 multi-aged classroom (50)
 outdoor play (528)
 parenting (252)
 power (121)
 rules (115)
 science (394)
 sensory (174)
 songs (36)



People sometimes think making art this way is about making a mess. This is a misperception. I take no special pride in sending children home with paint in their hair, but I do want everyone to know that that's okay; that if part of the process, *your* process, involves getting paint in your hair, no one's going to give you the business about it, which is why I need the parents on board.



Awhile back, I was surprised when Callie said, "My mom told me not to get messy today, but I got paint on my coat

stories/storytelling (127)
 superheroes/princesses (75)
 tape-off (9)
 Teacher Tom's art (20)
 Teacher Tom's First Book (3)
 teaching (746)
 traditions/rituals (166)
 Why I Teach The Way I Do (11)
 Woodland Park (92)

about teacher tom



Teacher Tom
Seattle,
Washington,
United States

I am a preschool teacher, blogger, speaker, artist and the author of Teacher Tom's First Book (teachertomsfirstbook.com) For the past 15 years, I've taught preschool at the Woodland Park Cooperative School. The children come to us as 2-year-olds in diapers and leave as "sophisticated" 5-year-olds ready for kindergarten. The cooperative school model allows me to work very closely with families in a true community setting. I intend to teach at Woodland Park for the rest of my life. I love the kids and I love the families. It's an incredibly rewarding job.

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anyway." She didn't seem to be particularly upset, smiling as she held up her blackened coat for my inspection. I said, "Really? Your mom told you not to get messy?" She nodded earnestly. "Do you have to go somewhere after school?" "No," she answered, but there was a twinkle there that gave me the idea she was putting me on. When her mom arrived to refute the claim, "I did not say that!" Callie gave us both a smile to let us know she'd enjoyed pulling our legs.



While Callie was feigning a mess-aversion by proxy, some children are, for a variety of reasons, including constitutionally, actually anti-mess. I'm not driven to get those kids messy, but rather to support them in their own process, which often is to observe, to stand just outside the spatter zone, remarking on what they see happening. There are always other things going on at school they could be doing, so when they stop to watch, that's often when I chose to role model my own artistic process, narrating as I go.

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Living in Dialogue



This was the case when we set up styrofoam meat trays of paint, butcher paper, and rubber mallets. The basic idea was to dip your mallet in paint, then pound away. I knew this was going to be a particularly messy project, not just for the art maker, but for anyone in the vicinity. The first children on the scene, apparently, could see this as well, so they hung back, curious, but not ready to take the plunge, so I grabbed a mallet, dipped it deeply into the yellow paint and brought it down with a stroke that would make John Henry proud.



"Hey!" kids shouted, "You got paint on me!"

"Sorry," but that broke the ice for the first wave of painters, while others took another step back.

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6 months ago

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- ▶ 2018 (111)
- ▶ 2017 (254)
- ▶ 2016 (259)
- ▼ 2015 (256)
 - ▶ December (21)
 - ▼ November (21)

"I Just Have To Finish My
Cry"



While the early adopters had their first furious go, I hung out with the observers, first showing them my paint-spattered jacket, echoing Callie, "My mom told me not to get messy today, but I got paint on my coat anyway." Then I shrugged, "That's okay, I can just wash it off later." I often demonstrate the technique of wiping my messy hands on my pants, encouraging similar behavior in the kids. "That's what pants are for," I'll say, which more often than not prompts kids to wipe their hands on *my* pants. I made sure to point out that there was a bucket of water and a towel nearby and that some of the kids were going inside to wash their hands in the sink. I just wanted to make sure they understood their options, that their bases are covered should they, after all, decide to take a mallet into their hands.

"Never In My Wildest Dreams"

And Just Be Thankful

Star Wars And Superheroes

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Like There's Nobody Watching

The Angel Usually Wins

It's Their Process

"There's No Evidence. There's No Evidence."

Hoisted On Their Own Petard

This Is Why I Despair

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The Three Little Pigs

Eleven Things To Say Instead Of "Be Careful"

Safety Play

"I'm Working Soooo Hard And Learning Soooo Much!"

"Anything Goes"

We Acted Like A Community

A Not Knocking Down Building

If We Really Care About Children And Families

Many Hands

▶ October (22)

▶ September (22)

▶ August (21)

▶ July (22)

▶ June (22)

▶ May (21)

▶ April (22)

▶ March (22)

▶ February (18)

▶ January (22)



- ▶ 2014 (257)
- ▶ 2013 (276)
- ▶ 2012 (363)
- ▶ 2011 (363)
- ▶ 2010 (353)
- ▶ 2009 (199)

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I then announced that I was going to make a mallet painting without getting messy, which I did by gently applying dollops of paint to a piece of paper, then covering it with a second piece of paper before pounding away. When I peeled the two pieces of paper apart to reveal not one, but two identical paintings, several of the observers stepped up to take their place, eager to try this process. They wound up messy, of course, but equipped with a plan for mitigating it, none of them seemed to mind.



A couple still declined, moving on to other things. Maybe next time, maybe never, because it's up to them, even when it comes to making a mess. And that's okay; it's *their* process

and if not getting paint their hair is part of it, no one's going to give them the business about it.




I put a lot of time and effort into this blog. If you'd like to support me please consider a small contribution to the cause. *Thank you!*

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posted by [teacher tom](#) at 5:35 am 
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unknown said...

I love this post. I remember the first day I saw kids squeezing glue bottles until they were empty. Then parents quickly refilling them so the child could get back to squeezing. I had worked in many preschools prior to my son attending Woodland Park, and I might have been fired for allowing this to happen! I was always taught to demonstrate how to use the proper amount and not "waste" the glue. Talk about a paradigm shift when I saw this!!!! At first, I gasped inwardly, but, along with everything else I learned from WP, I quickly SAW what was going on. It was the process, not the product, it was the moments of

intense concentration, the feeling, the elation in their eyes of unlimited freedom to explore, to observe the glue as it cascaded down and everywhere, to see their physical effect on something, it was science, it was learning at its core. WP constantly challenged my thinking and opened my mind to the endless possibilities of learning. Needless to say I quickly bought tubs of glue and squeeze bottles to implement in my own educational play group. I carry these kinds of moments with me through parenting and through my own adult encounters (where more is MORE and less is limiting). Let those kids get messy if they choose, because (from my family's experience) before long many of them will be spending their days in public school elementary classrooms where these opportunities will be limited or simply not exist. It's hard to get messy when there are no mallets or plungers, or slingshot tennis balls... Just a pencil, paper, some crayons, colored pencils, and ... A glue stick.

9:49 AM

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