

# ART AND CRAFT MATERIALS: USE WITH CAUTION



Art and craft activities are among the most common activities found in home, educational and child care settings. Activities like painting, drawing, or working with clay introduce children to basic art concepts, and can be used with children of all ages. Craft activities, like making bird houses, flower baskets or embroidery from kits, usually require the child make something according to a model and are usually most successful with older children (the later elementary years). Either activity can expose children to health hazards if art and craft materials are not chosen carefully.

## HEALTH HAZARDS

Art and craft activities both may use materials that could pose a serious health threat to children and adults. Some types of paint, glue, model materials, and solvents contain substances that have been shown to produce cancer, organ and tissue damage, mental retardation, and other serious health problems. Anyone who offers art activities to young children needs to be aware of these potential hazards.

Many art materials have been designed and tested for adults. Unfortunately, children's bodies may be more sensitive to these substances, and they might use these materials in ways that adults don't (e.g., putting things in their mouths).

Children tend to be active and curious. They have less well-developed fine motor skills and often do not understand the potential danger presented by an activity. As a result, children may spill supplies, or get them on themselves or others. This can increase the risk of harmful exposure. Children may also put their fingers in their mouths, or suck their thumbs after having their hands in the materials. While this is more common in children under five, nail-biting continues well into the school years.

Children's bodies are not as strong or as fully developed as adult bodies. Therefore, they are more sensitive to poisonous substances, like lead, especially if eaten. Children also tend to breathe faster than adults and often breathe through their mouths instead of their noses. As a result, they might breathe in more of a poisonous substance than an adult would. Their air passages also tend to be narrower than adults' which make them more sensitive to irritation by chemicals.

## REDUCING THE RISKS

Because children may be especially sensitive to the effects of art and craft materials, parents and child care providers should carefully examine the materials provided. Listed below are ways to reduce the risks to children.

- ② Use only art products designed specifically for children. Use art materials that do not have any warning labels and carry the statement "Conforms to ASTM D-4236" or similar wording. Products that have been approved by a toxicologist and carry the Certified Product (CP) or Approved Product (AP) seal of the Arts and Crafts Materials Institute are generally approved for young children. Use caution if purchasing or using imported art and craft materials as they may not meet these U.S. health and safety standards.

Avoid art materials with artificial fruit or food scents that may tempt children to eat them (or other nearby materials).

- ② Always provide close supervision, no matter what the child's age.
- ② Provide clear instructions on the proper use and clean-up of art materials before children begin the project.
- ② Pre-mix powdered paints, glues or model materials.  
Wipe or wet-mop the floor rather than sweeping.  
This reduces the chance of children breathing in dangerous chemicals.
- ② Separate eating areas from work areas. Store materials in original containers, not food or drink containers.
- ② Increase ventilation during arts and crafts activities by running exhaust fans or opening windows.
- ② Limit the amount of materials given to any one child, so that they cannot eat quantities large enough to harm them. This is especially important for children under six years old.
- ② Strictly enforce hand-washing after activities. Substitute other projects for finger painting projects when children have open cuts or sores.



## ALTERNATIVES

In order to choose safe art supplies to use at home or in the home child care environment, consider the following:

Avoid	Substitute (CP/AP Products If Possible)
Powdered tempera paints, pastels and chalks, or dry markers that create dust	Pre-mixed paints and natural dyes; oil sticks, crayons, chalks, and colored pencils; or water-based markers.
Oil-based paints, turpentine, benzene, toluene, and rubber cement and its thinner	Water-based paints (water colors, liquid tempera, and acrylic), water-based glues (glue sticks or tape), and water-based inks
Permanent markers	Water-based markers
Instant paper-mache (may contain asbestos fibers and lead from pigments in colored printing inks)	Paper-mache made from black-and-white newspaper and library paste, white paste, or flour and water paste
Aerosol sprays	Brushes and water-based paints in spatter techniques

---

This fact sheet has been created for the H.E.L.P. for Kids Project.

More information on this topic can be found in "Children's Art Hazards" by Lauren Jacobson, National Resources Defense Council, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168, or by contacting the Art Hazards Information Center (212) 227-6220, the National Art Education Association (703) 860-8000, or the Consumer Product Safety Commission (301) 492-6800.

Portions of this document have been reprinted with permission from the National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Todd, C.M. (1993), "Art Materials: Use with Caution." In: Todd, C.M. (Ed.), *Day Care Center Connections*, 2(4), pp. 3-4. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

