

# Opening a Window to Foster Children's Self-Confidence through Creative Art Activities

*Art activities benefit young children's development in a variety of ways, including cognitive, creative, social, and emotional development. Art genres and materials present a lifelong way to relieve stress and promote self-healing, improving the quality of children's lives.*

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In spite of the great emphasis on learning academic subjects even during the early years, the importance of art activities should not be overlooked since these kinds of activities benefit young children's development in a variety of ways, including cognitive, creative, social, and emotional development (Belz, 2011). Children can count, sort, and classify objects, identify how properties change and discover examples of cause and effect, make their own decisions, and order their behavior to accomplish a goal (Koster, 2012), which can promote cognitive development. They learn about the names of colors, different textures, and spatial relationships. Furthermore, arts become a great communicative tool for young children who often have a hard time verbalizing their ideas and feelings. Therefore, art enables children to express themselves using various media, affirming their freedom of expression (Wallace, 2015).

Art is an experience that requires discovery, exploration, experimentation, and invention, which are essential elements of creativity and imagination (Kohl, 2010). Children can explore and experiment with whatever and however they like without any restriction other than safety (Vecchi, 2010). Allowing children to experiment in new ways can greatly contribute to children's creative development while they are trying out their new ideas and allowing their imagination to freely unfold.

Sharing space and materials with others, taking turns, interacting with others, being responsible for clean up, and making positive choices in personal behavior are important aspects of social development through art. Participating in a large-group art project can enhance community feelings and promote social skills (Fox &

Schirmacher, 2012), which leads to learning the power of cooperation and of empathy (Brouillette, 2010).

Children can express their positive and negative feelings through their art making process (Dyer-Friedman & Sanders, 1997). Art fosters positive mental health by allowing a child to show individual uniqueness as well as success and accomplishment, all part of a positive self-concept (Kohl, 2010). Negative feelings and impulses can be released in positive, acceptable ways through art that involves manipulating a variety of texturized materials, such as play dough and hand-paintings. Therefore, it is critical for educators not only to provide a wide range of art genres and materials, but also to present them as a lifelong way to relieve stress and promote self-healing which will improve the quality of children's lives (Koster, 2012).

## **Art as a Medium to Boost Self-Confidence**

Among various benefits of art for young children, this article highlights the emotional development aspect, specifically boosting self-confidence through art activities. The definition of self-confidence as having trust in one's self, clear knowledge of one's strengths and limitations and assurance of one's ability to handle a variety of situations (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, & Soderman, 2006) was used for purposes of this paper and research project. Self-esteem and self-confidence come from having a sense of belonging, believing that oneself is capable, and knowing that contributions are valued and worthwhile. Lack of self-esteem has been shown to lead to a multitude

of physical, mental, and emotional problems (Kernis, 2005), eventually resulting in overall academic and social underperformance as well as behavior problems. Thus, it is vital for early childhood educators to provide an environment in which children are nurtured in a positive sense of self (Mayesky, 2003).

Young children feel a sense of emotional satisfaction when they are involved in making art, and this satisfaction comes from the control children have over the materials they use and the autonomy they have in their decision-making process. Making art also builds children's self-esteem by giving them opportunities to express what they are thinking and feeling (Fox & Berry, 2013). Children easily feel that they can do well in art and accordingly, they grow in self-confidence and self-acceptance (Mayesky, 2003).

Creative hands-on activities are believed to be effective interventions for preschool children who struggle with social and emotional competences because art activities do not rely on verbal processing (Klorer & Robb, 2012). Therefore, this article reiterates the importance of creative and open-ended art activities to promote young children's emotional development, especially focusing on building self-confidence. The following case study illustrates how a 10-week art intervention program helped to increase children's self-confidence. It also highlights the teachers' roles in working with children and creating an environment for boosting children's self-confidence.

## Art Intervention Program

Specifically designed for boosting children's self-confidence, the art intervention program consisted of

an extended time period in which a variety of art materials were made available weekly for children's exploration and creative energy. The focus of this program was to assess children's confidence levels during and after their art making. These children were in an early intervention program in which specific therapies were provided such as speech, occupational, developmental, and physical therapies. Although the children had a regular art activity time during the day, they were usually exposed to art consisting primarily of pre-determined colors and cut-and-paste activity sheets. As the curricular focus, most of the activities the children experienced previously were crafts, defined as the use of art materials for a pre-determined individual outcome. In this school environment where adult-led, dictated art was the focus, a change was made to promote children's creation of art on their own.

**Art enables children to express themselves.**

Mrs. Renee was a licensed and state-certified early interventionist teacher holding a degree in Special Education. Her preschool classroom, housed in a public elementary school, served nine children ranging in age from 4 to 5 years. These children, diagnosed with a range of multiple developmental needs and levels, participated in a weekly one-hour art intervention session over a period of 10 weeks. Mrs. Renee explained that art is anything children

could draw, paint, make or create to show or express their feelings, ideas, or experiences. She reminded the children that they could create any type of art that would make them feel good using any combinations of the materials within the art center.

To boost self-confidence and to support the creative process, specific types of behaviors, actions, and communications were used with the children. The underlying philosophical belief that art is unique and an expression original to each individual provided the foundation for the experiences. Mrs. Renee not only provided a wide variety of interesting and open-ended materials, but also she asked open-ended questions to expand children's ideas and help a problem-solving process.

Mrs. Renee frequently commented on the process of children's art making, elements of art (e.g., colors, lines, and textures), the shades selected, or the placement of the marks found in children's artworks. For example, upon observing a child's work, Mrs. Renee's feedback included comments such as, "I can see you used a purple crayon to make marks on your page and to write your name. Tell me about the color purple and the marks on the page." We know that often, children of this age and developmental level, pick up any crayon or marker in close proximity with little thought of schema, plan, or purpose for a piece of art. However, Mrs. Renee's comments, although not directly telling the child to select colors for a purpose, may cause the child to begin to consider why certain colors might be chosen.

The environment of acceptance was necessary for growth in self-confidence and in the use of a variety of types of media for self-expression. Mrs. Renee was setting the tone and

creating the environment to support autonomy and thought in creative expression. Mrs. Renee would not direct children to use more than one color in an art opportunity, but the words selected and tone of acceptance throughout the 10-week period provided the climate needed for children to more boldly and with thought and consideration, create works of art. The thought process is always more important than the finished product. The acceptance of the child’s work regardless of how or what it might appear to look like was essential to the classroom environment in this school.

With words of encouragement, Mrs. Renee supported children emotionally and modeled behavior and language to demonstrate respect of others’ art works. Table 1 summarizes the instruction, activities, and materials provided during each session.

Mrs. Renee asked children to draw their self-portraits twice, during the first and the last (10th) weeks of the program. Mrs. Renee observed the children and documented their confidence levels based on three criteria, trust in themselves, identifying their strengths and limitations, and assurance of their abilities (Kostelnik et al., 2006), a total of 5 times (weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10). Then, children’s confidence level data were put into a chart, displaying confidence levels 1-3 (1=low, 2=middle, 3=high).

**Overall Result about Confidence Levels and Changes in Self-portrait**

Although two out of nine children showed a high level of confidence from the start of the program, overall children’s confidence levels gradually rose during the 10-week period of the art intervention (see *Figure 1*).

**Table 1: Description of Instructions, Activities, and Materials provided during Art Intervention Program**

Week	Description of instructions, activities, and materials
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explaining what art is.</li> <li>Drawing self-portrait: Children were handed a piece of paper with a circle in the middle and they were be asked to draw a picture of themselves.</li> </ul>
2-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free drawing: encouraging the children to draw whatever they wanted to draw with crayons, color pencils, markers, and paints.</li> <li>Providing encouragement and recognition of efforts during the activity.</li> </ul>
4-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free creative art activity with various shapes, colors, textures of paper, scissors, glues, glitters, and stickers along with drawing utensils.</li> <li>Encouragement and positive reinforcement were given throughout the process.</li> <li>Children were encouraged to be creative.</li> </ul>
6-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free creative art activity with colored construction paper, drawing utensils, glue, and scissors.</li> <li>Children were encouraged to be creative and recognized for their efforts.</li> </ul>
8-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Free creative art activity with colored construction paper, collage materials, drawing utensils, decorating materials, and divergent consumables.</li> <li>Encouragement and support were provided throughout the process.</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drawing self-portrait: Specific instruction was the same as the first week’s self-portrait.</li> <li>Display of children’s finished art projects and a storytelling session about the children’s art pieces and recognition given for each child’s efforts and work.</li> </ul>

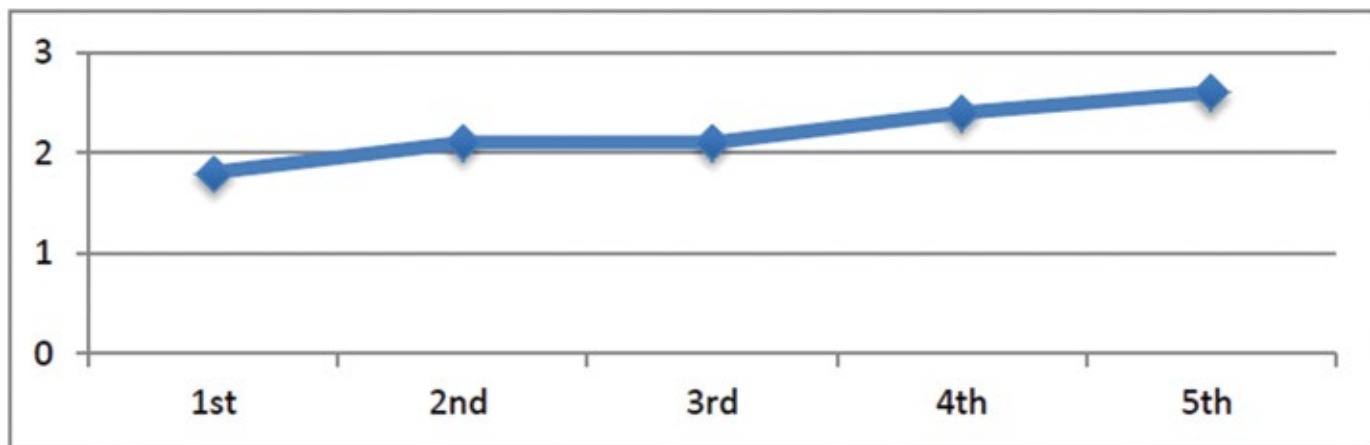
The average of the confidence level at week 1 was 1.8, while that at week 10 was 2.7.

An analysis of the artwork showed that all children gained varying levels of confidence from the beginning to the end of the 10-week period, based on the definition provided and the criteria stated. Several primary factors likely contributed to this success, namely: familiarity, repeated and frequent use of art materials in a free-form manner, and teacher support in the form of positive encouragement and reinforcement.

Additionally, increased development of fine motor skills over the ten-week period as well as increased language and cognitive development impacted children’s abilities and products. Moreover, the children used more of the diverse materials provided as time progressed.

When comparing self-portraits, as the program progressed, the children used more colors and added more details, added positive facial expressions including various kinds of clothing and parts of the face and body, which demonstrated a more

**Figure 1. Overall children’s confidence levels**



complete expression of their own understandings of the human body and self. Clearer lines and colorings were easily noticeable toward the end of the program. Based on Lowenfeld’s stages of young children’s artistic development (Isbell & Raines, 2013), preschoolers are usually at a basic form stage where children’s drawings begin to exhibit some type of organization. This is also identified as a pre-schematic stage where children begin to use symbols or combine basic symbols, prior to a holistic purpose or thematic development of a drawing or piece of art.

### Selected Children’s Examples

This section shows how the four selected children experienced

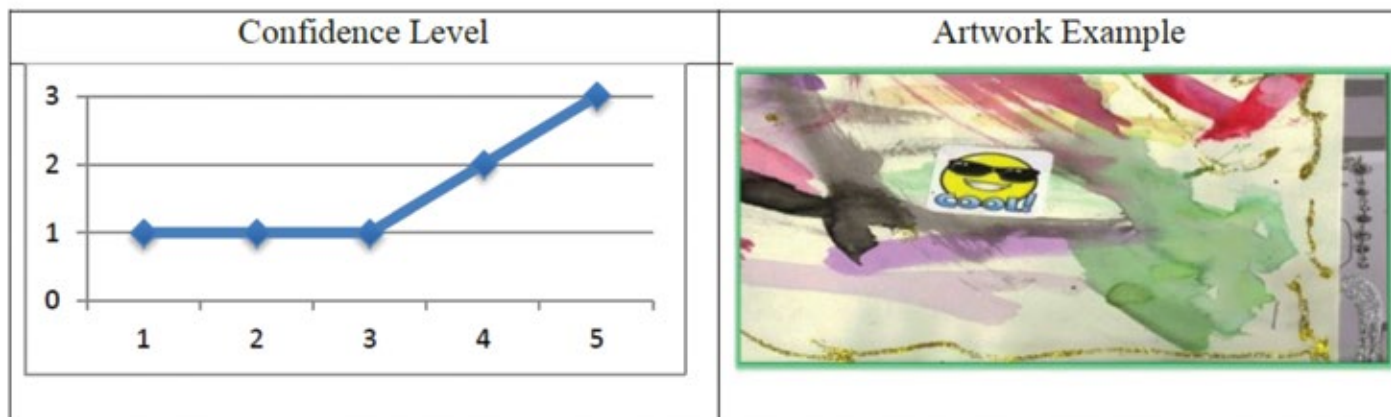
changes in their confidence levels as demonstrated in their self-portraits, as well as the methods used by the teacher to boost children’s confidence.

### Chandler’s Example

Figure 2 shows how Chandler’s confidence level changed over time along with his artwork. First, Chandler’s confidence level stayed the same during the first two measures (low), and then continued to rise after the third time when his confidence level was measured. During the first three weeks, Chandler had a hard time engaging in art activities: he stopped his activities and looked at others’ works or walked around the classroom. He finished his art projects quickly: within 5 minutes he had drawn a few straight and curved lines using no more than

3 colors. Mrs. Renee offered him materials in which he might be interested (e.g., car-shaped paper pieces and blue colored marker) and gave specific and encouraging comments on his works (e.g., “Look how hard you are working at drawing a circle.” and “You made big blue marks on your paper.”). From the time of the third assessment measure, Chandler gradually showed interest and effort in his art works. He was observed spending more time working on his art projects, using various materials and colors provided, using space effectively, and adding more detail. While covering the majority of the paper with colors, there was an attention to the boundaries of the paper. During the last week, he spent a whole hour intermittently working on and adding more to his paintings

**Figure 2. Chandler’s confidence level and artwork example**



showing strong confidence levels in all areas in the final measure.

Figure 3 shows Chandler’s self-portraits. The left one, which was drawn during the first week, demonstrates that Chandler has only colored the pre-drawn shape. On the right, drawn in the 10th week, he showed growth in the understanding that one color does not create a full piece of artwork: he colored in layers and he understood that the areas of his “face” needed to be differentiated and that he had gained confidence in using a variety of art materials in his creation.

**Ariel’s Example**

Ariel’s confidence level (see Figure 4) rose after the first two weeks and stayed consistently strong until the end. During the first measure, Ariel was observed to wait until others had finished. She slowly started her own

art project, which caused her to have insufficient time to finish and possibly prevented her from expressing creative ideas. Mrs. Renee reassured her that all children had unique ideas and provided extra help by talking with Ariel about what she would like to do with the materials. Following the second assessment measure, Ariel did not wait until others had finished but initiated her project showing that she had enough confidence in herself to begin without being overly conscious of others. She was able to show her own thinking in her drawings. During the final measure, Ariel said that she loved what she created and enjoyed talking about what she made and how she had made it, revealing strong confidence.

Her artwork example (see Figure 4) shows a great deal of attention to the boundaries of the paper. She literally outlined her work surface with

varied colors. She had decided her name is of central importance to her work. Her use of cloud like shapes at the top shows two possibilities: she understands the placement of clouds at the top of her world and she understands how to make the cloud shape. The clouds are also evidence of a skyline in her work and she has used the bottom of the paper effectively to demonstrate a base line.

In analyzing Ariel’s self-portraits (Figure 5), the first of the two self-portraits is already at a high cognitive and artistic interpretive level. The features of the face were detailed, including eyelashes, nostrils, and teeth. Her second self portrait also contained details, but the details extended further (i.e., the body was not a stick figure, the body had clothing colored in two colors, the hand appeared to be holding an object). Her confidence in drawing

**Figure 3. Chandler’s self-portraits**



**Figure 4. Ariel’s confidence level and artwork example**

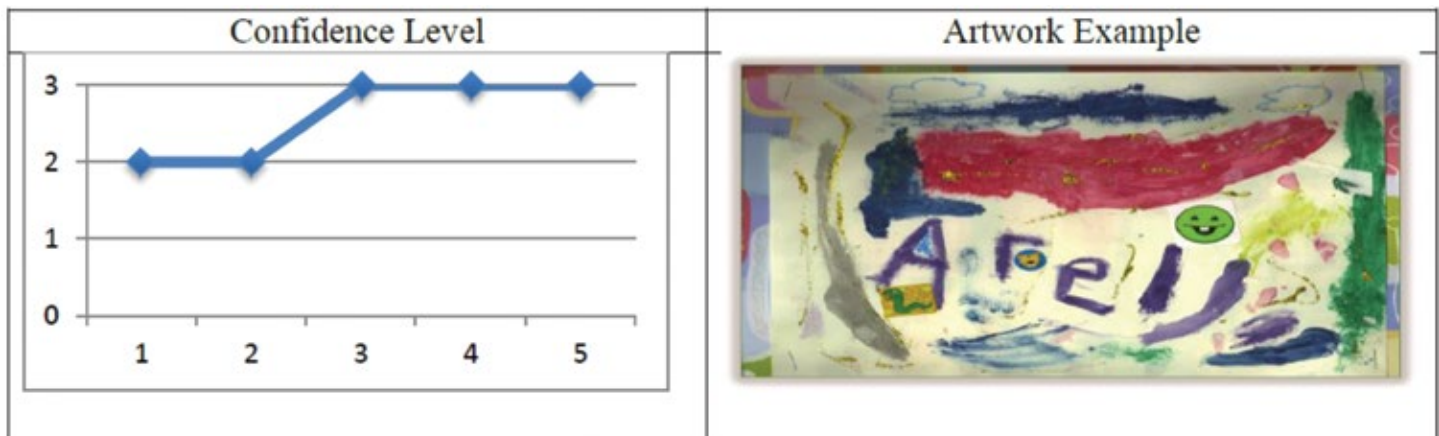


Figure 5. Ariel's self-portraits

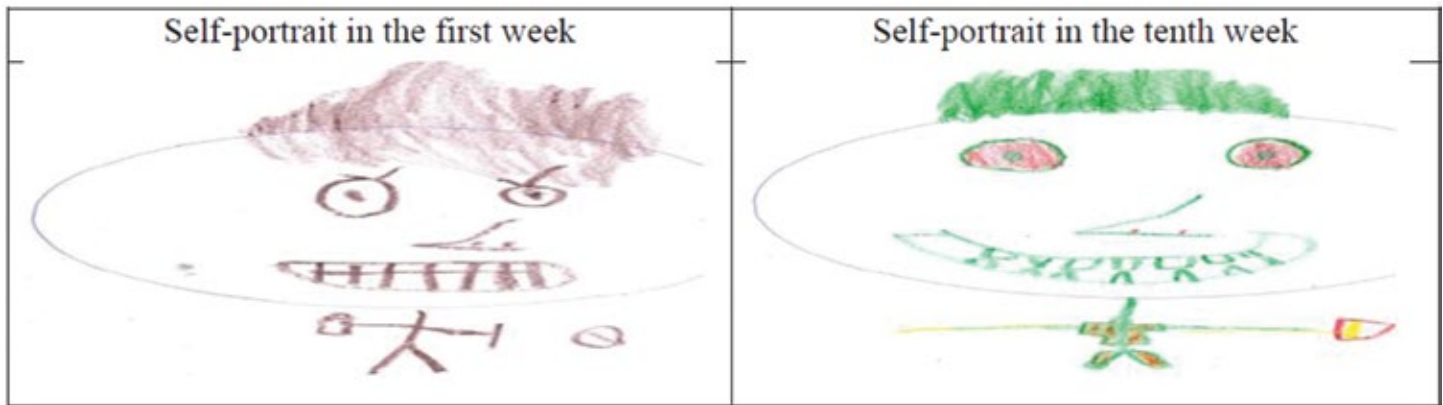
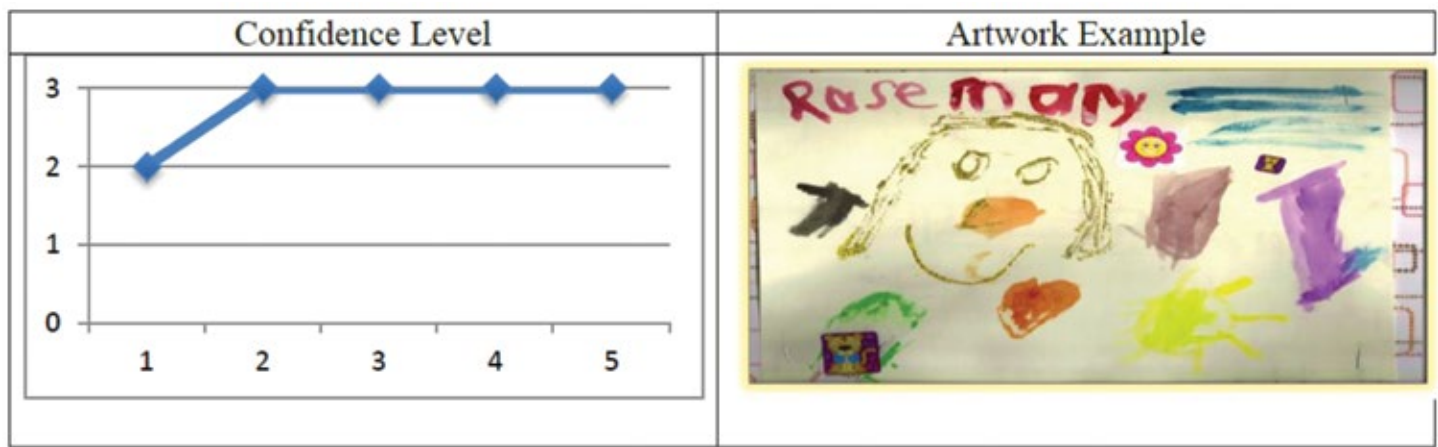


Figure 6. Rosemary's confidence level and artwork example



has clearly increased as evidenced by adding details she deemed important to the picture of herself as a fully functioning person.

### Rosemary's Example

After the first assessment measure, Rosemary's confidence level remained consistently high till the last measure as shown in *Figure 6*. At first, Rosemary asked Mrs. Renee to draw for her, saying she did not know what to do and she could not draw well. Mrs. Renee encouraged Rosemary to describe what she would like to draw and how it looked through guided questions. At times, the teacher offered illustrations from picture books or photographs of the objects that Rosemary liked to draw, which helped her visualize and guided her drawing. Her artwork was full of color and shape with a clear representation of a person.

Strong confidence showed in her use of space, color, and representation.

In the left portrait in *Figure 7*, Rosemary had details in her face such as pupils in the eyes, and clearly distinct and colored hair. However, she was more representational with the body, which showed her growth in cognition and confidence to expand her art. In addition, her self-portrait in the last week was anchored on a base line showing an example where the reliance on the premade circle seems to distract from the quality of the experience when compared to the totally self-created piece of work previously shown.

### Mikey's Example

Mikey maintained his confidence level at medium until the third assessment measure and then showed increased confidence during the last two measures (see *Figure 8*). During

the first two measures, he looked relaxed yet focused. During the third measure, he was more into the creation process but did not appear satisfied with his product and did not share what he created. Mrs. Renee pointed out positive qualities in his creation process and projects and gave detailed comments on artistic properties, including shapes, colors, and spatial use. From the fourth through the final measures, he commented on his own work positively and shared what he made with excitement and confidence. Mikey has used colors and movements in the example of the artwork. The movement of his hand is clearly respecting the boundaries of the materials. The change in color on the same line showed his freedom in using various colors.

On the left self-portrait in *Figure 9*, the large smile, the details of the face, and the full use of the

oval showed his confidence in using materials and space. On the right self-portrait, smile and features still existed but the features were drawn larger and more confidently. However, the colors delineated the features from the skin, which shows advancing cognition.

### Toward Boosting Children's Self-Confidence through Creative Art Activities

This case study of the art intervention program for preschoolers showed children's noticeably increasing self-confidence through creative art activities and the teacher's appro-

priate guidance and encouragement. Based on the findings of the case study, we recommend that teachers use the following suggestions.

**First**, social-emotional skills flourish in an environment where children feel self-confident, relaxed, and secure. Thus, it is essential for teachers to provide a safe and positive social climate environment where

Figure 7. Rosemary's self-portraits

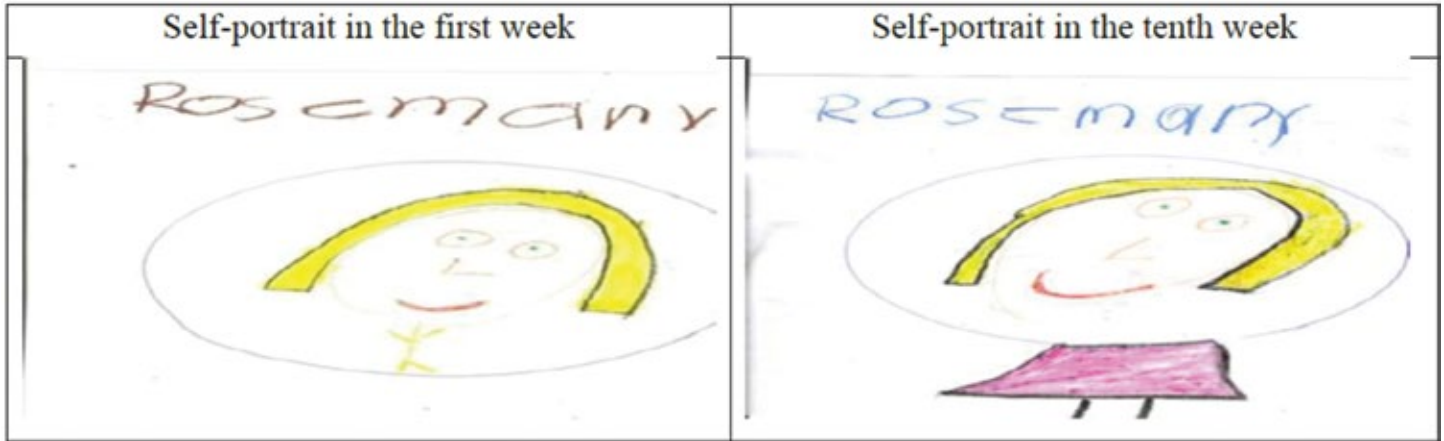


Figure 8. Mikey's confidence level and artwork example

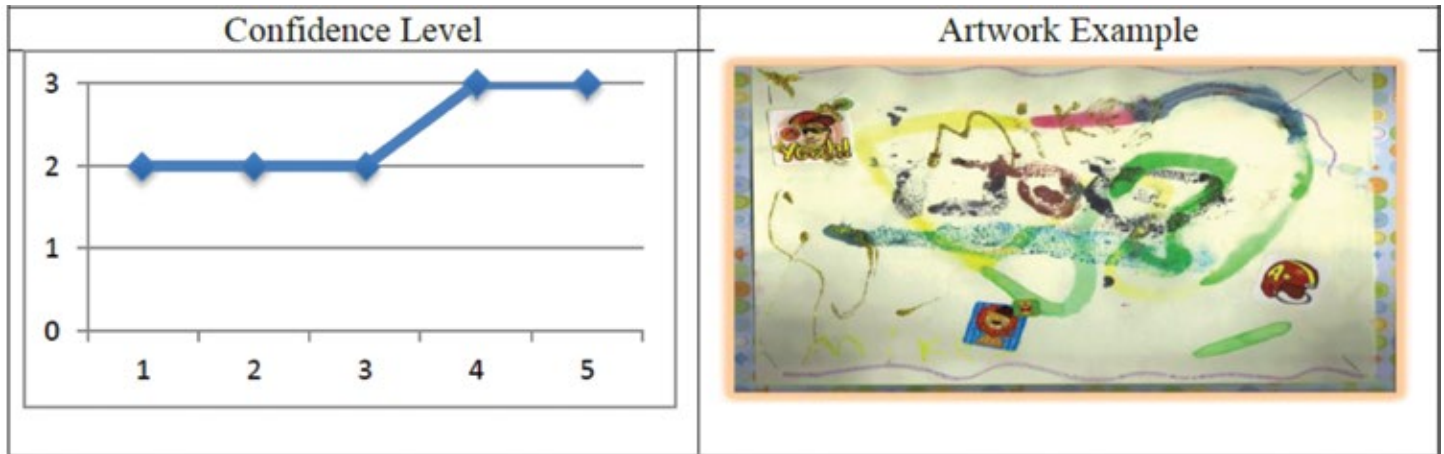
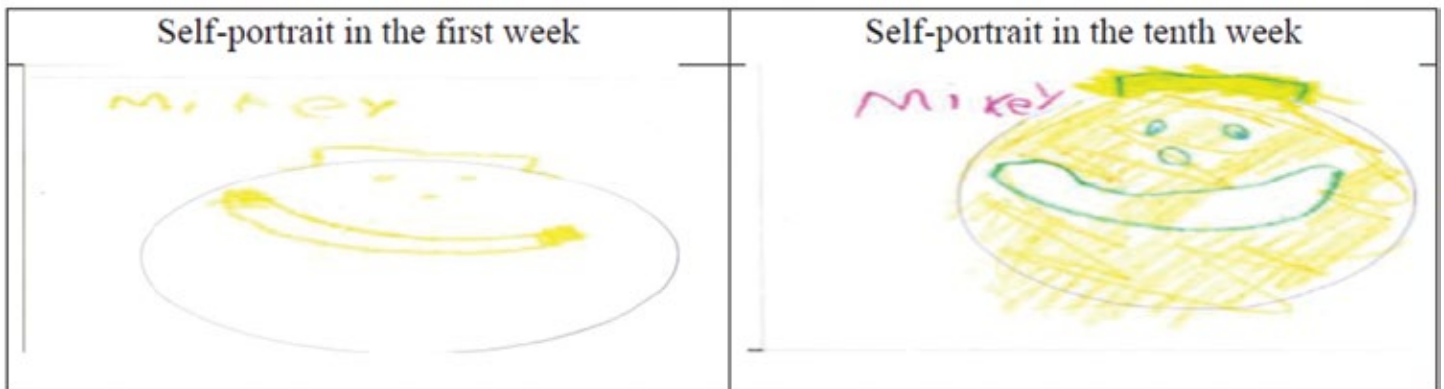


Figure 9. Mikey's self-portraits



children can feel comfortable to use art as a personal way to express their thoughts and emotions so that their ideas and feelings are accepted and valued (Koster, 2012). To support emotional development, teachers do not compare them to others (Morris, 2012): children's progress is based upon a pre or initial stage of development, in consideration of frequently changing and fluctuating developmental gains.

**Second**, teachers' qualities such as verbal encouragement, modeling empathy, using emotionally expressive language, and showing emotional warmth to each child have been shown to increase confidence, self-control, empathy, and cooperativeness (Spivak & Farran, 2012). Teachers' feedback can help children structure, organize their thoughts, or determine an appropriate direction to take. Furthermore, it is crucial to provide specific feedback about the children's learning processes so that they continue their explorations and extend their knowledge and skills beyond what they already possess (Mulcahey, 2009), rather than generic comments (e.g., "Well done."- "Good job!"). Open-ended questions rather than step by step directions can also provide opportunities for children to initiate ideas, take the lead, and actively contribute to an activity. A heavy reliance on listening to the children's intent for their work is essential in giving feedback, which addresses encouragement not only for the product but also for the process (Fox & Schirmacher, 2012).

**Third**, sensitive teachers should let children know that the process of participating in and expressing themselves in art or other creative activities is more important than finished products (Mayesky, 2003). Teachers seek to be judged not on

the children's products but on their growth. Instead of giving a model or telling what the final product is supposed to look like, it is important to give children reasonable control over deciding what materials they want to use and how they will approach the product. Providing a wide variety of materials and a sufficient amount of time allows children to select items that match what they are thinking and encourages them to expand their existing ideas.

**Art promotes social and emotional development.**

Therefore, teachers need to consider the higher values of an open-ended art program versus close-ended crafts. Art areas with divergent choices freely available to the children are preferable to pre-cut or pre-determined art materials and activities. Various materials that can be used to create and to modify would contribute to a strong art area, center or program. Safe materials and objects offered to children should be open-ended, inspiring creative decision-making and problem solving. If the art area is set up for autonomous use with decisions inspired by the artist's imagination, cognitive development is enhanced and confidence is increased (Drew & Rankin, 2004). When using open-ended materials, children develop spontaneous and creative self-expression and develop self-confidence.

## Conclusion

This research acknowledged the importance of teacher's emotional support, specific feedback and open-ended questions, and use of open-ended materials. Specifically, children's self-portraits significantly changed by using varied colors, adding more details on clothing and bodily features, or showing positive facial expressions. In conclusion, this research demonstrated how a 10-week art intervention program enhanced preschool children's self-confidence levels.

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The SECA

# Reporter

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Take time to share your thoughts and experiences. It's SECA's newest way to network and participate in the SECA family. If you haven't contributed yet, you can still comment on any of the previous blog posts or wait for the next one. You'll see a new post around the 20th of each other month.

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