Secrets of Scribbles

You come home from work one day to find your grinning toddler waiting for you, proudly offering his first work of art: a scribbled maze of yellow, red and blue crayon strokes. You promptly anchor his masterpiece to the fridge for all to appreciate. You see beauty (that others may not) in those random marks, but there’s even more than meets the eye.

A baby’s artwork offers a window to his burgeoning creativity as well as to his mental and physical development, according to early childhood researcher Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD, coauthor of Celebrate the Scribble: Appreciating Children’s Art. “Parents are a bit shocked to learn that those scribbles are actually something truly amazing. They’re to reading and writing what babbling is to talking. They’re the seed of what a baby will become.”

You can help it all get started when your baby is around 9 to 12 months old. Show him what a crayon does to paper, and watch him make random jabs that result in dots, dashes and lines. He’s not only tuning his fine-motor ability, he’s also seeing the creative results of his actions. Your encouragement (“Wow! Look what you made!”) turns his art into a shared experience, tells your little one he’s done something special and inspires him to do more.

From 12 to 18 months, babies’ lines and jabs take on greater form as motor control increases and they experiment with repetition. Your toddler becomes a little artist, creating curves and color schemes—to his own amazement. Watch as he also becomes a scientist, exploring how the lines are made, how more pressure creates a darker line or dot, how the color goes from crayon tip to paper.

Between 18 and 24 months, children begin to communicate meaning through art, revealing early understanding of symbolism and representation. Those brown lines may be your child’s house, and the black blotch inside may be him. But resist the urge to label these forms. Instead, offer open questions (“What are you making?”) and comments (“Look at those colors!”) and let your child lead the conversation with his own story about his creation. Also take time to create art with your child, perhaps by taking turns with paint or markers.

This is the best kind of interactive play, an imaginative activity that promotes learning. Making art, asserts Dr. Hirsh-Pasek, is just what a twenty-first-century child needs to succeed: “We need good communicators and creative thinkers, and art is one of the best creative outlets there is.” —Tiffany Forte

Beyond Crayons There are many ways for your baby to express himself artistically, says child development expert Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. Three to try:

PLAY WITH FOOD. Watch and enjoy what your child creates with strained carrots and mashed potatoes on the canvas of his high-chair tray. ENCOURAGE THE FINE ART OF FINGER PAINTING. Have him explore color and patterns with paint using his hands as brushes. TRY IMAGINARY PAINTING OR DRAWING. Let him paint outside with water and paintbrushes on cement; encourage him to make finger impressions on the living room rug.