

WHY ART IS ESSENTIAL RIGHT NOW

My inbox is currently overflowing with memes addressing how difficult it is for us parents to homeschool our children. Most of them have the same punch line: if coronavirus doesn't kill us, then homeschooling will.

As parents we are rightly concerned about our health and our job security; we are understandably shocked by the rapid dwindling of our 401Ks, and distressed by the fact that we cannot find a roll of toilet paper, well, anywhere. But what we're forgetting in the midst of this maelstrom is that our children's worlds have also been shattered.

Their school routines have disappeared; they can no longer play with their friends, or engage in the sports they love. They have been removed from the comfort of their daily routing while simultaneously absorbing the anxiety felt by their parents and other family members. Even as we tell ourselves how resilient our children are, even as we give thanks that they are mostly immune to the physical devastation of coronavirus, they are quietly being shaped by its emotional devastation.

As someone who has brought art education to many inner city schools over the past 10 years, I know that artistic expression – especially in children of elementary school age – is an essential emotional outlet during times of distress. It gives them a medium through which to convey things that may be too scary or too complicated to put into words, and can serve as a crucial launching point for important conversations with teachers and parents. Recently, however, with the indefinite suspension of so many schools, that outlet has suddenly been revoked. This is very destabilizing for our kids.

The late child development specialist Mary Hartzell used a simple demonstration to illustrate the importance of structure to children. She asked parents to push against her hand, and suddenly it would flop backwards without any resistance. This pulls the parent uncomfortably off balance. She then repeated the same movement, but this time returned a firm and unwavering pressure against the parent's hand. This is a metaphor for the structure and support that children need, and for what regular art education can provide: something comfortable and reliable for kids to balance themselves against.

Children thrive on routines but also on creativity, which can be a hard combination to come by. Currently, thousands of teachers are valiantly attempting to assign readings and math problems to their students over the Internet, but art is something that is simply getting lost in the shuffle. As parents, we must not let that happen.

Art has been proven to support children's emotional health in addition to building their creativity, focus, and fine motor skills. Despite its benefits, we may find it difficult to ask our children to put down their screens and pick up their crayons. We might even think we're doing them a favor by allowing the coronavirus quarantine to become a videogame "vacation." We're not.

By engaging our kids in artistic projects, particularly if we also make time to participate with them, we're giving them an essential avenue for expressing themselves during this stressful and disorienting time. We're allowing them to build confidence, and we're bonding with them in a fun and creative way.

A lot of parents are reticent to engage in art with their children simply because they don't know how or where to start. Fortunately, there are a wide variety of entertaining and completely free art projects available online, including all of the projects at our charitable site, crayoncollection.org or logging online for live lessons generously hosted by incredible artists such as Mo Willems and his "Lunch Doodles".

With some paper, a few crayons, and a few minutes of our time each week, we can give our children back an important aspect of their school experience; we can enliven their days and give them a voice with which to start conversations through the expressive creativity of art.