

A child's feet and hands are shown, heavily splattered with vibrant colors like green, blue, yellow, and red. The child is lying on a grey, textured surface, possibly concrete or stone. In the foreground, there are several shallow, disposable containers filled with paint: one with yellow, one with green, and one with red. The background is a chaotic but colorful mess of paint splatters and streaks, suggesting a playful and messy art activity.

# Banish Boredom

Activities to Do with Kids  
That You'll **ACTUALLY** Enjoy

Rebecca Green

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# DEDICATION

To Kane and Cameron, my "always up for an adventure" loves who embrace wholeheartedly the idea of always saying yes and never being bored. To my husband who puts up with my never-ending shenanigans and our creative mess, and exemplifies with gusto the value of hard work and unconditional love. And to my parents, for nurturing creativity and an endless set of interests, and supporting me no matter what.



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# INTRODUCTION

Hello! If you're picking up this book, I'm guessing that (like me) you are a parent who has spent some time wondering what you are supposed to do with your children now that they are no longer babies who sleep, coo, or cry most of the day. Now they're just as cute (most of the time), but they are verbal, mobile, and ready to explore. You're looking for some activities that will keep them stimulated, contribute to their physical and intellectual growth, and that you can enjoy and participate in as well. It can be a difficult balance!

As a mom of two young children, I have gone through the exact same transition, and I started writing a blog to share how I deal with the challenges. This book is based on my personal experiences and my realization that the best activities parents can share with young children take into account the personalities of both the parent and child. It's incredibly easy to lose yourself and your own identity when you become a parent, and that can especially be a concern if you leave a career outside the home to raise your children as I did. But I've found that as our kids have grown, the most enjoyable activities we do together started from something that I was interested in myself and then adapted to best fit the developing personalities of each of our children.





I am actually an attorney by education and trade, and for several years I practiced law as an attorney in a so-called “big-law” firm. But after having our two children, it started to become clear that, for me, I wouldn’t be able to be both the attorney and mom that I wanted to be. So I decided to take a break from practicing law and stay at home with our children while they were young.

When my family and I decided that I would stay home full-time, I knew that I needed a plan. So I pulled out all of the old calendars from our kids’ fabulous day care and tried to put together my own themed monthly plan. And I felt better. But by the second or third day of being a stay-at-home mom (SAHM), I realized that I had planned our entire days without much consideration of what the kids or I might actually like to do. I had gone the cookie-cutter-lesson-plan route, which seemed to contradict part of the reason I was staying home with them in the first place.

I recall frantically Googling, “What do I do with my kids?” in the early morning hours that first week home and discovering the creative parent blogs. (These are commonly called “mommy blogs,” but dads publish good blogs too!) I found blogs full of really creative art projects, science experiments, and visits to local destinations. I was relieved and remember thinking to myself, “I can do this!”

And I did. We jumped into adventures, and I started writing about them almost immediately—first in a small family blog. Then I moved to the more public realm with our Not-So-SAHM blog (<http://www.notsosahm.blogspot.com>), whose name reflects our tendency to get out and explore rather than staying at home. I found a sense of accomplishment in documenting what we had done



Besides the activities I plan, I also make sure my children have plenty of free play time by themselves, which is an important skill all on its own.

and maintaining my writing skills, a joy in establishing connections with other parents doing similar things, and some accountability to find new activities and follow through on them. I drew on my own creative childhood, which was filled with art, crafts, science, and outdoor activities. I planned some activities with the kids ahead of time and let others develop more organically. I consider myself quite lucky that I began staying home when the weather was nice outside—and that we live in a city with plenty of free and fantastic activities. I also know my entire family is lucky that I’m able to stay home at all.

We were busy those first six months or so, before the kids were in school. As they’ve both transitioned to longer days at school and organized extracurricular activities, the amount and kinds of things we do together has certainly changed. Besides the activities I plan, I also make sure my children have plenty of free play time by themselves, which is an important skill all on its own. But we’ve been so fortunate through all of our experiences together, developing and growing along the way. From those experiences, I have gained a sense of what types of activities are fun and educational for the kids and at the same time provide fulfillment for me as a parent and a person. Given how helpful I found other parent resources when I started staying home, I felt that sharing what I have learned would be useful to other parents. I may be at home

full-time right now, but any parent, whether working outside the home full-time or part-time, or at home full-time, can use the resources in this book.

# The Personal Approach to Activities

I know that as parents, we are often looking for “the answer” to our numerous questions about raising our children. But my overarching point in this book is to find your own approach to activities with your children—one that suits your personality as you help your children discover their own. That might seem obvious, but it was something I first overlooked. That’s the humbling point about being a parent: even the brightest, most well-intentioned people (including you, of course) have no idea what to do when taking on this new role. But through some trial and error, I’ve arrived at an approach that works well for us. My personal goal with all the activities I do with our children is to help them become well-rounded people by exposing them to a variety of different disciplines and to encourage them to become creative, confident, and independent thinkers who can question critically and work through issues.

The question is, where do you start? I’ve had the best success by starting with myself. Ask yourself, what things do I want to explore or learn more about? Pick one and start there. And then watch as your children react to activities involving that interest. I’m going to guess that as a parent of young kids, you’re thinking something along the lines of: “Coffee. Coffee is something I can get into.” If so, find a local roaster and take the kids for a field trip! Maybe they’ll be enamored by machinery, maybe they’ll enjoy the smell, or maybe you’ll come up with an art project out of coffee grounds. Or maybe you’ll just get an amazing cup of coffee out of it.

I continue to be surprised at how quickly I can tell what kinds of things are going to appeal to each of our children’s personalities, which allows me to come up with slight variations on each activity that will suit each child. For example, even though both of our kids love exploring, our daughter, Cameron, is more of a directions follower than our son, Kane, who really likes flexibility and creativity. They both love geocaching, which involves treasure-hunting using a website and a navigation device to guide you. Cameron, however, is more focused on the mechanics of following the Global Positioning System (GPS) device to find the treasure, and Kane likes to know the story behind the geocaches placed there by other treasure-hunting enthusiasts. So I try to satisfy each interest as we do the same activity—Cam helps me use the GPS to track the geocache while Kane and I think through the clues and the story behind the placement. And if one sibling doesn’t like a particular activity and the other does, it’s a good opportunity to teach the lesson that sometimes you need to be flexible, compromise, and be patient while the other person gets a turn at what they like.

Having trouble picking an activity that you think is suitable? My second piece of advice is not to underestimate your kids. I generally try to stretch our children to do activities that might be

labeled as slightly above their age, or maybe even something you may not initially think would be an activity for children. For example, I took our children (age four and five at the time) to tour the Library of Congress, which solicited some surprised reactions from friends. And upon arrival, a library docent told me that the tour was generally advised for children at least eight years old. But we stayed, and although they may not have experienced the hour-long tour the same way an older child or adult would have, they did learn something. They learned to be polite, wait patiently, listen carefully, ask questions of adults, and so on. And they even picked up some new knowledge along the way. I try to always remind myself that with all activities, it's about the process and not the product. They didn't come out of that tour as historical scholars, but they learned a lot in the process. It doesn't always work out—our children are still children and we've had our fair share of fabulous, dramatic exits—but in my opinion, the more we do these kinds of activities, the better children get at doing them and the more they get out of them each successive time.

My last piece of advice is to do your research but stay flexible. You may have found the perfect morning music concert to attend, but on your way there, you walk past a construction site and it turns out your kids would like to sit on a dirty curb for hours watching construction

vehicles. Try to roll with it. I've found that sometimes unplanned activities work out the best. If I'm too focused on a particular goal I have in mind, I might miss an opportunity to discover something our kids would enjoy more. On a related note, don't worry if something doesn't turn out the way you planned—the kids probably won't even notice. And if they do care about plans being changed, it's another life lesson learned—we all need to learn to adapt to changing plans. (It's probably telling that one of our family's favorite songs is "You Can't Always Get What You Want.") As your children get older, you'll find that they're able to communicate more clearly about the kinds of things they like to do, and you can solicit their help in choosing and adapting activities.

To sum up my approach:

- **Start with activities you like.** Your toddler probably can't tell a Monet from a Lichtenstein but might like climbing stairs. So a trip to an



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# 1

## ART PROJECTS

When I first started staying home, I found that it was incredibly easy to fall into a trap of planning all our activities around our kids without much, if any, consideration of the things that I like to do. Given that they were so young (ages one and two and a half), that meant planning typical kid activities around their nap schedules, mealtimes, bathroom trips, and so on. It's a natural thing to do and it makes sense. But I felt like I was starting to lose myself just a little bit, and I came to the realization that it was perfectly fine to plan some things to do with the kids that I liked too. And art was one of those areas in which I first started to make that transition.

When the first few art projects (such as cutting shapes out of paper) were not provoking the kind of creativity I was aiming for, I realized that my focus should be more on the art of making—in other words, putting process over product. The kids and I started undertaking more open-ended art projects. Even though they don't always end



up as frame-worthy pieces, we all enjoy the process so much more. My general approach is to give the kids freedom to create how they want—even within the confines of a particular project. For example, I might pick the particular art media we use, such as watercolors, but have them decide what they want to do with it. Or I might have a more focused project, such as creating pop art of themselves for Father's Day, but let them pick their own colors. I love watching the kids make choices, figure out how and what they want to do, and follow the paths down which their creativity takes them. By exposing them to activities I enjoy, they've started to develop their own interests. But I still have fun and stay interested. And that gives me more satisfaction at the end of the day, and in turn, I think makes it a better experience for our kids as well.

## Preparing for Art Making

Before gathering materials, I find that it's helpful to spend some time thinking about what kind of art you'd like to make with your kids. To come up with project ideas, I think about the kind of art I enjoyed making when I was young, spend time researching ideas online, and peruse kid art blogs and books. We have been inspired by art we see on our field trips and sometimes think of our own projects based on those observations, but I generally have a running list of art projects we'd like to try.

If you first gather ideas about the kind of art you'd like to make, then you can more easily find ways to purchase art supplies cost-effectively. You can save by buying in bulk, so I try to use the same materials for several different projects. After our art supplies were pretty well stocked, I found it much easier to set the kids up with simple activities, such as just coloring with markers. (See the Resources section for our list of favorite art suppliers.)

As you can tell, it's also important to consider the age of your children and their particular personalities before choosing a project. I always try to choose projects that both of my children can participate in, even if it's in a slightly different way. For example, we did a spray-painted coffee filters project that was well suited for my oldest, Kane, who had developed enough motor skills to physically squeeze a bottle full of watercolors. Cameron wasn't quite at that stage, but she was perfectly capable of using a paintbrush to achieve a similar effect. I let her try using the squeeze bottle but had the backup available so she could still participate and not get frustrated.

I know that there are some projects one of our kids will enjoy more than the other, but I encourage both to try. I also offer options that might better suit their particular personalities. We certainly have moments when one decides not to participate, and I don't force them. But I find that they have a hard time not joining once we get started.

Cameron has an affinity for painting on her body instead of on whatever traditional media we're using, so I quickly learned to set up workspaces to allow her to do that. I once taped large sheets of paper to the wall around their bathtub and set them up with brushes and



glow-in-the-dark paint. I have a portable black light that I plugged in far away from the tub and obviously kept the tub empty for safety. Kane went right to work painting on the paper, but all Cam wanted to do was paint herself from head to toe. When they were done, all I had to do was take down the paper and run the tub.

I've also found it's helpful to try to keep a laid-back attitude toward art and mess (which doesn't always work). By now, it should be fairly obvious that I don't mind a little mess. But if the idea of having a fully painted child run down the hallway or having glitter strewn throughout your living room strikes fear in your heart, then don't do it! Find a project that is creative and fits your comfort level. It's not going to be fun for anyone if you have to obsessively sweep under your child's chair throughout the whole project.

Once you have the materials and an idea of what project you and your kids would like to do, make sure you think through how much time you'll need for the project; no one likes to be rushed. I also like to set up the art project area, gather the materials, and then spend some time talking to my kids about what we're going to do. If a project needs to be done in stages, don't put out all of the materials at once. You'll just get frustrated when the kids inevitably go straight to stage four. I also occasionally show my kids examples of a finished project, when available, particularly if we are trying to create in the style of a certain artist. But I generally like to try to keep their minds open and not make them feel like they have to create in a certain way.

To that end, I sometimes join in, but have found that when I do, my kids frequently try to imitate what I'm doing or ask me to do things for them. So more often, I just sit with them and talk about what they're doing or wherever else our conversation leads. I'm also perfectly comfortable setting them up with an easy project and doing something else nearby. Although



I'd love to do art all day, I also use it as a time to keep them occupied while I need to get other things done. I've had several stern conversations with the dishes, but they still appear incapable of washing themselves.

# Art Project Ideas

As I mentioned earlier, I like to have a list of projects handy when we need an idea to get us started. These are our favorites, with additional options noted for some activities. As you gather materials on the lists, make sure you have enough for all children participating. You can adjust each project to best suit your child's age and temperament, but most of them we've done in some form since Cam was one year old. (Remember: Don't underestimate them!)

## BIG PAINTING

Both of our kids love to get messy while making art. In fact, I often set them up for art projects in swimsuits because I know that whatever they're doing, it's going to be all over them. And big painting might be their favorite messy art project for that very reason. On top of the good fun, I love big painting because it helps develop

PAINT CHOICES

We love to use BioColor paint, which retains the individual paint colors when mixed and scraped together more than regular tempera paint. But mixing colors is also another important skill, so regular tempera paint is fine too.



gross and fine motor skills, teaches them a bit about restraint (in terms of how much paint to use), and stimulates creative storytelling for them.

They are both big fans of making up stories about what they're painting as they are painting it. I'm not sure if it's because this is such an active way of making art or because of the fluid nature of the media, but when they move the paint around with the scraper, the paint seems to come alive for them. Our kids view the paint as doing something while they create art and often describe the paint as actual physical matter—like water or lava—that is working to create a scene (such as an ocean with a deserted island). They envision people or animals moving around in that scene (George Washington might be storming that deserted island). This is a great activity to let the kids work on by themselves, and big art can take big time, which can be a nice break for me. However, I find it hard not to get sucked into the stories they are telling! But giving them the license ahead of time to make a total mess takes the stress out of the activity for everyone and is so much more fun.

### Materials

- Several colors of tempera paint in squeezable bottles
- A large piece of canvas or sturdy poster board
- A paint squeegee or scraper, an old credit card, or a sturdy piece of thin cardboard

### Directions

1. Set up the canvas or poster board so your children can reach the entire piece or can easily turn it to reach the entire media area.
2. Provide several colors of paint and let your children squeeze it onto the canvas, scraping it around in whatever pattern they like. Encourage them to start with a small amount of paint until they get a sense of how much is too much.
3. Let the painting dry well, and then hang it as abstract art; use it as a play board for other toy setup, storytelling, or play acting, or save it to cut into cards for friends and family.

I like to encourage my children to talk to me about what they are painting while they are scraping. (When it comes to talking, my kids don't need a lot of encouragement!) But if your child prefers to paint in silence, that's fine too. I can tell that sometimes they just need some quiet time to think while they're painting. You can also try playing music or an audiobook and see if they enjoy painting with that in the background instead.

### Additional Options

- Using nontoxic paints, place a large piece of poster board or a white sheet of paper on the ground and let your littlest ones paint using their entire body. This works best in a diaper or bathing suit, and probably outside.

- Use a variety of big brushes (hand broom, sponges, and so on) to paint whatever canvas you're working on.
- Get a group together to work collectively on a big painting mural. We like to do this outdoors and hang up a large piece of paper or a white sheet. It's so interesting to see how kids collaborate to make a joint piece of art!

## BLEEDING ART TISSUE PAPER PAINTING

Although its name is a bit unfortunate, bleeding art tissue paper creates some of the most beautiful art and is a big favorite of our children. Part of the fun is they get to make a total mess before the painting even starts (by ripping up large sheets of tissue paper into smaller shapes). There is also an element of surprise because you're never entirely sure how the painting is going to turn out until it dries. This type of art project gets better and better as it progresses. Plus it results in a gorgeous product with so many uses. I always make sure to participate in this one and am often found at the art table by myself long after the kids have moved on. We have years' worth of bleeding art tissue paper gift tags from our efforts.



### Materials

- Several colors of bleeding art tissue paper (not regular tissue paper)
- Thick watercolor paper
- Paintbrushes
- Water
- Children's scissors (optional)
- Glue (optional)

### Directions

1. Start by having your children rip or cut the large tissue paper into smaller pieces. I like the look that using torn paper creates. But if your kids love using scissors or if you're going for a cleaner look, then let them cut the paper into shapes. Have them separate the pieces into piles by color. The paper is easier to use once they get going and they get to work on their color recognition.

2. Brush a little water onto the watercolor paper, place a piece of tissue paper on it, and paint over it with more water. The wetter the tissue paper gets, the more the colors will bleed and mix into each other. Resist removing the tissue paper just yet.
3. When your children are happy with the shapes they've made, let the painting dry. Then, have them pull away the tissue paper pieces to reveal the painting made underneath! (Tip: Save those pieces of tissue paper—you can reuse them!) Hang the painting as is, cut it into pieces and attach it to a string to make a pretty garland, or cover it with contact paper to make a unique place mat.

### Additional Options

- Paint the tissue paper as a sun catcher onto a window, door, or clear easel. Let dry for temporary art and remove and rinse when finished.
- Reuse pieces of tissue paper for collages or to simulate stained glass by pressing the tissue pieces onto a piece of clear contact paper and then hanging the artwork in a window.
- Instead of using water, paint tissue paper onto paper using a water and glue mixture. Less light will come through, but the colors will be brighter. Or paint them onto an empty plastic bottle to make a cool lantern. (You can see an example on the blog; search for "tissue paper bottle lights.")

## MULTIMEDIA COLLAGE

Collage can be one of the best open-ended art projects for kids. To start, this type of project can help you and your children reuse the vast piles of other art that they've created but that you haven't been able to toss. I start with this old artwork and add in a few standard supplies, and then I always love to throw in something unusual to see what creative use they'll come up with. Striped pipe cleaners become animal tails, buttons become building blocks, and so on. Sometimes our kids make three-dimensional collages and vertically build a sculpture upward. And sometimes they create collages that are flat depictions of things. Try to resist asking what they're making—it doesn't have to be anything, really. You just never know what kids are going to come up with when you give them simple supplies and little or no direction.

### Materials

- Thick cardboard cut into medium-sized rectangular pieces (about 6" x 9")—big enough to provide an ample collage area without creating something too heavy that will break
- A variety of collage materials—I like to recycle other art, such as pieces of a big painting, into collage supplies. I also like to include some tactile, manipulative supplies, such as textured foil paper or pipe cleaners. And Cam always likes something shiny too.





- Children's scissors strong enough to cut the collage materials (Or you can cut them in advance for younger children.)
- Brush-top bottles filled with glue or small containers of glue and paintbrushes

### Directions

Give each child a piece of cardboard, a brush, and make sure the glue and collage materials are within reach. Let them go, and see what they create!

### Additional Options

- Talk to your children about geometric mosaics and have them try making them with collage materials, creating a shape or a repeating color pattern.
- Have your child draw something and then fill it in with collage pieces.
- Collect items from nature or your pantry (for example, beans or pasta) and let the children use them to make organic collages.
- Make animal or monster collages using shapes and photos cut from magazines. (See an example on the blog by searching for "monster collages.")
- For older children working on letter and number recognition, provide a drawing that you've divided into sections and labeled with letters or numbers. Make a corresponding color code for the sections (for example, use red materials for *A* and purple materials for *B*) and have the children create a mosaic by number or letter.



## PAINT PRINTMAKING

The thing I love most about printmaking with paint is that it is incredibly easy to adapt the project for pretty much any age. Even toddlers can paint with fingerpaints (or even edible fingerpaints for the youngest ones) onto a surface and have an adult help them press paper to their painting to make a print. Plus older children can learn to make prints of more elaborate paintings they make. And, no big surprise, my kids love it in any form because it's generally a messy activity.

In addition, there's just something about being able to reproduce artwork in the form of printmaking that makes kids feel like real grown-up artists. When Kane was in prekindergarten, he decided that he was going to have a school fund-raiser with his fictional band, Team Kaboom. He and Cami (also a band member) wanted to make flyers for their event and hang them at school. Making prints was an excellent, low-tech way to make sure that all the flyers had at least the same background print (he wrote the fund-raiser information on each one himself). I was just trying to encourage his creativity and social consciousness but later learned that he really thought he was going to host the fund-raiser and had started inviting kids and teachers at school. In his mind, the flyers were real, and he was not happy to find out that we were hosting no such event.

### Materials

- Fingerpaints or tempera paints
- A hard, clean surface on which to paint—this can be a table, a place mat, the back of an old baking sheet, or even a sheet of acrylic





- Cotton swabs
- A brayer, foam roller, or sponge (With a sponge, which our kids like, you'll need to work a little harder to get an even layer of paint.)
- Thick paper
- A styrofoam tray (optional)
- A pen (optional)

### Directions

1. Place a small amount of paint on your surface and use the brayer to spread the paint into a thin layer. (Don't worry about using a brayer if your youngest are doing basic fingerpainting; they'll spread the paint around as they go.)
2. Let your children paint whatever they like, using either their fingers or cotton swabs as a brush.
3. Press a piece of paper on top of the painting, smoothing lightly over the surface.
4. Lift and see your print! Repeat by pressing with additional pieces of paper until the print is no longer clear.

### Additional Options

- Try printmaking with colored paper and black paint.
- Have older children sign and number their prints from each limited edition (for example: 15/20, Kane Green) as an artist would do.

- Recycle Styrofoam trays to use as a printmaking surface for slightly older children. Use a pen to scratch an image into the foam, roll the paint over it, and then press the paper on top.

## SIDEWALK CHALK PAINT

The kids and I loved doing this art activity when they were very young. Perhaps it's because it instantly brings me back to the wonderfulness of summer, but I also think it's because they were so completely and totally engrossed in getting messy with their art projects. It was really something to watch! I'd seen several different recipes for cornstarch sidewalk paint, and I decided to make it a thick consistency and see what the kids would do with it. I made several colors and gave both children small plastic cups of each to avoid competition and complaints of hogging.

### Materials

- 6 cups cornstarch
- 3 cups water
- 6 colors of washable tempera paint

### Directions

1. Working with one batch at a time, in a medium bowl, mix together 1 cup cornstarch with 1/2 cup water. Stir until the cornstarch is incorporated well. It will take a little muscle; the kids typically like to help with this.

### ADJUST FOR THE COLORS

Our recipe generally uses a 2:1 ratio of cornstarch to water, so if you'd like to make fewer or more colors than we did, just adjust your ingredients accordingly. For example, you will need 8 cups of cornstarch and 4 cups of water for eight different colors of paint.



2. Add several drops of one color of tempera paint. If you'd like the color to be brighter, add a little more. Mix until you get your desired color. Then transfer the colored paint to a smaller container for painting.
3. Repeat until you have six different colors of paint (or as many as you like).
4. Once you have all the sidewalk paint mixed, take your kids outside, hand it over, and watch out. We first did this project when the kids were really young (one and two-and-a-half years old). My children started off making small dribbles with paintbrushes onto the sidewalk, and they soon moved to pouring it out in big globs all over each other. Although I wished I had put the kids in their bathing suits, I encouraged their inclination to turn the art project into a sensory experience. They squished and swirled colors together and loved it so much that neither seemed bothered by the fact that they were being covered with a sticky mess. A plus of taking messy art outdoors is the actual cleanup itself. When you hose them down, the kids also think it's bonus water play. Don't worry; it washes out—even out of hair.

### Additional Options

- Help your kids use the chalk paint to mark outdoor games, such as hopscotch or tic-tac-toe.
- Hit the streets and chalk-mark around your neighborhood. Consider your neighbors and use your discretion! Someone on our street wrote "Look both ways!" on every corner, and I loved it. But not everyone will appreciate such things.
- Use the paint as a fun opportunity to practice and reinforce letters and numbers by having the kids trace templates you've already marked on the sidewalk.





## SPRAY-PAINTING ART

I'm all for keeping art projects simple, but something special happens when you hand your children each a spray bottle. You think they like glue? Watch their reaction when you give them a bottle full of paint and tell them to start spraying. They can't stop. This can be a very messy project—but it's worth it. It helps kids learn a variety of skills, including gross and fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination, and restraint (too much watery paint will rip the paper). Plus it is just an interesting, out-of-the-ordinary art project, and they'll love watching the different colors spread and diffuse throughout the filter.

The first time we tried this project, Kane kept going and going until we ran out of filters. He was a little man on a mission. But Cameron didn't quite have the coordination or strength to squeeze the handle of the bottle herself yet. Of course she didn't want any help, so I watched as she determinedly shook the spray bottle over the coffee filter to get the paint out. It worked, but she wasn't exactly getting the result she wanted. She eventually took the paintbrush and cup of watercolors I offered and painted away, happy to join in the project. She can now squeeze the bottle handle with the best of them, but it was important at that time for me to adapt the project for her so she didn't get frustrated. Even if you don't think about it beforehand, be willing to change a project so that it works well for each child's age.



## Materials

For each child:

- A small spray bottle
- Coffee filters (High-quality paper works best.)
- Liquid watercolors (washable preferred)
- A drop cloth or kraft paper

## Directions

1. Choose a work area knowing that paint will travel a short distance, and cover the area with a drop cloth or kraft paper.
2. Have older children help fill several spray bottles with different colors of liquid watercolors. (I like to do the fill-up over a container, which catches any overflow.)
3. Place coffee filters out on the work area, and let the kids spray away!

## Additional Options

- Is the thought of spraying paint inside your home making you break out in hives? Take it outside! Use the coffee filters, or hang up an old bedsheet or roll of paper and let your kids spray a big mural.
- Skip the paint altogether, and turn this activity into an art and science project. Use markers to color the coffee filters with a design. Then spray plain water onto the filters and watch the colors spread into a pretty watercolor look.
- You will undoubtedly find yourself with lots and lots of watercolored filters. Save them and string them together (either in a vertical stack or horizontally) to make an easy party garland.

## SPIN ART

I recall playing with a tiny spin-art machine when I was a young girl and being totally mesmerized by the gorgeous images that came into focus as the paper stopped spinning. There is something so magical about the result. However, as an adult, I'm routinely disappointed by the limits such prefabricated artistic gadgets present. I was incredibly excited to find projects using salad spinners to create the same effect. (You can find them at inexpensive prices.) Besides loving the element of surprise involved in spin art, children love the act of spinning itself—whirling the handle around faster and faster to get the paint to spin, and tinkering with paint amount, placement, and colors to achieve different results. Plus while mixing paint colors can often result in a lot of brown, spinning the colors almost always yields an amazingly multicolored end product. Of course, the product isn't necessarily the point, but this one can be really fun for kids who get easily frustrated if they don't make something they deem pretty. Think beyond the spinner, and work favorite stories into the activity. Our kids like to assign characters to certain colors and have them battle to see what color spins out on top.



## Materials

- A salad spinner (The ones with a hand crank instead of a pull cord work best.)
- Heavy-weight paper or poster board, cut into a size that will fit and lie relatively flat in the spinner
- Squeezable tempera paints (If you can't find prepackaged squeezable paints, mini condiment bottles make great paint containers.)
- Glitter (optional)
- Alternatives to paper, such as egg cartons or fabric (optional)

## Directions

1. Have the children place the piece of paper into the bottom of the spinner.
2. Let them squeeze different colors of paint onto the paper, first trying out just a few drops of several colors, and then adding more or less to achieve their desired result.
3. Put the top on and let them crank away! Once the spinner has safely stopped moving, open the top to reveal the painting.

## Additional Options

- Add some sparkle to your spinner by sprinkling in glitter after you add the paint. It will mix and dry with the paint to create a really pretty effect.

- Try a medium other than paper. We've used poster board heart cutouts and egg carton cups to make some really neat spin art. And I'd love to try to get an effect similar to tie-dyeing by spinning fabric paint onto fabric.
- In place of a salad spinner, create spin art by putting dots of paint on a round paper plate, turning it over on a piece of paper, and manually turning the plate to put the paint on the paper.

## SQUISH PAINTING

We are obsessed with squish painting in our home, and it's absolutely one of the most requested art projects from our kids. Similar to printmaking and spin art, the kids love the element of surprise in making each painting. You can try to plan out a design, but you never really know until after it's been squished what the finished art will look like. In my opinion, the fun process also happens to make some of the most gift-worthy, sophisticated art pieces (especially if you use metallic paint à la Andy Warhol's Rorschach prints). Whenever we break out this project, our entire living room floor is soon covered in a quilt of squish paintings left out to dry. Once the kids get going, they don't want to stop! Cami likes to look at the entire painting as one object or pattern (such as a butterfly or an airplane), whereas Kane likes to interpret it as a scene (frequently involving the defense and attack of some structure). Any way you look at it, they both have fun!





## Materials

- Medium-weight paper
- Squeezable tempera paints (If you can't find prepackaged squeezable paints, small condiment bottles make great paint containers.)

## Directions

4. Have the child fold the paper in half lengthwise so that a crease runs vertically from top to bottom. (This also helps children visualize the line of symmetry.) You can also prefold paper for very young kids.
5. Open the paper to lay it flat again, and allow kids to squeeze paints into whatever pattern they'd like. Sometimes ours try to make matching patterns on each side of the fold; sometimes they paint all over the whole paper randomly.
6. Fold the piece of paper closed, using the prepainting fold for guidance. Let your child squish and smooth the paper shut. Then open to see the finished design!

## Additional Options

- Try folding twice for a really unexpected result. After prefolding the paper vertically, fold it in half again along the width, creating four quadrants when you unfold the paper. After painting, fold along one line of symmetry to squish the paint. Open and refold along the second line.
- Add accessories, such as eyes or mustaches, to make monsters, dragons, animals, silly faces, and more!
- Spend some time examining a dried painting with your child and try to pick out shapes and pictures. Use a dark marker or pen to outline the shapes.
- Use the paintings as background art pages to write your own storybook.

## TAPE-RESIST PAINTING

Next to glue, tape is the most popular art supply in our home. I honestly can't make much sense out of it, but both kids get so excited if I say we are doing a project using tape. And letting them tear the pieces themselves is a must. So not surprisingly, they both love to make tape-resist painting, and they have ever since they were very young. Plus if you're looking for a time-consuming project, you can absolutely count on this one for the additional time it takes the kids to untape themselves after getting inevitably tangled as they work. Sometimes it's the little things about a project that make it so special.

We first tried our hand at tape-resist painting with watercolors when Cami was about a year old. Since the kids not only like to tear the pieces of tape to use themselves but also like to remove the tape pieces once they've finished painting, they ended up tearing a lot of holes

in the paper during the process. Cameron immediately got upset when she “ruined” her art, but Kane took it in stride and decided that the rips and holes were part of the art. (You end up learning a lot about your children’s personalities during many of these projects.)

Years later, we visited an exhibit on destructive art at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, which made both of them feel better that such a process could be an intentional way of making art. The first time we tried the tape-resist painting, though, was a good learning opportunity for me to recognize their different personalities and preferences. I realized that I could help Cameron learn to wait to remove the tape until the painting had dried a bit and we could pull it off slowly together. And it was good for Kane to see how to do it without being destructive. But he also knew that if he wanted to tear holes in his painting, that was fine. In my opinion, there is no wrong way to make art, and this was a great project for showing the kids that.

### Materials

- Heavy-weight white paper
- Tempera or watercolor paints
- Washi tape (or similar, light-adhesive tape that can be removed easily—painter’s tape is a good alternative)
- Glue, white crayon, or chalk (optional)





### Directions

1. Have the kids tear pieces of tape in advance and then stick the tape pieces to the paper in whatever design they wish.
2. Allow the kids to paint over the taped paper, encouraging them to cover the white space (so that the resist pattern actually shows up).
3. Let the painting dry almost completely, and then let your children (with appropriate assistance given their age and temperament) remove the tape pieces to reveal the resist!

### Additional Options

- Instead of making a random pattern, use the tape to outline a more realistic shape.
- Use the negative space from the tape to write a message and turn the painting into a card for someone special.
- Try other forms of resist painting, using glue, white crayon, or white chalk to draw a design or image. Then paint over it (once dried, for the glue) to reveal the resist.

