



Squish, Sort, Paint & Build

Over 200
Easy
Learning
Center
Activities

By Sharon MacDonald

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Illustrated by Rebecca Jones



gryphon house

Beltsville, Maryland

This book is dedicated to
Ariel, Victor, Megan, Jeremy
and all the other four year olds
who taught me so much
about teaching.

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Published by Gryphon House, Inc.
10726 Tucker Street, Beltsville, MD 20705

World Wide Web: <http://www.ghbooks.com>

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cover: Graves Fowler Associates
Text Illustrations: Rebecca Jones

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

MacDonald, Sharon. 1942-

Squish, sort, paint & build : over 200 easy learning center activities /
by Sharon MacDonald ; illustrated by Rebecca Jones.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-87659-180-2

1. Early childhood education--Activity programs. 2. Creative activities
and seat work. 3. Classroom learning centers. I. Title.

LB1139.35.A37M355 1996

372.21--dc20

96-9099
CIP

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Dear Teachers,

Although I have used centers for over 25 years, when I first set up a whole classroom where all the teaching was done through centers, I was a bit anxious. I set up my classroom in centers anyway, bit my lip and pressed forward with not much more than hope. The results surprised me. Centers worked! But not for very long. Why? After about a month, the children wanted change. It took me awhile to accept that centers needed to be revamped, revised. I concluded that change needed to happen often if centers were to work.

I also discovered that I often needed to justify the center approach I was using. It was noisier. The classroom often appeared to others to be in a perpetual state of motion. Structure is so often what we think we want to see. In a center-based classroom one must look closely if one is to find structure. The questioning, however, was good. It urged me to find out more about centers.

I spent a lot of time studying what children learned through a center-based approach to teaching. Then, I looked at the activities and tried to conclude what children could learn using the activity. That was good too, because what I found encouraged me even more.

Over the years I have experimented with many activities and ideas that could be shaped into a center-based approach. The activities and ideas really work. I know they do. I have used them all. I think you will find that they will enrich your classroom, enhance the learning that takes place there and they will excite your children, energizing them and you. I am certain they will add variety to your work. Enjoy trying them.



Sharon MacDonald

How to Use This Book

Helpful Tips to Make Centers Manageable and Child-directed

A good rule of thumb is to have two and one-half activities for each child working at the center. For example, if you have four children able to work at the center, you will need ten activities. This seems to be the magic number to keep children working productively and actively involved in what they are doing. If you have too many activities, the children get frustrated, feeling they won't be able to get to all of them. They may work too quickly and not enjoy the full benefit of the activities. On the other hand, if you have too few activities, it seems to create a battle zone over who gets which activity and when. Change the activities when the children seem to lose interest. If an activity goes unused for several days, it is time to change it. If an activity is popular, however, it needs to remain in the center for as long as it is used. If children are not interested in a particular activity, leave it out for a day or two then put it away. Bring it out 30 days later. You may be surprised at the result.

Locate each center in an appropriate place in the classroom. Some centers, such as the Construction Center, need large open spaces for building. The Library Center requires quiet spaces for reading and the Pouring Center needs to be located near a water source.

A good center management idea is to place each activity in a basket or dish pan with all the necessary component pieces included. Remember the activities in this book are open-ended; there is no right way to do any of them. For example, if the activity is a collage of shapes, then the basket containing the activity materials needs to contain a resealable bag with the paper shapes in them, a small bottle of glue, paper plates and a picture direction (rebus) that provides instructions to the children. They have everything they need to complete the project independently.

Use rebuses (step-by-step picture directions) as much as possible. They show children how to use the various materials and equipment properly. These simply drawn pictures invite the children to read along and to work at their own pace. Many of the illustrations that accompany the activities in this book can be easily converted into rebuses by adding written directions to the picture. Consider the ability level of the class when adding the words. Including activities with rebuses in centers is like having a second teacher in the classroom. The children become so completely involved in what they are doing that often they are not aware of the passage of time and of the presence of others in the classroom.

Make plans for clean up in advance. Have cleaning supplies handy: a broom, a dust pan, a small wet mop and newspaper for the children to cover their workspaces before they start. A garbage can, a wet sponge and smocks are also useful. This preparation saves you lots of headaches down the road when a small "disaster" occurs.

The Art Center

The Art Center draws children to it like no other center in the classroom. It is a magic place where children find a place to express forms, images and structures. For many, it is the first time they will have the chance to work with their own unique ideas. Because the Art Center is for exploration—not necessarily for creating a finished product—children can work for a short time or long time, depending on each child’s ability and temperament. They can choose the materials best suited for their ideas, their unique hand sizes and their moods or feelings at the time. When you encourage young children to experiment with a wide variety of art materials, they make their own experiences. It is empowering for them.

Art is about encouraging creativity in children. Open-ended art activities and materials give children opportunities to develop their own ideas and use their own designs. In doing this, they develop creative thinking skills and they learn to problem solve. In addition, language, reading, writing, math and motor skills develop while children are in the Art Center. Social skills and science skills also occur when children are left alone to find out things for themselves. Let’s look at a sample of the skills that can be learned in the Art Center.

Language Development: Speaking and Listening

Talking and listening are vital skills. In the Art Center children talk and listen spontaneously when sharing thoughts, ideas and problem solving. Think of all the things there are to talk about when children work with playdough, for example: how it feels, smells, goes together, falls apart; big pieces, little pieces, how flat, or how soft it is. When children are painting at the easel, words such as runny, sparkle, slick, smooth, ooze and many others are used and explored. New vocabulary is developing. Words about gluing—sticky, stuck, gooey and tacky—evolve when children have dozens of opportunities to manipulate a glue bottle and work, sticking things together. Children want to talk to their friends and to share their discoveries.

Language Development: Reading and Writing

Reading and writing occur here, too. Children are encouraged to sign their works of art, just like famous artists sign theirs. Blank books are available in this Center in case a child wants to write a story about a painting he has created. Children are encouraged to make comments about their work and to write their thoughts and ideas on paper. The writings can be attached to their paintings. Books about famous artists' works are available in the Center so the children can become familiar with different artists' styles. Children interact with print in the Art Center by using rebuses to give them directions. These picture directions simply get children started using the materials. The children work the activity by "reading" the rebus.

Physical Development

When children cut with scissors, paint with brushes, pound playdough, open glue bottles and scribble with crayons, they are developing hand-eye coordination, hand manipulation and pincher control. When children work at the easel and move through the Art Center, they are learning about their bodies in space; and about using both sides of their bodies to accomplish a task.

Math

Math occurs naturally when children use, repeat and extend patterns, as with a stringing activity, for example: one piece of straw, one paper circle, one piece of straw, one paper circle and so on. Patterns are basic to math. Gluing precut, geometrical, paper shapes, painting on them and stringing them together teach children basic geometry. When they work with playdough or clay, children are exposed to part/whole relationships, with more/less and with thick/thin. There is no need to have a math lesson. The activities themselves become the math teacher.

Science

Science can be a part of the Center when children mix and make their own colors. Children can use the scientific method while working. They can state the problem or question: "What will happen if I paint with the blue over the yellow?" They can state their hypotheses-predictions. "I think it will turn green." They can test this by painting as they have stated. When they observe the finished work, they compare results to see if their hypotheses-predictions were valid. This is an easy way to teach science. When children glue glitter to paper, they observe causality (if I do this, then that happens). The world becomes less mysterious. Magical thinking, a common phenomenon in young children, is replaced by knowledge about how things happen. Gravity, for example, can be explored as the paint runs down the page, while the children are painting. They also can learn about the properties of matter when they work with the various materials that are available to them in the Art Center.

Social Development

Children learn to share materials, work together on projects and to take turns doing activities. The Center offers children the chance to make choices and decisions for themselves. As children come to the Center, choose an activity “read” the picture directions, work the activity and return it to the shelf, they are practicing good social skills. They develop a sense of self-confidence, as well, by doing things for themselves. They are in charge.

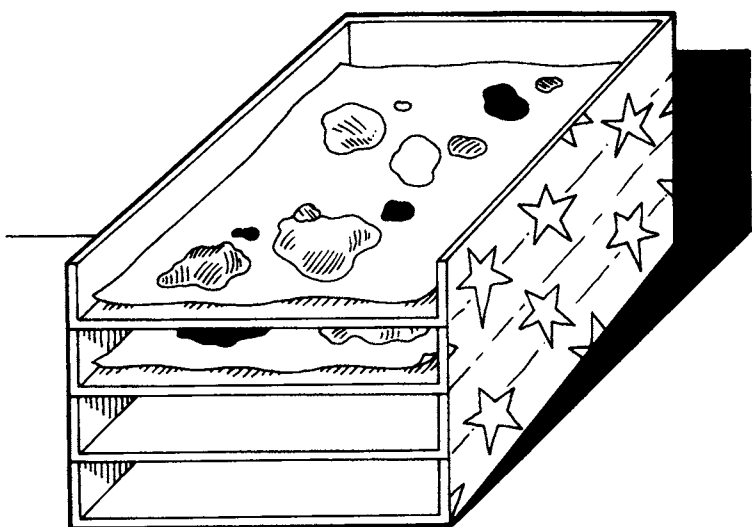
Creating the Art Center

Since we know how important a well planned, well organized and well managed Art Center is, we need to look at how we go about making it a place where learning will take place. The first consideration is deciding where to put the Art Center in the classroom. The ideal spot is close to a source of water and a sink. If the water source is down the hall, have two dishpans: one with a little soapy water and the other with clear water. Add paper towels, and you have a place to prewash the children’s hands before heading down the hall with them to finish the job in the bathroom. Have a small bucket, with a soapy sponge, for spills. If you don’t have a sink, include a couple of liquid trash buckets. These would allow the children to toss their liquid trash. These would be emptied by the teacher at the end of the day.

The second consideration is the traffic pattern in your classroom. Children walking through the Art Center on the way to the Block Center invites disaster. So, locate the Art Center away from the main traffic flow.

The third consideration is a good light source. A window close by is optimum; it makes the Art Center a more inviting area, but it is not essential. If a window is not available, place the Center where you have the best light.

Fourth, is the floor covering. Tile is the best, but if you have carpeting, use a shower curtain-liner or a painter’s drop cloth to cover the areas most likely to take the most spills and messes. It is not ideal, but it works to protect the carpet.



The last consideration is the furniture. You will need a table and chairs on which the children can sit and work and a two-sided, free-standing easel. Place the easel on a shower curtain-liner beneath the easel and the drying rack. You also will need low, open shelving to house your selection of art activities from which the children will choose. A place to dry all of those creations will be helpful, too. The best method, that takes up the least amount of space, is a multilevel box construction. Get five or six, low profile cardboard boxes at the grocery store. Remove the same side of each box and stack them one on top of the other. Have all the removed sides facing the same direction. Tape the boxes together at the sides and back. The box construction can be covered with decorative

self-adhesive paper, providing more stability. Now, you have a number of vertical shelves on which to slide the children's "gluey" creations for drying (see illustration).

Self-directed Activities

Because you want the children to make choices about the materials with which they work—the media that interests them—offer them a wide variety of activities from which to choose. The ultimate goal is for the children to develop the skills discussed earlier, a variety of activities is necessary to attract each child to the Center. The reason for the diversity is that some will learn to use scissors by cutting paper strips, others by cutting magazine pictures and still others by cutting playdough.

A good rule of thumb is to have two and one-half activities for each child working at the Art Center table. One or two children can also be in the center working at the easel. For example, if you have four children able to work at the table, you will need to have ten choices of activities on the open shelving from which the children can choose. Does this sound like a lot of work for a busy teacher? Well, it really isn't. Actually once the Art Center is set up, the activities stay out for as long as the children are choosing them. That could be for two weeks, two months or maybe the whole year. Replace them with new activities as needed. Teacher time is reduced, over the long run, as the children interact with and learn through the environment.

Another good management idea is to place each art activity in a basket with all the necessary component pieces included. Remember these activities are open-ended. There is not a right way to do any of them. Let's take an example. If you are doing a shape collage activity, and it is a choice on the Art Center shelf, then the basket containing the activity needs to contain all the components needed to complete a shape collage. You would have a resealable bag with the paper shapes in them, a small bottle of glue, paper plates and a picture direction that provides instructions to the children. They have everything they need to complete the project.

Clean Up

Make plans for clean up in advance. Have cleaning implements handy: a broom, a dust pan, a small wet mop and newspaper for the children to cover their workspaces before they start. A garbage can, a wet sponge, and smocks are useful, too, for messy choices. These preparations save you lots of headaches down the road when a small "disaster" occurs.

Learning, through a carefully planned and prepared environment means that we must look carefully at each activity placed in the Center. You might want to use the checklist that follows to see if your Art Center activity choices enhance creativity.

Creativity Checklist

- ✓ Can the child do something with the activity? Is it hands-on?
- ✓ Can the child use her or his own ideas, thoughts and methods?
- ✓ Are there opportunities for discovery?
- ✓ Is the activity meaningful to the child and does it fit into his or her world?
- ✓ Is the activity age, developmentally and individually appropriate?
- ✓ Is the activity self-directed?
- ✓ Who does most of the work, the child or the teacher?
- ✓ Can the child work for a short time or for a long time?

All of the activities require that the child prepare the workspace for use. After the child selects the activity to be used, newspaper is placed on the workspace by the child. The child puts on a smock. After completing the activity, all activity components are washed and the basket containing all the materials is returned to the shelf for use by other children. The newspaper is tossed and the painting, or other artwork, is set aside to dry. It is very important that the children learn these expectations and perform these tasks with a minimum of teacher intervention.

Useful Art Center Additions

These additions add interest to the Art Center activities. Substitutions and additions of these items offer variety and change.

Things to add to one pint of mixed tempera paint:

2 Tbs. corn syrup	to make it slimy
1/2 tsp. sand	to make it gritty
1 Tbs. flour	to make it lumpy
1 tsp. glycerin	to make it slippery
1 Tbs. sawdust	to make it rough
1/2 cup sugar	to make it shiny
1/2 cup salt	to make it sparkly (use this immediately)
1/4 cup liquid starch	to make it creamy

Things to use as bases for art projects:

newspaper	meat trays
fingerpaint paper	cardboard
shoe box tops	construction paper
sandpaper	paper sacks
leftover laminating film	computer paper
egg carton lids	aluminum foil
toilet paper cylinders	fast food cartons
paper plates	wrapping paper
large junk mail envelopes	

Things to cut:

playdough	old magazines
straws	hay
crepe paper streamers	paper strips
meat trays	catalogs
old postcards	old placemats

Things to use for paintbrushes:

sponges	feathers
twigs	leaves (ferns are best)
whisk brooms	strings tied on sticks
dish mops	roll-on bottles
pot scrubbers	feather dusters
squeeze bottles	cotton swabs
toothbrushes	chop sticks
paddle balls	vegetable brushes
paint rollers	straws
eyedroppers	cotton balls
fly swatters	scrubbing pads

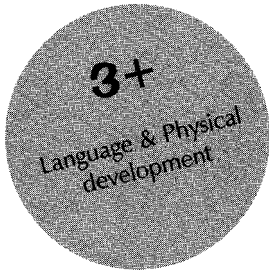
Things to use instead of paint:

food coloring and water	watercolors
Epsom salt	watery glue and crayon shavings
toothpaste	watery glue and sawdust
Kosher salt	whipped white detergent, such as Ivory

Things to use for printing:

wood scraps	leaves
empty spools	toy cars
jar lids	box lids
kitchen gadgets	corks
shells	cookie cutters
fake fur	dominoes
hands, fingers and feet	pot scrubbers
keys	large buttons
marker caps	sponges

Cotton Ball Painting



Children develop and practice pincher control (thumb and first finger use) and fine motor control with this activity and, they experiment with texture and color.

Materials

- ✓ basket
- ✓ cotton balls
- ✓ assorted paper
- ✓ paint
- ✓ newspaper
- ✓ resealable sandwich bag
- ✓ 3 clothespins
- ✓ 3 small margarine tubs

What to do

Insert many cotton balls in a resealable sandwich bag.

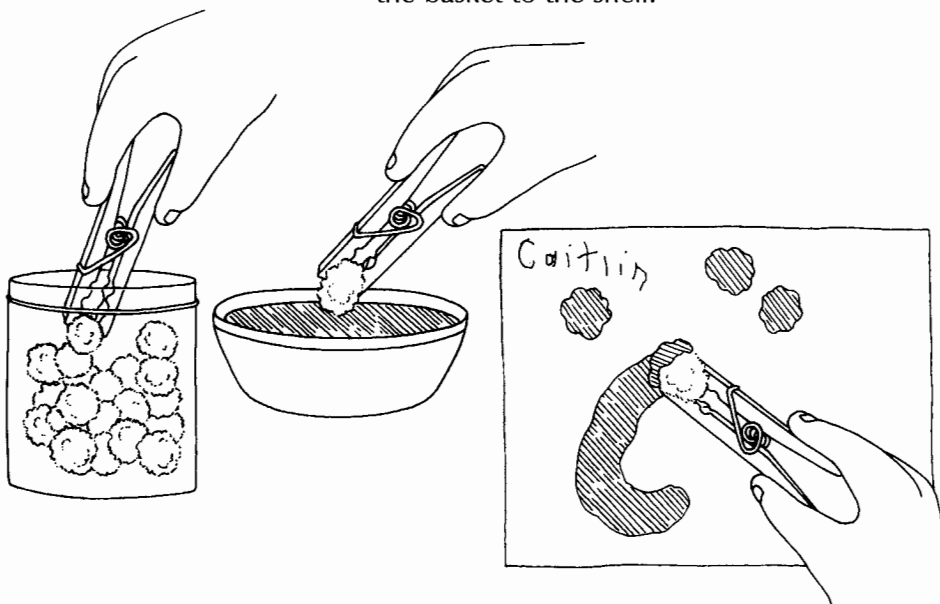
Have lots of paper available (try different kinds of paper like grocery bag paper, old manila folders and envelopes that have been cut at the edge and laid flat).

Add three clothespins and a rebus to the basket; place the basket on the shelf.

On another shelf, accessible to the children, have three, small margarine tubs into which you have poured small amounts of paint (keep extra paint handy to restock the tubs).

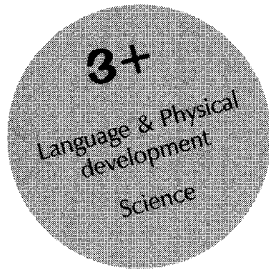
The child selects the activity and places the three tubs on the workspace.

The child squeezes the clothespins to capture a cotton ball, dips it into the paint and paints (or prints) with the cotton ball on paper. When the child is finished exploring the activity, she tosses the cotton balls and newspaper, returns the tubs to the shelf and puts her creation aside to dry. She returns the basket to the shelf.



Note: Your local pharmacist tosses away vast amounts of cotton every day. Ask her to save it for you. Cut the cotton into small pieces for this activity. You also can use pompoms just as you would use cotton balls in this activity.

Feather Painting



This is a favorite activity of children, and it offers many opportunities for them to problem solve. Each child will approach the task differently.

Materials

- ✓ basket
- ✓ turkey feathers
- ✓ small flat tray
- ✓ newspaper
- ✓ variety of paper
- ✓ paint

What to do

Place one turkey feather, lots of paper (I like to use paper cut from brown grocery bags) and the rebus in a basket.

Place a small tray of paint (dark brown paint seems to offer the most interesting contrast on brown grocery bags) on a shelf easily accessible to the children. Be sure to mix plenty of paint to replenish the tray.

The child places the small tray of paint on the workspace.

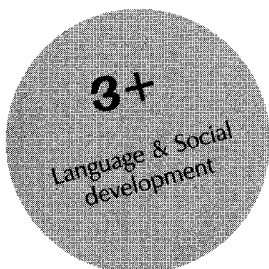
When children use this activity you see each child work a little differently. The children dip the feather, sometimes the pointed end, sometimes the feathered end, and they draw or paint with the feather.

Some of the children learn they can make interesting designs when they slap the feathered end onto the paper (they also learn that sometimes small paint spots appear all around the workspace and on their faces). They learn, also, that a sponge is necessary to clean it up.

When a child has finished, part of the job is to put back the paint tray and wash and dry the feather.

It is exciting watching children explore and discover with this activity. Try other types of feathers and compare the results.

Follow the Leader Painting



This activity helps children develop language skills and it gives them a structured, useful reason to talk to each other. Also, it makes them aware of how important clear directions are and how equally important it is to listen.

Materials

- ✓ easel
- ✓ paper
- ✓ paint and brushes

What to do

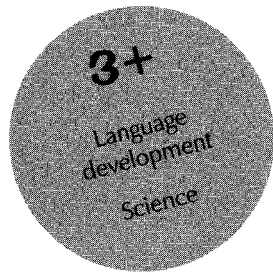
When two children have chosen to paint at the two-sided easel, have one child be the leader and the other the follower.

The leader starts to paint and describes what she is doing and what color she is using while she is working.

As she works and describes, the other child follows the leader's directions trying to do exactly what the leader says without looking at the leader's work.

Have the children reverse roles. This is very challenging and lots of fun, especially when the children compare their two finished works of art afterwards.

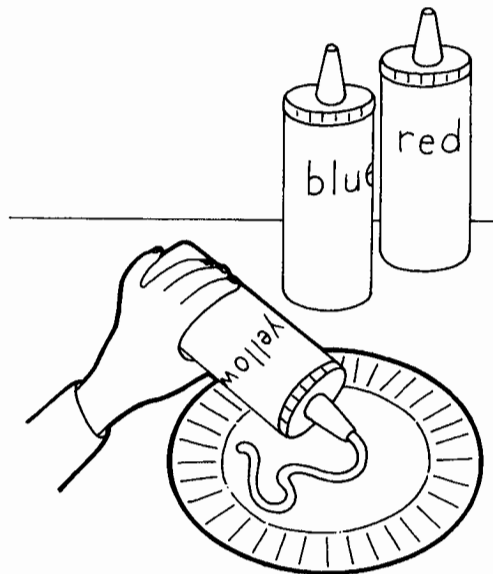
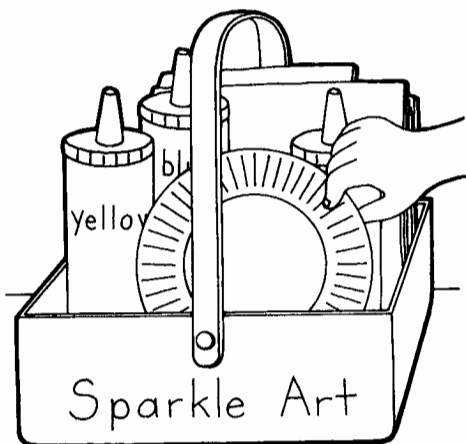
Sparkle Art



This activity invites children to experiment with pastel colors and with depth as a quality of art (overcoming the flatness that exemplifies their work by bringing a third dimension into play).

Materials

- ✓ basket
- ✓ plastic squeeze bottles
- ✓ measuring cup
- ✓ salt
- ✓ paper plates or sheets of cardboard
- ✓ newspaper
- ✓ bowl and spoon
- ✓ flour
- ✓ food coloring



What to do

Collect three plastic squeeze bottles that have caps (like ketchup or mustard bottles).

Mix together in a bowl, one cup of all-purpose flour, one cup of salt and one cup of water colored with food coloring. Make three different color mixtures.

Stir the mixtures well and pour each color into one of the squeeze bottles. Save the extra colored water for use later to replenish the plastic bottles. If the mixture is too moist, add more flour.