These suggestions are primarily for classroom teachers and homeschoolers who are looking for advice on teaching painting to children. Art teachers may also find the following tips of interest.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO PAINT

Painting, like drawing, is so fundamental to art that it is hard to conceive of an art education program as complete that doesn't provide children with frequent opportunities to work with paint. In addition to being a truly expressive medium, painting provides an excellent opportunity for the development of personal symbolic communication. Children often communicate things in painting that they cannot communicate verbally. Children may, for instance, reveal in their paintings certain aspects of their lives that they are attending to emotionally which they may not be able to speak about in public. In this way, painting can be a cathartic experience for children by enabling them to “release” their emotions. But, painting is also a medium that requires children to analyze, organize, and synthesize their experience. In short, painting requires them to “think.”

Very young children may draw what they know, but it is said that they paint what they feel.

-Rob Barnes

In painting, children must think about what they are going to paint, how they are going to paint it, and whether the image they paint is complete. Painting, then, is of special value to children as a means for vivid representation of their innermost feelings and ideas.

Most children enjoy painting, partly because paint is such an unpredictable medium and one that is full of surprises. Brushing wet color onto a surface and moving it around is such a gratifying and immediate experience that children usually show great excitement when learning they will get to paint in art class. For some adults and teachers, however, painting is a “messy” project and one that requires too much time to cleanup afterwards. It doesn’t have to be that way. If certain preparations are made beforehand, painting can be a richly rewarding experience for both the children and the teacher.

Children should wear smocks and stand at easels when painting. These easels are made from cardboard boxes.
PREPARING FOR PAINTING

To avoid the feeling that painting is too messy for the classroom, the teacher should spend some time preparing the necessary materials and working spaces for painting activity. A few appropriate preparations include:

- Covering the painting surfaces (desk tops and tables) with newspaper.
- Make sure that there is enough room in the aisles so that children can move around the room smoothly.
- Having a large sponge, plenty of paper towels and a bucket of water ready in case of accidents.
- Making sure that everyone is wearing a smock that adequately covers their clothing.
- Selecting a flat drying space for the finished works (e.g., on the floor along a wall).
- Setting up painting stations around the room with a full selection of colors and a quart-size container of water for cleaning brushes during the painting activity. Children should be assigned to the nearest station where they can pour the paint they need into pie tins or styrofoam egg cartons.
- Appointing monitors to collect the brushes and wash them (with soap in warm water and leave them to dry with the bristles up in a container) when the painting activity is finished.

TYPES OF PAINT

Typically, two types of paint are used in elementary art classes: tempera and watercolor. Although both are water base paints, each has its particular characteristics that take time to learn and master. Generally speaking, tempera is a medium for all grades (K-6) while watercolor is used more often in the upper grades (3-6).

TEMPRA PAINT: Tempera paint is opaque, meaning that when yellow is painted over another color it will remain yellow if the color beneath was dry. Children should have the primary colors (red, yellow and blue) available to them along with black and white. They should be shown how to mix colors (to make the secondary colors) and how to make tints and shades of a color by adding white or black. The best brushes for tempera painting are those with flat, stiff bristles. When the painting activity is finished, paint jars should be covered with their own lids after the rims have been sponge-cleaned.

WATERCOLOR PAINT: Watercolor paint is transparent, meaning that when yellow is painted over blue it will appear green where the two colors overlap. Watercolor paints come in tubes or as a tray of cakes, which is more economical for the classroom. Art teachers usually provide each child with a tray of watercolors consisting of a set of eight colors (or more) with a small camel hair brush. A good lesson to introduce upper-elementary students to the variety of ways of working with watercolor paints is to have them divide their paper (12" X 18") into six areas in which they experiment with the following techniques:

Make Color Shades and Tones—In the first square, have students try adding black to a color; mix color complements (e.g., red and green); add water or lots of pigment; or mix a color with an adjoining color (e.g., red and orange).

Try Different Brushstrokes—In the next square, have students see what happens when they point or flatten the tip of the brush; add lots of water to the brush or dry it out.
Lift Paint from the Surface—Next, have students paint the third square with "watery" paint and then blot it lightly with sponges or paper towels to create a texture.

Add Paint in Unique Ways—In the fourth square, have students try splattering, dripping or swabbing the paint on with different tools such as q-tips, sponges and various sized brushes.

Practice Painting Washes—In this square, have students paint two or three areas of light colors (e.g., yellow, orange and red) and then, when semi-dry, overlap these colors with another color (e.g., blue) to see what changes occur.

Try a Resist Method—In the last square, have students draw lines using light-colored crayons or by laying waxed paper over the square and drawing with the end of the brush. Next, have them paint a dark color over the top of their lines to see what happens.

Keep in mind that these are simply techniques and that the purpose of having children learn them is so that they may choose to use them in future paintings. If desired, these experiments can be cut into shapes, rearranged and mounted to form interesting abstract compositions.

WHAT TO PAINT?

During the first months of the school year it is recommended that the entire class paint the same subject or topic. Once children have shown they can work with paint, the teacher might provide two or three topics to choose from or arrange different still-lifes around the room from which to paint. During the final months, it may be desirable to allow each child to choose and perhaps research (explore and gather source materials) his or her own subject to paint.

A few topics for beginning painters include, My Family, Our Neighbors, My Best Friend, I'm Going to Bed, I'm Eating Breakfast, I'm Climbing a Tree, Make Believe Animals, I'm Walking in the Rain, Going to Disneyland, My Pet, Watching a Parade, Trees in a Storm, and so on. Older and more experienced painters prefer working with topics that center around narrative content, visual description and expressive themes. For instance, older children might be asked to respond in painting to questions like, “What do you and your friends do for fun?” or “What's your favorite sport?”

"MY DOG ELMO"
This first grader was inspired by seeing artists' paintings of people with their pets.
Older children might also enjoy painting from class models dressed in various costumes or from a still life set up in the classroom consisting of objects that they selected and arranged themselves. Once children have acquired some mastery with painting, they should be given opportunities to use brushwork and color for more expressive purposes such as in depicting a “stormy sea” or a “noisy city.”

**ARTISTS TO STUDY**

Look at the paintings of Pablo Picasso, Georges Seurat, Claude Monet, Jackson Pollack, Georgia O'Keeffe, Vincent van Gogh, Carmen Lomas Garza as well as other artists. In discussing a painting, children might be asked questions like, “How do you think the artist applied the paint in this work?” “How would you describe the colors in this paintings?” “How does this painting compare to the last one we saw?”

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Teachers interested in obtaining additional assistance on teaching painting to children may find the following books and websites helpful:

**Books**

**Websites**
*Crayola Art Techniques—Watercolors* (www2.crayola.com/educators/techniques/watercolors.cfm)
*Crayola Art Techniques—Tempera* (www2.crayola.com/educators/techniques/tempera_paint.cfm)
*Red, Yellow, Blue* (www.accessart.org.uk/colour/start.html)