

Know your colours?



When people reel off the short list of what children should know to be 'ready for school', along with 'write their name', goes 'know their colours'. Not 'know their fruits' or 'know their vegetables' - both of which might be more useful - but know their colours.

The colour challenge

Here's a challenge for you then: could you honestly - without looking them up - find these colours in a paint shop?

Carmine, sinopia, vermillion, raw umber, burnt umber, heliotrope, ochre, chamoisee, cinereous, puce, chartreuse, celadon, cerulean, burnt sienna, magenta...

No, I couldn't either, even though I am an artist and do know some of them.

How do you learn your colours?

Children learn their colours the same way as they learn their fruits and their vegetables, by putting two and two together. When you pick up a banana you ask the child, "Would you like some banana?" and they put the name together with the object. Or, when you are serving dinner you enquire, "One or two brussels sprouts?" They see the object and you give them the name for it. Learning the names of colours works in the same way, even though colour is not an object.

"Bring me those red socks please, they will match your red gloves."

"Nana knitted you that heliotrope jersey but it is too big for you just yet."

"This colour brown is called burnt sienna - it's my favourite."

"I love your new jarmies with the violet owls on them."

Children know their colours when...

When a child can put the right paint brush back into the right pot of paint they know their colours. If they do not know the names of the colours it is because they have not heard them often enough, from you, in a context that enabled them to put two and two together.

How not to learn your colours

For some weird reason many adults subject children to their version of Master Mind by asking them questions, questions, questions. Holding up an object and asking, "What colour is this?" is not the way to teach colours (or anything else). You could successfully teach learning anxiety, but there isn't one child who can learn their colours by the 'master mind method'.

Let them ask their own questions

Dr Rangimarie Turuki Rose Pere, when talking about her education, remembers the shock of having, for the first time, a pakeha* teacher. Rose was eight at that first meeting. What shocked her was the teacher asked questions that he already knew the answers to. Her maori teachers never ever asked children questions unless they didn't know the answers to them themselves. They believed the children might be able to give them the answers to the 'big stuff'.

If you have had experience with young children, you will know that sometimes they come out with the 'big stuff' and you wonder where they get it from. "Out of the mouths of babes".

Describe, describe, describe

Children will learn their colours with ease when you give them the names as you describe the beauty in their world, "Look at the way the sky goes from a pale turquoise all the way up to the deepest navy blue". Children who are lucky enough to have adults speaking to them like this, from the beginning, learn their colours the same way they learn about quinces and aubergines. Isn't aubergine a colour?

Pennie Brownlee. April 2013

* A pakeha is a New Zealander of European ancestry



Painting by Susana Ragel