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All cultures and communities feel a need to develop artistic traditions. These traditions may be as ancient as myths and storytelling, or inherently contemporary, such as jump rope rhymes and children's songs that parody popular television shows. Old or new, artistic traditions serve a number of purposes:

- They foster a sense of group belonging;
- They create a shared framework of understanding for productive communication;
- They help groups reflect on basic life questions and concerns;
- They make life interesting, creating beauty and fun in unexpected places; and
- They exemplify ingenuity, often making creative use of pre-existing resources.

As parents, we want the best for our children, which includes exposing them to a rich range of art forms: dance, music, visual arts, theater, creative writing...the list goes on. One of the best ways to interest children in art is to help them explore connections between their own life experiences and the artistic processes of others. Most children already are artists who practice a significant range of art forms—it's just that we as adults have difficulty recognizing children's art because we have forgotten the extent to which art is a fundamental human impulse that is part of everyday life.

Getting Started: Talking with your children about the games that they play is a wonderful way to begin exploring folk arts with them. Games encompass all artistic disciplines:

- sidewalk chalk drawings and finger-painting are visual art;
- parody songs are a combination of music, poetry, and creative composition;
- forts and dollhouses are design arts;
- puppetry, dress-up, and magic shows are theater;
- folded paper fortune-tellers, lanyards, and costume-making are craft; and
- clapping games, cheers, jump rope, and bicycle tricks are creative movement.

Ask your children to teach you the games that they play with their friends. As you learn more about their play-worlds, try to find out as much as you can about their aesthetics.

Most children spend hours practicing their favorite forms of play. Ask your children what makes a given game "good" and what the standards of excellence are that players strive for. They will probably appreciate your interest and tell you, in great detail, things about their pastimes that you never knew. This conversation will also create an opening for you to teach them about your childhood games. Together you can compare similarities and differences, discussing play aesthetics in detail.

Venturing Out Into Your Local Community: The beauty of exploring folk arts with your children is that traditional arts provide a dynamic framework for meeting lots of people, learning about a wonderful array of cultures, and experiencing sophisticated subject matter in unforgettable ways. For example, children who watch a master craftsman temper a piece of iron might see him demonstrate how the super-heated metal loses its magnetic field—rendering a difficult science concept both memorable and meaningful. When you and your children look for folk artists in your community, you help the children develop a curiosity about the world around them that is fundamental to lifelong learning. What festivals take place in your town, county, or region? You can find out about these events by looking in the newspaper, contacting your state arts council, or calling a local historical society.

Pull out a calendar and go through it with your children. What dates are special? Birthdays? Religious observances? Family reunions? Local festivals? You and your children might want to make a community calendar: photograph people and events, select the best shots, write captions, and work with your local photocopier to "publish" a calendar that you give as gifts to friends and family.

You and your children may want to document the traditions of your family and your neighbors. Ask friends and family about their often-told stories, handmade objects, songs, and dances. You might even want to make a community traditions video documentary with your children. You could hold a premiere screening of the video production in your living room—complete with popcorn and autographs.

Don't forget that cooking is also an art. Foodways are the most enduring tradition in any family, regional or ethnic group, persisting long after community members have forgotten old country language, dances, and other rituals. What foods are unique to your family, your community, or to the cultures of your neighbors? You may want to document these delicacies with your children, creating a community or family cookbook that includes photographs and oral histories.

Every community has special artistic traditions, but some traditional artists are so good that they become revered as "folk masters." Each year the National Endowment for the Arts honors a select group of traditional artists through its National Heritage Fellowships program. What kinds of artists have received this award? John Jackson, Piedmont blues guitarist; Eppie Archuleta, Latina weaver from the San Luis Valley of Colorado; and New Hampshire split ash basket maker Newt Washburn are among the past winners. National Heritage Fellows include artists from both urban and rural communities, recognizing master traditional artists in every region of the United States. It's possible that one of these master artists may live in or close to your community.

Visit our Internet site with your child and find out which past award winners live in your state <http://arts.endow.gov/Archive/Features6/allheritage.html>. Once you've found these artists in cyberspace, try to find them in person—they may be performing at local gatherings or selling their artwork in local stores.

All these project ideas are rich with educational possibilities. Encourage your children's teachers to strengthen school-community connections by incorporating folk arts into their ongoing lesson plans. A range of Folk Arts and Education resources are currently available on the Internet, including the National Endowment for the Arts publication, ***Folk Arts in the Classroom: Changing the Relationship Between Schools and Communities*** <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/db/cx/tskforce>, and the Library of Congress, American Folklife Center's ***Teacher's Guide to Folklife Resources for K-12 Classrooms*** <gopher://marvel.loc.gov/00/research/reading.rooms/folklife/bibs/teachers>. The Smithsonian Institution, Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies (202-287-3424) also produces a number of high-quality educational materials. For more information about current Folk Arts and Education resources, contact the National Task Force on Folk Arts and Education, 609 Johnston Place, Alexandria, VA 22031.

If we take the time to stop, look, question, and listen, we discover that art is all around us in the form of folk arts. The process of exploring folk arts with our children helps us rediscover the fact that our families, neighbors, and communities constitute rich learning environments that are authentic and engaging.