INTRODUCTION

FOR THOSE OF US lucky enough to have grandchildren who figure prominently in our lives, moments that take our breath away are common. As I watched my three-year-old granddaughter spend some of her post-nap burst of energy jumping up and down on a miniature trampoline, with a grin that goes from ear to ear, I chuckled with my own delight. She moves with obvious excitement at being able to jump with abandon, knowing that a balance bar will keep her steady for the split seconds that her stockinged feet leave the surface. Jumping for the joy of it. It must feel pretty close to flying.

This isn't going to sound right, but frankly I experience just as much pleasure from being told, as she looked at the food on her plate a few minutes later, “I don't like Brussels sprouts.” I am delighted because only a few short months ago she might have simply pushed them away when her mom put them in front of her. The full sentences that now emerge regularly as part of our conversations—despite occasional needs for interpretation—are part of the marvel of children this age. “A great miracle in childhood is the emergence of language without explicit instruction” is the way that child speech pathologist Diane Zimmerman puts it.1

The part of early language development that I've known since my own children were tiny was the fact that adults in the lives of little ones have a responsibility to talk to kids about what they see and do, read to them, discuss what's going on, ask them questions, listen, and try to make sense of their early attempts at talking. What I needed to get through my head, however, was the child’s job in what is actually a two-way street. Yes, children need to hear language, but every bit as
much, they need to engage in verbal give-and-take as soon as they start to babble.

Language doesn’t simply happen. It’s the result of many things and perhaps most important is a child’s verbal interactions with older people and other children. Research tells us that the more verbal exchanges among toddlers and others, the greater their ease and success with language in the long run, though a proviso is that the exchanges need to be positive. “Don’t do that” doesn’t really count. Children learn to speak by talking with others—from communicating, not just from hearing words or commands. In the absence of dialogue, language development is slowed, and in the view of some, irrevocably.

For me, the decision to write this book about Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) for children from three to five has a great deal to do with making sure that all children have a chance at meaningful verbal give-and-take. By the time children start preschool, most have some ability to talk, but one of the key arguments for universal preschool is to make sure that regardless of their skill level as they enter, all know the basics of communication by the time they head to kindergarten. VTS can help ensure that growth: kids talk about what they see in pictures, assisted by teachers. The pictures are artworks carefully chosen to connect to the life experiences of the children and as such provide much for the children to observe, consider, and talk about. The painting by Francisco de Goya in figure I.1 has had wonderful responses from young children over many years. You might examine it to see why you think this has been the case.

The discussions resonate to the point that VTS has proved to be a useful and gratifying addition to teachers’ tools for building language. For example, Dori Jacobsohn, who trains teachers in early childhood instruction including VTS, heard from teachers in Detroit that the impact produced more “productive talk” throughout the day.3

One challenge for educators in general is maintaining a fruitful balance of talking to young people, letting them talk, helping them listen, expanding their exposure to what’s around them, and introducing new
language and information when it's wanted and needed. When these strands are woven together into experience that feels real, useful, and authentic—and the less likely it feels like rote exercise—the greater the likelihood that the children learn in ways that stick. VTS for preschool is designed to do just this.

In the following chapters, teachers talk about what we have learned from watching three- and four-year-olds focus on a series of well-chosen images and talk themselves into understanding what they see in response to four short, carefully designed questions. Teachers are, in fact, the people who convinced me that VTS might be something valued in early education though it took several years for me to get comfortable with this concept. I should have been more open to begin with because anyone like me who's spent time with young children knows images are important to them. Simply looking at things holds their attention longer than it does for most of us. Their literature is full of illustrations for reasons. Drawing is equally important: given materials, most children take great pleasure in making images beginning with scribbles. But all that said, I didn't see how these behaviors might argue in favor of assembling preschool kids into groups, sitting them on the floor, and asking them to discuss what they saw in pictures.
WHERE VTS COMES FROM

VTS evolved over more than a dozen years of field research to see if and how it worked—what teachers and students experienced, how teachers used it, and what growth it produced. Cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and I led the team, and this process involved many schools that let their classrooms become laboratories. That work is described in a book that is essentially a companion to this, *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. But here’s the short history.

When we first drafted VTS in 1991, I was director of education at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Housen and I hoped the teaching would jump-start skills that museum visitors thought they lacked, limiting their pleasure looking at art. We tested our new lessons in schools to get some sense of their impact; teachers were willing to let us collect data from students over time, which is hard to do in museums because visits are usually occasional, informal, and infrequent.

In the earliest days of experimenting with ways to build observation skills and rapport with art, Housen and I, with help from others, concentrated our research on testing with fifth graders and their teachers. In 1991, grade 5 was typically the highest grade in elementary schools, and given that it was slightly before the era of pervasive standardized curricula and testing, teachers had more time and energy to try something new. The arts, while always underfunded, remained on the radar of many schools. Meanwhile, irrepressible ten-year-olds were the perfect age and stage for lessons that asked them to look at carefully chosen works of art and discuss what they saw in an open-ended way.

Given our intention to build viewing skills—another way of saying “visual literacy”—we had data to help us start the learning. Abigail Housen had been studying how people think when looking at art for over fifteen years. We had her data about how the brain processed observations while looking at art—and how the cognition changed as experience grew—to help us start. We used this information as the basis for creating lessons that enabled elementary students to use existing
skills—the ability to observe, to talk, and to make sense of observations, for example—to start the teaching/learning, and then to increase the skills involved in finding meaning in the array of images that surround us in the modern world. We watched and documented what happened and folded what we learned into extensions of the original lessons as well as into the frequent revisions we did based on what we continued to learn. Many of us watch VTS in practice to this day to see how it works with students, if and how it affects teacher practice, and if it can be used in additional contexts.

Even the first draft of the curriculum was well received. Teachers could and would teach it and let us watch and study the process. Early data indicated that our lessons were effective in producing growth in what we called viewing skills, our initial objective. Teachers meanwhile noticed other benefits. When third- and fourth-grade teachers caught wind of an activity that seemed to engage virtually all students in fifth grade—even those who seldom raised their hands—and during which disagreements as to meaning could be discussed civilly by often-contentious classmates, they asked if they could give this approach a try as well. I was very comfortable finding images for fourth graders but a bit less so as we got to the lower grades.

Within a few years, our school data revealed that the set of lessons, taught in a roughly ten-lesson sequence, did increase particular skills: students made more observations, and these observations became more detailed and focused over time; they drew more inferences from these observations; and they backed up more opinions with evidence. Importantly, we found that the skills stuck: they remained in place when students were studied several years later, after the VTS lessons stopped. To find all this out, Housen used existing tools and protocols, both pre- and posttests—and also developed more—to document thinking and, later, language.

Our findings were good news for us in museums because careful observation and thinking deeply about what one sees are obviously germane to people looking at art. What came as a pleasant surprise was
how these same skills served school priorities as well. Early reports indicated two aspects in particular, neither predicted by us. The first was that thinking skills showed up in other lessons, especially when evidence was required to back up an answer. In addition, students wrote more and better when the prompt was a work of art, beginning as early as second grade, something that teachers discovered. Teachers told us that VTS was beneficial within the larger frame of what their students were expected to accomplish academically.

Another surprise to us was the impact of discussions on social behavior. VTS discussions seemed to engage all students; for example, even students who didn’t participate normally in class felt comfortable contributing ideas during VTS discussions. A second was that students could disagree with one another during VTS and not get angry about their differences. Discussions had a civility about them sometimes missing in other classroom lessons and activities. A third—not seen immediately—was the confidence children developed slowly but surely in their own voices and in the validity of their opinions.

We were, of course, delighted with reports about these social behaviors at the time, but their importance has grown as schools have assumed more responsibility for social and emotional growth of young people, not just academic achievement.

By now, VTS has a long history of usefulness in the elementary grades, and I wrote about this in Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines. Despite its usefulness throughout later grades, it took me awhile to get comfortable with developing a version tailored to preschool. This book tells that story while offering guidance to preschool educators on how to use VTS.

THE ORIGINS OF VTS FOR PRESCHOOL

Enter a fearless, experienced kindergarten teacher, Debby Robin, of Urbana, Illinois. She knew VTS was worth a try with her students. The results she reported back opened my skeptical eyes to a potential I’d
not seen. Children willingly grouped around the poster-sized reproductions we selected as they would for a reading group. They raised their hands and took turns. They mentioned what they noticed; those that saw something they had no language for got up and pointed to the images. At first, some repeated what others had mentioned, but over time, more of them made new discoveries to point out and name. It became clear to Debby that they were listening to one another. She wasn’t surprised (even if I was), but both of us—and other veteran teachers at Debby’s school—were delighted. The notion of a K–5 sequential curriculum began to take shape.

A few years later, building on what we learned from watching VTS in kindergarten, another determined educator/researcher, Paula Lynn, began experimenting with VTS discussions among groups of preschoolers. At the time (2008), Paula was working at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in the museum’s school partnership programs. I knew she was doing it and was once again skeptical that the most basic rigors of VTS—sitting and looking in a group, taking turns, speaking—would be too challenging for the developmental levels of children as young as two and a half to four. Again, Paula showed me potential I’d not foreseen. I made an unfortunately common error: underestimating children.

Paula wrote me recently describing her experience back then. It wasn’t smooth sailing all the way, but instead a process full of discoveries.

_I quickly realized that the students needed to hone their communication skills if we were to have constructive discussions together. It is developmentally appropriate for children this young to be focused on the self; they operate in a space that is their own and what others do or say rarely has an impact on what they will do or say next. For example, multiple students may point out the same tree because unless they themselves have said it, it’s as if it has not been said. The fact that many of these children didn’t speak English might have had an impact on this. Knowing that, patience was paramount._

_It was a little more than half way through the year before I started to notice their collective growth in being able to communicate effectively within_
a group. That included listening, taking turns, raising their hand to share, elaborating on their ideas, and even referencing other comments by using classmates’ names. I remember an instance towards the end of the year when a boy was sharing what he saw in a painting by building on what another student mentioned. He began by saying, “That’s a rocking chair . . . like she said.” The girl he was referring to turned her head towards him and said, “I have a name!” It was both a humorous and pivotal moment. The students were becoming aware of the fact that during our discussions we respected others by using their name.5

The most surprising result of Paula’s carefully observed practice was that in time many children would not simply see and name things they saw, but they inferred meanings beyond simple observations—“I think she’s eating,” for example. While that was delightful news, what truly astonished me was that a significant number of them could, when asked, identify what they saw that led them to a particular conclusion—“Because she’s standing by a table.” Given the right images, a strategy that worked in the early grades (K–2) was effective in preschool.

With Paula putting wind into my sails, and again with the help of both VTS colleagues and preschool teachers, VTS for preschool took the shape I share with you in this book. The adaptations are significant though relatively modest. The basic premise remains the same: give children a chance to draw on their ample ability to look, make sense of what they see, and express their responses in a structured way.

VTS image discussions require what children are great at—learning from what they see. We chose to base the discussions on visual art because it’s a particularly rich form of imagery, one that begs viewers of any age to explore deeply and to probe beyond first impressions. We initiate and extend the process using open-ended questions that enable kids to mine images for whatever stories are meaningful to them. We facilitate the process by listening and supporting children’s comments and helping them enjoy the game of figuring out meanings together.
VTS IN PRESCHOOL: THE ADAPTATIONS

Word regarding VTS in preschool began to get out. With the enthusiasm of people ready for a new opportunity, my colleagues and I began responding to requests from preschool teachers to give VTS a try. Importantly, we found sites willing to let us join them as they watched to see both teacher and student change over a multiyear period. In what follows, you’ll read what we have learned, and you’ll meet some of the remarkable people who showed us the way. To write this book, I have pulled together the thoughts of trainers, teachers, school directors, and my own observations from multiple years of implementing VTS in preschools in many parts of this country and in different types of schools.

The impact of VTS on children in preschool is still unfolding; what’s established clearly is that it becomes a teacher’s trusted companion in efforts to build children’s willingness to express themselves orally, gain confidence, and have a sense of their own points of view as well as their interest in hearing the ideas of others. They make more observations and infer more meaning from them, both having an impact on language. A more general impact is that VTS experience gives children tools for making sense of much that was previously unfamiliar, skills that transcend VTS discussions, enabling exploration of many subjects and phenomena at school and at home. And, of course, children begin to view art with comfort, a win for anyone who cares about developing visual literacy alongside verbal literacy.

As it has developed, the key differences between VTS for preschool and for older students lie in

- the choices of images: they are simpler, more tailored to predictable life experiences of any given group of students, as in more city images for city kids.
- the duration of lessons: discussions are shorter (usually eight to twelve minutes instead of fifteen to twenty in K–5), usually focusing on one image at a time.
• the numbers of discussions over time: there is no limit; teachers are encouraged to conduct as many as they see helpful, usually between ten and twenty over the year.
• the phrasing of the opening questions: we add both “What do you see in this picture?” and “What do you notice here?” to the basic set that starts with “What’s going on in this picture?” and “What more can you find?”
• the timing of introducing an additional question asking for evidence, specifically “What do you see that makes you say that?” For preschool, we ask teachers to watch for the time when it seems developmentally appropriate to challenge students to add reasons for thinking something.
• the expectations of behavior: teachers in preschool allow more flexibility, for example, letting children walk up to point to what they are talking about in an image if that’s needed—and it sometimes is.

Teachers also expect more subjective ideas from the kids based on their necessarily limited experience (they haven’t been around all that long) and often in highly personal ways. It therefore takes more reading between the lines to understand precisely what children are thinking and talking about in order to paraphrase their comments, a key aspect of facilitating discussions. (VTS for preschool is described in detail in chapter 2.)

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK
My intention with this book is to equip early childhood educators and others to try VTS with young people in their lives!

The movement toward universal preschool is part of the reason for the urgency of this book. As curricula for early childhood are still somewhat in flux, we need to think of what gives children the best
foundation for later schooling and for life. Pressure exists to start academics early, and it’s both my strongly held view that this is a mistake and this opinion is shared by more and more people studying the impact of preschool on later achievement.

During these tender but enormously fertile years, children need nurture more than academic rigor. They need to be helped to learn by dint of their own efforts, not only by direction from others. They need to go from following their noses to directing their attention. They need more time with creative play and active exploration aided by teachers with questions and suggestions more than directions. They need to create and solve their own problems independently with help only as needed. They need to be supervised but not always told what, when, and how to behave. They need to figure out how to share and engage with others by seeing behavior modeled in relevant circumstances, not just by being taught rules to follow. They need experience with real-life challenges and activities, ones whose inherent usefulness is obvious to them. They need to learn language by way of authentic communication, not rote memorization.

Decades of research and theory back up this thinking, and whole methods such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia exist as examples to guide the kind of teaching that produces empowered, capable, confident, and creative learners as a result of preschool. VTS as an activity fits within child-centered perimeters and greatly assists meeting these objectives.

In the succeeding chapters, I illustrate VTS in operation with groups of children at different points in their VTS experience, providing you with a picture of what a teacher does and what students do in response. I explain each element in the teaching strategy with comments from teachers to help illustrate their understandings of them. I detail what we know about the impact of VTS discussions on student learning, and later, what teachers discover about this additional way of teaching, more facilitative than directive and more open ended than
many are used to. When I think it might be useful, I provide summary notes and tips at the ends of chapters to make it easier for you to put VTS into practice.

VTS is a structured activity that allows for independent and authentic observation, thinking, and expression, supported actively by teachers. I hope you’re intrigued enough to get started with kids in your life!