I first implemented the Attachment Test over a decade ago as an intervention in response to students’ over-reliance on tape and glue to hold things together in their three-dimensional artwork. Glue is less flexible than tape but more enduring, especially for paper and cardboard because it permeates the fibers. Tape lends itself well to improvisation because it sticks immediately but it is more expensive than glue. Neither works perfectly with every material found in the art room.

“You can wrap, tie, insert, wedge, notch, stitch, fold, clip, weave, twist, and knot objects together. Look over these materials and see what they can do for your solution to the Attachment Test. Maybe you will be the first to invent a whole new way of attaching,” I tell students eager to get started.

A re-purposed marker box holds brads, string, paper clips, buttons, elastics, wire, ribbon, foam, rubber stuff, foil, pipe cleaners, and other unusual items found at the local recycle center. “As you work, remember to think like an artist. Your solution must look like more than just a bunch of stuff stuck together. It needs to be artwork that shows a design or represents something recognizable.” As classmates count attachments, they also check for aesthetic appeal. If the solution has none, it is not ready to pass the Attachment Test.

The teacher will complete the final review, checking for these criteria: (1) The minimum number of materials and attachments are included; (2) The object is stable (nothing falls off when shaken); and (3) The work shows artistic thinking.

Students participate with enthusiasm and feel triumphant upon passing the test. While tape and glue (especially hot glue) continue to be favored attachment methods, students’ mindsets about alternative strategies are growing. For example, a student recently challenged herself by constructing a three-dimensional house using no glue or tape. The sides were lashed together with pipe cleaners through punched holes. Others have created moving vehicles, elevators, real and fantasy creatures, exotic plant life and complex symmetrical designs using attachment strategies.

Everyone who tries the Attachment Test passes by summoning his or her curiosity, patience, and playfulness. Just as a deep-water test determines which swimmers may swim out to the raft, the Attachment Test acknowledges students who have practiced with materials and are now empowered with a toolbox of strategies for future endeavors.

Diane B. Jaquith is an elementary art teacher in Newton, Mass. She is a co-founder of the Teaching for Artistic Behavior organization, a co-author of “Engaging Learners through Artmaking: Choice-Based Art Education in the Classroom” and co-editor of “The Learner-Directed Classroom: Developing Creative Thinking Skills through Art.”