

Creativity in Young Children

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Creativity is more than a product — it's a process. An interesting painting, a thought-provoking writing, or a unique response, may be examples of creative work, but the decisions people make as they paint, sculpt, write and think are at the core of the creative process.

The objective of this publication is to broaden understanding about the creative process for parents and others who work with children and youth.

What does creativity look like?

Art and music are common examples of creativity, but you can find creative thought in almost all aspects of life — from the way a parent quiets a crying child to the methods a scientist uses to discover a cure for a disease.

Creativity in young children

Children who amaze their teachers with unusual responses to questions, who display a keen sense of humor, who perhaps are nonconforming and unpredictable are thinking creatively.

Because creative thought often goes against the set rules of a strict class-



room or home, adults may be irritated by the behavior of a creative child.

Adults often do not recognize the value these creative children bring to families and classrooms. Eventually, these children become the adults who make a difference in our world with their creative problem-solving skills.

Encouraging creativity

Teachers and parents can help children learn to think and solve problems in creative ways by giving them the freedom to make mistakes and by respecting their ideas.

To solve a problem creatively, children need to be able to see a variety of perspectives and to generate several

solutions. When working on a problem, teach children to examine their surroundings for “cues” that will help them generate a pool of possible solutions. In addition, adults can encourage creative thought simply by providing:

■ **Choices** — Children who are given choices show more creativity than do children who have all choices made for them.

■ **Stimulation** — Physical environments designed to stimulate the senses can enhance creative problem solving. For example, when shown an object in the shape of a half-moon and asked, “What can we use this for?” Children will exhaust their first mental images and begin developing ideas from what they see in their surroundings. Looking around a classroom or playroom for cues is a creative problem-solving method.

An environment that provides both novelty and variety will greatly aid creativity.

■ **Time for play and fantasy** — Dramatic play just prior to engaging in problem-solving tasks can lead to more creative thought.

■ **Independence** (*with reasonable limits*) — Parents and teachers should encourage children to think and act freely without adult direction, yet within the limits of rules.

■ **Exposure to a diverse community** — Give children the opportunity to see and experience other cultures and ways of living to help learn to respect the choices other people make.

■ **Brainstorming sessions** — Encourage children to tackle problems as a group by freely expressing their ideas with no fear of a negative response. Brainstorming can take place between a child and an adult or between two or more children.

■ **A time to leave reality behind** — The joining together of two or more irrelevant elements, called *synectics*, can lead to creative answers. The process of *synectics* can take many forms:

- ◀ Hand a child a piece of modeling clay, and ask the child to imagine that he or she **is** the modeling clay.
- ◀ Place a child in a different time and place. For instance, ask a child to describe how he or she would cook a meal without electricity, silverware, dishes, etc.
- ◀ Ask a child to describe a problem or an event by using pictures instead of words.
- ◀ Ask a child to solve a problem using the most fantastic solutions he or she can come up with.

■ **Encouragement** — When children show special aptitudes, such as an ability to generate many questions, a keen memory, advanced reading or pre-reading skills, artistic skills or other above-average abilities, adults should encourage them to build on and expand their skills.

■ **Honest critiques** — Evaluate student work constructively so that they can see ways to improve their work and still feel positive about themselves and what they have created.

■ **An environment where there is no one right answer for every problem** — Teachers who enthusiastically encourage children to develop more than one solution to a problem see greater creativity in problem solving.

Barriers to creativity

Often people are not able to perform at their best because of outside influences that make them feel pressured or insecure:

■ **Reward** — When people do not expect a reward, they are more creative and enjoy the process more. An unexpected reward that comes after a project is completed is valuable but not necessary to the creative process.

■ **Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation** — As in the case of reward, external motivation, such as money or special privileges, undermines creativity. Artists indicate that when they are working for the enjoyment of the process, they are far more effective and productive than when they are commissioned to create for money.

■ **Expected external evaluation** — Knowing beforehand that a piece of art is going to be graded, can lead to a decrease in creativity.

■ **Peer pressure** — There is some evidence that pressure to conform can lead to temporary decreases in creativity.

■ **Surveillance** — Being observed by others while engaged in a creative process can undermine the creativity of a performance.

Creativity through art

Developmental stages of art

The following is a brief overview of the developmental stages of children's art. Please keep in mind that the ages given are general guidelines and that children will enter and leave each stage at their own pace.

Scribbling stage (Approximately 2 to 4 years)

- ✓ Children are amazed at their ability to make marks. They have just realized that they can interact with and affect their environment.
- ✓ Much time is spent practicing motor skills.
- ✓ Children draw circles first, then squares and other geometric shapes.
- ✓ Children begin trying to recreate their world. They may want to point to and name parts of their drawings.

Pre-schematic stage (Late preschool to approximately age 7)

- ✓ First attempts are made to represent people or objects. Efforts are recognizable to adults.
- ✓ Children show a fascination with the wide variety of colors.
- ✓ Obvious connections between different pieces of the drawing.
- ✓ Signs of approval from teachers and peers are important.
- ✓ Easily discouraged and fatigued.
- ✓ Active, hands-on, eager to learn, self-centered.
- ✓ Highly imaginative yet tend to focus on one idea at a time.
- ✓ Search for ways to represent their ideas.

Schematic stage

(Approximately 7 to 9 years)

- ✓ Increased use of symbols, such as a cross for a church or dark colors to represent night, both in number and frequency.
- ✓ Less self-centered.
- ✓ Still do not have a realistic understanding of their environment — for example, the sky may not meet the ground at the horizon.
- ✓ Improved eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills.
- ✓ Increased attention span.
- ✓ Begin to develop a sense of humor.
- ✓ Children divide by gender in play.
- ✓ Special characteristics are represented for each person or object. (If Mom wears glasses and has curly hair, the child will include these characteristics in the drawing.)

Realistic stage

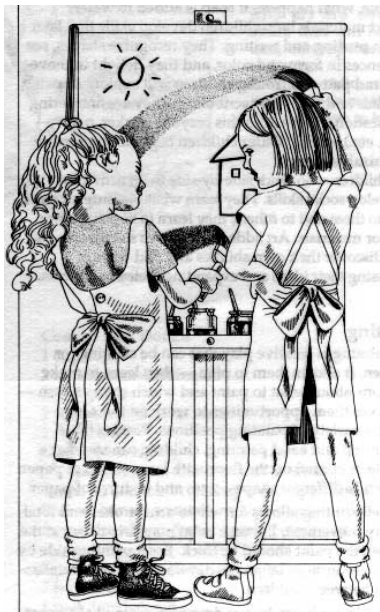
(9 to 12 years)

- ✓ Greatly affected by peer influence.
- ✓ Increased amount of detail and use of symbols.
- ✓ Expanded individual differences.
- ✓ Beginning to develop a set of values.
- ✓ Want to do things “right.”

Pseudo-naturalistic stage

(12-14 years)

- ✓ Children are highly critical of the products they make.
- ✓ There is a more adult-like mode of expression.
- ✓ This is a period of great individual differences in the physical, mental, emotional and social arenas.
- ✓ Art often becomes an elective in school. For many children this will be their last opportunity for art instruction.
- ✓ This is a period of heightened self-consciousness. Children in this age group often feel a need to conform to their peers, which can stifle their creativity.



Children want their art to look like the object they are looking at. Failing in this attempt can be discouraging. Children need to be taught that art does not have to mean copying what they see. Show children other styles of art, such as impressionistic or cubist, to help them see that the free expression of ideas and emotions is more important than creating a mirror image.

Never compare one child's work to another's or select one piece to be the “model” or “ideal.” Children will go through these developmental stages in the same order, but the pace at which they enter and leave them will vary.

Creativity through art

- ✓ Avoid projects that can be completed in only one way: (paint-by-numbers, kits to be assembled).
- ✓ Do not use art as indoor recess or as a reward for behaving. Art activities should be well thought out and planned.
- ✓ Make a wide variety of materials available to children.
- ✓ Suggest options, but let children make the final decisions for art projects.
- ✓ Ask children about their art while it is

happening, not just at the end. Children should describe their work, but don't ask them to name objects or feelings depicted.

- ✓ Praise the effort, use of color and uniqueness rather than just the final product — the trip is more important than the destination.
- ✓ Display art at a child's eye level.
- ✓ Encourage individual expression. Avoid the regimented use of materials and adult-directed projects. A classroom full of samples of individual creativeness, as opposed to 23 identical pieces hanging in a row, indicates that the teacher has given children choices and has focused on the process rather than the product.

Clay

Clay and play dough offer opportunities to be creative while providing a release for energy and stress. Clay can be pulled, pushed, squeezed and punched. Rolling pins, cookie cutters and various containers will add to imaginative play with clay. (*Play Dough recipe is listed under “Fun Textures” on page 4.*)

Paint

Painting is creative play that can be calming for children. It allows them to plan and make decisions about color and form, and it provides children with an opportunity to work on their own.

When planning painting activities for children, alter the painting position (floor, table, easel), and provide different paint textures, thicknesses and colors. Let children try painting with straws, eye droppers, cotton balls, cotton swabs, sponges, feathers, string, pipe cleaners, styrofoam, and fruits and vegetables cut crosswise.

Add a bit of powdered soap to the paint to make clean-up easier.

Sand

Sand has a wonderful, unstructured quality. As children mix, pour, sift, stir, measure and mold sand, they are using pre-math skills, socializing and using their imaginations. Working with sand can be relaxing, and it provides a smooth sensory experience.

Be sure to include digging tools, buckets, molds, trucks, cars and figurines in the sand play area.

Add dry tempera paint to color the sand, and let children create sand paintings by gluing sand to paper or by layering the colored sand in clear containers.

Crayons and chalk

Using chalk to draw on large areas such as driveways and sidewalks is an activity that generations of children have enjoyed. Freedom to create on large blank surfaces is far more stimulating than giving children activity sheets and telling them to "stay in the lines."

To get different effects from crayons, cut a "v" shape in the side of a crayon, or use textured surfaces under paper (screens, coins, pegboards).

You can also recycle old bits of crayon by melting them together (200°F) in a muffin tin. Let the melted crayon bits cool and then shape them into writing utensils.

Water

Water is one of the most exciting and yet soothing play items for young children. Let children experiment with water by trying to float objects of different weights, pouring and measuring, adding food coloring, adding bubbles, and washing dolls and toys.

Fun Textures

Play Dough

Materials

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup water
- 1/2 cup salt
- 1 tablespoon cooking oil
- 2 teaspoons cream of tartar
- Food coloring

Procedure

Mix flour, water, cooking oil, salt and cream of tartar. Heat slowly and stir constantly while adding food coloring. Continue heating until a ball is formed. Remove from heat and knead ball. Store in an airtight container.

Goop — It seems to melt in your hands

Materials

- One box of cornstarch
- Water (start with 1/2 cup)
- Food coloring

Procedure

Combine all ingredients in a shallow pan. Add water until the mixture is firm in the pan yet runny when in your hand.

Glerch

Materials

- 1 cup liquid starch
- 1 cup white glue

Procedure

Pour the liquid starch in the bowl first. Add the white glue. When the glue starts to solidify, pour off the starch. Work the mixture with your hands. Add more starch if it feels too sticky.

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