

THE ART OF BEING CREATIVE



Helping kids tap into their imagination may just be the most important learning goal you can implement this year.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBYN BREEN SHINN STYLING BY HEATHER ROME

The floor of Dina Gjertsen's living room is carpeted with taped-together paper bags. It's a semipermanent installation: Her 9-year-old son, Townes, has positioned his figurines on it as part of a strategy game he's cooking up. Meanwhile, in his bedroom, he's erected a hybrid of furniture and Legos that he calls The Temple. "It helps that I'm not the most obsessive housekeeper," laughs Gjertsen. "I'm happy to walk around it all because the things he comes up with are so uniquely weird."

Where others might see a mess, Gjertsen sees creativity. As codirector at Parts and Crafts, a "hackerspace" in Somerville, MA, she helps lots of kids exercise their imaginations. The workshop is filled with everything from sewing machines and hot-glue guns to bins of golf balls. With these at their disposal, kids are free to create.

Like Gjertsen, most of us are eager to nurture our kids' creativity. A recent *FamilyFun* survey found that 71 percent of you consider raising creative kids to be "very important." However, there's increasing evidence that this skill is under threat. Kids' scores on the Torrance tests, the standard measurement of creative thinking, have fallen 20 percent since 1990. Experts blame everything from standardized testing to screen-time overload. Compounding the problem, many parents don't feel able to help: Our survey found that fewer than half of you consider yourselves "very creative."

But truth is, none of that matters. "It's a myth that creativity is something you're born with or that arrives as one brilliant aha!" says Keith Sawyer, Ph.D., a professor at the University of North Carolina's School of Education, in Chapel Hill, and author of *Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity*. "It's a way of thinking and acting that we can get better at." Let that sink in. Creativity can *grow*; it isn't just genetically bestowed. So let's look at what creativity is, how it develops, and what you can do to foster it at home.



Think It Out. Even young artist Scout (age 7) knows the power of a plan. She sketched this mural on paper before she had at it!

THE ROOTS OF CREATIVITY

One of the key factors in creativity is *divergent* thinking, which is the ability to generate many unique ideas, says Elena Hoicka, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Sheffield in England. And kids can exhibit it as young as age 1. With curiosity about the new-to-them world and with attention spans that flit all over, young minds are virtual idea factories. That's why toddlers can instantly unspool wild tales of dinosaurs driving a flying bus to the amusement park... and then to the candy store... and then... Could you? "There's no question kids are more creative than adults," says Dr. Runco. "They don't take things for granted. They are not worried about judgment or how things have always been done." Indeed, one North Dakota State University study found that college students who were asked to imagine themselves as 7-year-olds tested higher on creativity tasks than those who didn't adopt the childlike mind-set.

As kids get older, they get better at a second key element of creativity: *convergent* thinking. This involves narrowing down all the wild brainstorming to select the best option, then working to develop it into something useful. (Think of that pillow-fort mansion with the fancy guest-towel door that took hours of tinkering for your young architect to perfect.) Older kids also begin developing the perseverance that allows their ideas to come to fruition, even in the face of frustration and setbacks. (It fell over again!!!)

This kind of "what if" thinking and endless

noodling flourishes when kids have unstructured time to play and daydream. That's because creativity happens in fits and starts—not in one fell swoop. Gjertsen has observed just that in her many hours at the workstations at Parts and Crafts. "Sometimes kids want to do the same thing over and over. Or they want to start something but then just throw it away and try something else," she says. Wrong turns and mistakes are creativity in action—it's the brain at work exploring all the crazy possibilities. "After a few years in school, kids can learn to be afraid of looking stupid, making a mistake, not getting an A," Dr. Sawyer says. This is exactly when parents need to step in and reframe the conversation. "Failure is part of the process. You *will* take detours. You *will* hit dead ends." Each one teaches you something new. It's freeing to understand that failure isn't something to be feared—it gives kids the confidence to keep trying.

READY, SET, CREATE!

The refreshing bottom line? Everyone is born with the capacity for creativity—we just have to know how to unlock it. We asked parents to share how they encourage their own children to harness the power of their imaginations.

TRUST THE PROCESS. "Parents and kids can get too focused on the final result," says Meri Cherry, owner of the Meri Cherry Art Studio in Los Angeles, and a mom of two. "You have to end up with a beautiful masterpiece or it's a failure. If you are drawing a house, it has to have four walls and a

BEYOND THE ARTS

There are a lifetime of fantastic reasons to make boosting your child's creativity a #parentinggoal. "Decades-long follow-up studies of kids' test scores show that the measure of a child's creative thinking is the best predictor of his accomplishments as an adult," says Mark Runco, Ph.D., editor of *Creativity Research Journal*. And those accomplishments extend into many fields—not only the arts. In fact, creativity is a key to success whether you're designing an earthquake-proof building or creating a new life-saving medicine. However, engaging in traditional creative pursuits does seem to help the brain fire on all cylinders. Case in point: Nobel-winning scientists are 22 times more likely to perform as actors, dancers, or magicians compared with scientists who don't have these interests, notes Adam Grant, author of *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*.



Genius! How does Scout find her way to the bathroom in the middle of the night? By following her line of stuffed animals! Problem solved.

“THERE IS NO QUESTION KIDS ARE MORE CREATIVE THAN ADULTS.”



Looking Up. A DIY pulley system transports toys to the top bunk.

“ THINK OF OCCASIONAL BOREDOM AS RECESS FOR YOUR CHILD’S BRAIN. ”

rectangle roof. How limiting is that? There are a million kinds of houses in the world! If you see beauty in the process instead, it’s a lot more fun.”

QUESTION EVERYTHING. Spend any time with a preschooler, and you know that little kids are expert at asking *Why? Why? Why?* As we get older, we tend to stop this and instead cruise on autopilot. Helping your child preserve this sense of inquiry is crucial to a creative mind-set, says Dr. Sawyer. “You want to foster a different way of seeing the world, where you wonder and notice the puzzling things around you.” That’s because creativity is about not accepting how things are. It’s about wondering how things could be better.

Christy Saludaes, who blogs at From Engineer to Stay at Home Mom, sees things to wonder about together all around. “We might look at a toy, and I’ll ask my son, ‘How do you think the toy was made?’ If he says it started out as a hunk of plastic, I’ll ask, ‘What do you think they did first? Cut it? Paint it?’ My kindergartner was so interested, he sketched out what he imagined was the whole process.”

MAKE IT FUNNY. If you have a good sense of humor, you’re already highly skilled at looking at things in alternative ways—a

hallmark of divergent thinking. “Humor lets kids practice thinking outside the box in a fun way,” says Dr. Hoicka. “When they get a laugh from others, their creativity is instantly rewarded.” Riddles and jokes can get kids in the many-answers mode. (Knock, knock: Anyone could be there!) So start a round of riddles during that next quiet carpool.

GIVE THEM A STARTER. Kids often find a blank page intimidating. (Don’t we all?) So provide a little structure and step back. That’s what Matt Richtel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the *New York Times* and the author of the children’s book *The Runaway Booger*, does for his kids. “I’ll sit at the computer and type the first few words at the top of a few pages. (‘Once there was a girl...’) I leave lots of room on each page for them to fill in the rest and then illustrate their ‘book.’ I talk to my kids a lot about the idea of detail. I’ll ask them what the difference is between ‘a girl’ and ‘a girl who plays guitar.’ This gets them to elaborate on their ideas. I resist the urge to edit. In one of my daughter’s stories, the dad ended up dead on the floor. I didn’t say, ‘You hurt my feelings! You can’t kill me off!’ I don’t want to give her the idea that there are places you can’t go when you’re being creative.”

Cherry does a variation of this at her house as well: “I set up what I call an ‘invitation.’ Maybe while they are asleep, I’ll put out a vase of flowers, two trays with nice paper on them, and some watercolors. One child might paint the bouquet while the other makes something completely different. Or I set out old boxes and stickers and tape and say, ‘I wonder if you can figure out how to make a robot with this stuff?’”

SOLICIT THEIR HELP WITH PROBLEMS. The best creative ideas are not only new—they’re useful. So enlist your child’s help: What kind of toy could we make for the dog so he doesn’t get bored when we’re gone? What can we do about the recycling that’s always overflowing the kitchen bin? Brainstorming ideas, then implementing one together, gives kids hands-on problem-solving practice.

Involving your kids in your own daily efforts can also help them see that creativity is everywhere. “My husband does the maintenance of our cars,” says Saludaes. “When he replaces the brakes, my 7-year-old is out in the garage watching and helping.” This type of work, where you have to problem-solve to get it right, is just as crucial to creativity as arts and crafts.

BE A MODEL. At Parts and Crafts, Gjertsen and her coworkers are often immersed in their own projects alongside the kids. “I’m always making dollhouse furniture and miniature food. In the sewing area, an artist has been working on an elaborate quilt for weeks. The kids pick up on our energy and enthusiasm, and it makes the space come alive. And if a kid sees an artist making something, he might want to try it too.” You can do the same thing at home. Sit down and sketch next to your child, or enthuse over your own latest knitting or furniture-refinishing project. “Let them watch you,” says Saludares, the engineer. “Talk about what you are doing. Find ways to share what you love. In my case, that’s science. For others, it could be writing or cooking.”

EXPOSE THEM TO DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS.

“Seeing different viewpoints lets you look at the world in new ways,” says KH Kim, Ph.D., a professor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA, who studies creativity in children. That perspective can result in fresh insights by making you question your assumptions. It doesn’t necessarily mean you have to go backpacking through Europe. Dr. Kim notes that even reading a book about a different culture can give kids a new outlook. “Ask them to put themselves in the character’s shoes.” Pretty soon you’ll begin to see creativity worth sharing everywhere. “You can go to a baseball game and discuss how it is creative. A pitcher might be throwing in a totally unexpected way,” adds Dr. Runco.

LEAVE GAPS IN THEIR SCHEDULE.

“Kids need time in their day to engage in unstructured activities of their own choosing,” Dr. Sawyer says. The most enriching activity might not be another round of French lessons but contemplating a column of dust or messing around in a leaf pile. Children who spend more time in free-form activities like these are better able to set their own goals and take actions to meet them without prodding from adults, according to a 2014 study in the online journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Who Knows? Building cardboard houses could spark a love of architecture.



Now that’s a skill for a lifetime! This might mean you need to be stalwart in the face of those nails-on-the-chalkboard words “I’m bored.” (In our *FamilyFun* survey, only about half, or 56 percent, of you said you allow your child to be bored as a way to encourage creativity.)

Boredom encourages daydreaming, a state in which the mind wanders and allows you to look at things in new ways. In one 2014 study in the *Creativity Research Journal*, for example, subjects who were asked to read a telephone book out loud (zzzzzzzzzzzz) came up with more uses for disposable cups afterward—a classic test of divergent thinking—compared with subjects who had not suffered through this stultifying task. Think of occasional boredom as recess for your child’s brain.

HELP THEM HANG IN THERE. Making something new or figuring out a problem takes stamina. Showing that you value their efforts helps kids keep at it. “Often, kids think they are done with a piece of art in two seconds,” says Cherry. “So I will ask them about the process. ‘I notice you

chose the blue marker. I wonder what you are going to choose next.’ Or I’ll say, ‘I wonder what would happen if you added tissue paper?’” Your interest encourages them to keep going—and that’s what builds the muscle of creativity.

SUPPORT THEIR PASSIONS.

Dr. Kim notes that the big creative achievements in life—a new concerto, a groundbreaking theory about how to fix global warming—require a long apprenticeship in which you develop a depth of expertise from which to build. You need passion to fuel this persistence. Dr. Sawyer agrees: “A huge body of evidence suggests that sustained creativity comes from intrinsic motivation. It happens only when you get real pleasure out of doing something.” Expose your child to lots of pursuits—ballet, computer programming, and more—to see if she finds something that makes her catch fire. If she falls in love with the oboe or robotics, find ways to encourage her enthusiasm—she just might discover a passion that will change her life. ♦