

FOSTER CREATIVITY THAT LASTS A LIFETIME

by Joyce E. Nuner

All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up. — Pablo Picasso

Matthew is going to tell us about his picture,” says Ms. Kathy. She has brought his art work to the director’s office, and other teachers have gathered around for a look.

She continues: “Today at group time, I invited the children to help design the artwork for the new T-shirt we need for our school, and this is Matthew’s.” She holds up his picture of geometric shapes, yellow lines, brown circles, and a blue shape. Others in his classroom have made pictures of children playing and catching butterflies or crosses and flowers associated with the school’s faith-based program.

Ms. Kathy nods to Matthew. He explains:

“This is like if I was flying in a helicopter over the school, what everything would look like.” He points to the black that dominates the picture: “This is the parking lot.”

The geometric shapes, he says, represent the various lines of the building, and the small brown circles represent the river rock in the landscaped beds in front of the school. The yellow lines represent the parking lot stripes, and the blue, a handicapped parking spot.

Everyone listens, aware that Matthew has never flown over the school in a helicopter. But they recognize he has the ability and creativity to visualize it. “Yes,” says one. “Of course,” says another. “Thank you for telling us about it.”

The reaction of Matthew's teacher and colleagues is ideally how all teachers of young children will respond when children create something unexpected. Ms. Kathy could see past the conventional and accept the creative.

Children don't fit in a box, except in Dr. Seuss stories. As professionals working with young children, we don't force them there. There are many times during the school day that conformity is necessary, perhaps for safety reasons. However, children also need the chance to exercise their natural inclination toward creativity.

What is creativity?

Adults often struggle with the idea of creativity because they feel they are not creative themselves. This goes back to the definition of creativity: the ability to produce something new or novel. We often confuse creativity with artistic ability. However, creativity may also mean the ability to solve a problem in a unique way or devise an interesting theory for why the sky is blue.

ARTISTIC ABILITY IS JUST ONE OF MANY FORMS OF CREATIVITY.

Artistic ability is just one of many forms of creativity. In the classroom, we have come to appreciate the different types of intelligence that children possess. We can also begin to see that there are many forms of creativity, and everyone has it to some degree.

Young children tend to be highly open and creative. Honig (2006) notes, however, that creativity, if not nurtured, decreases by fourth grade. Children at age 5 ask about 30 questions an hour. By age 7 they ask just 2 or 3 questions an hour. Creative genius is displayed in 95 percent of children between the ages of 3 and 5. By age 10, it's 63 percent; by 15, it's 32 percent; and by 20, it's down to 10 percent.

Intuition is another aspect of creativity. Intuition can be defined as the ability to sense or know something without reasoning, a quick and ready insight. Ludeman and Erlanson (2003) note that by the time a child enters the first grade, intuition drops dramatically. That's because many group settings, schools included, encourage conformity and uniformity over intuition and creativity. Conformity works against the natural creativity that children possess.

Creative children can be challenging

Mayesky (2000) notes some general characteristics of highly creative children.

- Originality
- Lack of conformity
- Stubbornness
- Finding fault
- Discontent
- Self-satisfaction
- Determination
- Curiosity
- Strong sense of intuition
- Willingness to take risks
- Sense of humor
- Preference for complex ideas

These characteristics indicate that creative-minded children can sometimes pose challenges in a group setting, taxing the resources of even the most patient teacher. This is where we encounter the danger of encouraging conformity, as opposed to creativity.

When faced with a highly creative child, however, we must take the positive traits and the less-than-positive traits together. If you think about it, determination and stubbornness are really just two ways of describing the same characteristic. As adults, we need to view the challenging aspects of creativity as an opportunity to nurture original thinking.



How to nurture creativity in children

Here are some simple steps we can take to help children express their natural inclination toward creativity.

- **Take time to appreciate aesthetically pleasing things.** Aesthetics refers to an appreciation for beauty and a feeling of wonder. Children often experience this sense of wonder when looking at a ladybug or playing with goop in a sensory table. Music, art, books, and even a pretty rock can all inspire creativity. As facilitators of children's learning, we need to expose them to many beautiful things.

It is equally important that we take time to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us. A child's joy and wonder at watching water spill from cup to cup may seem boring to an adult, but to the child it is wonderful and amazing. Slow down. Look. Listen. Touch. Smell and taste with a new appreciation for the wonder of it all.

- **Spend time with nature.** Everybody needs a little nature. Whether it is spending time outside on the playground, taking a walk around the school grounds, or taking care of the plants or an aquarium in the classroom, children and adults alike need some exposure to natural things every day. Nature can heighten our senses and calm us, all at the same time.

- **Allow, accept, and even encourage the unconventional.** It's OK if a child doesn't think or do things in the same way that other children do. This is the very definition of creativity.

To adults, however, unusual thought processes seem foreign. Give the child the benefit of the doubt. See where the line of thought is going before intervening or dismissing what the child is saying.

Consider this example: On the last day of preschool, Jack, a 4-year-old, asked, "Why are we here?" The adult standing next to Jack answered, "It's the last day of school, and we're celebrating with a picnic." Jack persisted, "No, I mean why are we here, on Earth?" Then began a lengthy and deep conversation between teacher and child exploring what Jack thought.

It was not a typical conversation with a 4-year-old. Or was it? Maybe we just respond to children's questions too quickly with our adult answers instead of allowing them to create their own theories and solutions. Rather than answer children's questions with an adult response, we might encourage them to articulate their own thoughts and feelings. Creative problem solving, artistic projects, and experiments are often the result of less teacher intervention, not more.



▪ **Provide open-ended toys.** Choose toys that encourage children to do the creative work. Blocks, construction sets, dolls, rhythm instruments, puppets, balls, and dramatic play props are a few examples.

Avoid toys that have batteries or do things for the child. What fun is a baby doll that makes crying sounds when a child is perfectly capable of pretending that the baby is crying, cooing, or talking?

When we give children toys that do everything for them, we are putting their play in a box. We are saying, "This is the way you should play with this toy, and only this way." Such toys do not encourage creative thinking and imagination.

YOUNG CHILDREN TEND TO BE HIGHLY OPEN AND CREATIVE.

Open-ended toys, on the other hand, have no fixed way of playing with them, no single outcome. Recyclable items are a great place to start. Empty water bottles can be made into cars or airplanes, for example. Add a filler, such as pebbles, and you have a musical instrument. Ends and pieces of PVC pipe in a sand and water table can add to the pouring fun. All shapes and sizes of cardboard boxes and cylinders can be added to the block center and open up a whole new kind of building.

Open-ended toys and materials

Children use open-ended materials to expand their understanding of the real world—how they can change, combine, and manipulate materials to create something new. The following examples of open-ended materials offer unending opportunities for creativity and discovery—and they cost only the time to gather them.

- fabric
- string, yarn, ribbon, lace scraps
- cardboard
- boxes and cartons
- sea shells
- pebbles
- feathers
- buttons and beads
- wood scraps
- paper
- newspapers and magazines
- dirt
- broken clocks and other small, non-electronic machines



- **Provide open-ended materials.** To create masterpieces, children need a wide selection of open-ended materials. Teachers model their creativity when they give children unique items to paint with or on. Newspaper need not be used only to protect an easel or table surface. It can be the canvas for the budding artist. Instead of brushes, provide empty paper towel rolls and small boxes that children can use to make geometric paintings.

INTUITION IS ANOTHER ASPECT OF CREATIVITY.

Working with an assortment of materials can encourage a variety of imaginative outcomes. Rather than just one product, children can generate an array of products or no product at all, if they so choose.

Take pictures of the children as they explore materials in the art center. Display these photographs instead of focusing on their finished artwork. Art in and of itself is not the only form of creativity, but it is one outlet.

- **Provide opportunities for interaction.** Allow children to think, question, and express themselves in unconventional ways. Children learn through social interaction with peers and adults, so create a classroom environment where there is abundant time to talk with children.

Talking with children is different than talking at them. Direct instruction is not the goal here. We want to engage children in conversations. Meal times, center time, playground time, and transitions from one activity to the next can all provide opportunities for teachers to use open-ended questions to encourage language and engage children in conversation. For example, “Cassie, tell me about your clay sculpture,” or “Nicholas, what do you like about painting with your hands and fingers?”

- **Value the process over the product.** If you haven’t already thrown all your coloring sheets into the recycle bin, do so now. They stifle creativity! They are the adult’s perception of what an image should be. They are not a child’s creation. They are not about the process.

Bulletin boards don’t need 15 uniform pictures displayed to show that a class has been learning. They need to show many shades, many brush strokes, and many variations, much like the children we serve.



Free materials

Freecycle groups are grassroots, nonprofit organizations of people who believe in recycling. They give—and get—free, unwanted materials from other members. Groups are moderated by local volunteers; membership is free. Go to www.freecycle.com and identify your location. Join your local group with an e-mail message. After you sign up, you'll get a message on how the group works.

Ask for that easel you want to add to the playground, for example, before you go out to buy one. A group member may have one cluttering the garage and be ready to pass it on to your program.

- **Model creativity for children.** In working with young children, we want to encourage and appreciate their natural inclination toward creative thinking. One of the most important steps we can take in doing this is to exercise our own creativity. Remember, everybody has some.

When we model a creative attitude for children, we are fostering a positive, creative, accepting environment where children feel safe to ask questions, create, and ultimately learn.

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About the author

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