

Cultivating Children's Creativity

By Susan Hennies

"The role of imagination or the ability to think in images is recognized as an important component in creative thinking. Albert Einstein said he discovered the theory of relativity by picturing himself riding on a ray of light," writes Rahima Baldwin in [You Are Your Child's First Teacher](#). Imagination and creativity, like muscles, need exercise to grow. Children have a natural drive to exercise these "muscles," just as they are driven to practice crawling or walking. Although each child has a unique timetable, most begin to work with rudimentary imagination by age two and a half. By eleven or twelve the imaginative capacity is much less pronounced, although it may have transformed into various forms of creativity. The stronger the foundation, the stronger the re-emergence of imagination and creativity in adult life. Here are seven planks for this strong foundation:

1. Stick to classic toys which require

visualization and imagination: The best toys are often the least expensive. Encourage your child to use appropriate suitable objects from the house or from nature. Old sheets, a laundry line, and some clothespins are the makings of a better tent than the one in the latest toy catalogue. When buying toys, choose classics that can transform with your child's mind and needs. Wooden blocks, a sand box, square yards of solid colored, light weight cloth, hand push trucks or trains without a lot of detail, a soft doll with simple facial features, a basket of sea shells (too large to choke on), and a sturdy child's tea set will be put to various purposes for many years. Making "tea" at age two may evolve, by age five, into an elaborate party. As a family child care provider I once had the privilege of observing such a party engaging a group of children for over four hours! Clothes were draped over furniture to make houses and over children to make costumes (including yellow for long golden hair). Dolls, dressed in their best, sat at a flower laden table with a large cake (a flat piece of wood), as the birthday doll unwrapped scraps of tissue covering her gifts. Her visitors had carefully made party favors, and party games were enacted in great detail. (Compare this to the imagination needed to push the button on a battery-operated doll which repeats 10 stilted sentences.) As Joseph Chilton Pearce says, "...play is the only way the highest intelligence of humankind can unfold."

2. TELL stories to your child regularly. I do mean TELL, as contrasted with reading. There are marvelous picture books for children and I firmly believe in regular snuggle and read sessions. Storytelling, however, is a different experience. When you tell a story, your child must bring that story to life with his or her own pictures, visualizing the princess or the wicked witch in the perfect way for that child at that time. With a picture, however lovely, the artist has preset the image. When you tell a story, you make eye contact with your child. This special connection enables you to feel when to tone the story down or juice it up. You can sense you have your child's attention – it's an interactive process different from reading. Over time you will begin to "see" your child visualizing by looking at his or her face. Tell stories about your childhood, read fairy tales several times to yourself and tell them – not word for word, but with your own bits of color. The deeper you delve into the process, the richer experience your listening child will have. You may find yourself making up stories; your child may make them up as well. Don't be afraid of repetition. It's soothing to young children, and a good story has enough meat for repeated tellings.

3. Be worthy of imitation. It's a sobering moment the first time your darling scolds Teddy in exactly that exasperated tone of voice you used yesterday. Young children take in every nuance of your body language, tone of voice, even your unspoken attitude about what you do. They cement this into their bodies through imitation and it forms their picture of the world. Do you have a regular creative outlet you enjoy? Do you attend musical, artistic, or dramatic events with your child? Our community has many free and low cost opportunities to expose your child to the arts. Role model the joy of creativity.

4. Facilitate your child's artistic exploration.

Guide, show and suggest when asked, but encourage your child to do as much as possible. Concentrate on the PROCESS, not the product. Find something you can genuinely appreciate in anything your child creates, and express your appreciation openly. Be wary of creating alongside your child; your high skill level can easily discourage your imitative youngster. Make sure plenty of raw materials are available, such as (depending on

age) playdough, clay, scissors, tape, glue, crayons, markers, construction paper, nuts, seeds, shells, dried noodles, string, beads, paint brushes, tempera, watercolors, finger paint, chalk, yarn, bits of wrapping paper or wall paper, dried pressed flowers or leaves and other materials. It can also include simple musical instruments, dress up clothes, crowns and costumes. Music and drama are art forms, too. Let your child discover as much as possible. To experience blue water color paint flowing into red to make purple is worth a thousand words.

5. Play with language. Talk to your child from birth or before. Read, recite nursery rhymes, narrate what your little one is doing. "Are you petting the puppy? The puppy likes you." (Don't use "baby talk" or your child will, too.) Once your child is talking, make up silly poems and songs, explore rhyming words, roll sounds around on your tongue for the pure pleasure of it. Start storytelling circles where each person tells the story for one minute and then passes it to the next. Enjoy the twists and turns. Search out poetry. Play scrabble. Put word magnets on the refrigerator. Have family valentine verse contests. Write a paragraph leaving blanks for some nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Ask your child to fill the blanks, giving part of speech clues only, then laugh together at the silly results. Expose your child to rich language daily, both in conversation and reading. I know a child growing up on an organic farm where the adults have limerick competitions to communicate about daily tasks. This child composes astounding limericks. She also writes marvelous short stories with rich word images and sophisticated vocabulary.

6. Cultivate wonder. One of the gifts of parenting is learning to see things through the wondering eyes of our children. We can catch the spark from them and develop it into a flame to warm them in turn. Take the time to look at life's details with the your child's fresh eyes. Don't be afraid to personify. Talking about "sister moon" inspires the reverence and intimacy which keep wonder alive. (Save scientific explanations for the older child, when the powers of true analytical thinking are being honed.) The world abounds with miracles. A simple beeswax crayon contains the incredible journey of the honeybee visiting lovely flowers to gather the pollen to store in the honeycomb. Perhaps the colors of those very flowers are even now in this crayon. If you feel the wonder yourself as you share the story, your child will see the world with awe. In such vision creativity thrives.

electronic games are created by rapidly sweeping photons, too fast for the eye to follow. Exposure to these causes the eye muscles to "give up," stay open, and simply allow the image to fall on the retina passively, creating the famous "television stare." (A Real Life, Fall 1999) Powerful electronic multi-media images sink deeply into a child's memory and psyche. Your child is the passive receiver, disabling the imaginative capacity. The American Academy of Pediatrics, as cited in *The New York Times*, recommends that "children under 2 years old should not watch television, older children should not have television sets in their bedrooms." I believe children under five are best served with almost no visual media exposure. After age five, limit viewing to judiciously chosen videos or programs, and interact with your child about what you've seen. Try exploring different endings, talking about how a red-haired hero would have fared instead, how the story might have changed if it happened in a different time or place. You want to stimulate the imagination and break up the frozen images as much as possible. Let children digest what they have seen by working with it in some artistic way. The more they work physically and verbally with it, the more they own it and make it pliable.

Most importantly, let your child see you doing creative things you enjoy. Happy creating!

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7. Seriously limit media. Television and