Creativity is Not the Same in Everyone

Understanding and Appreciating the Differences

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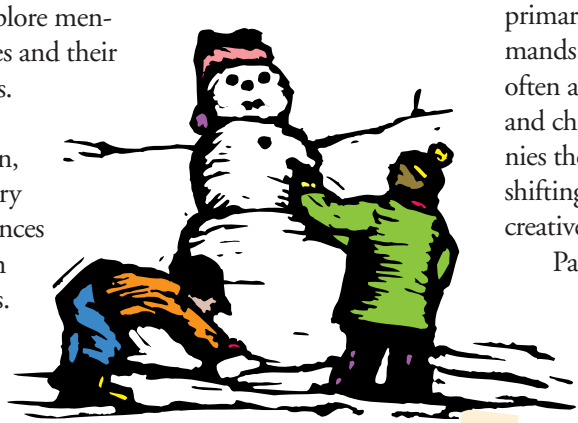
Creativity is natural and readily apparent in the curiosity, imagination, and playfulness of young children. It's common for young children to be spontaneous, open to many ideas and experiences, imaginative, and filled with wonder and delight with the discoveries they make about themselves and their world every day. All children grow and develop in their own individual, unique ways, and at any age level or period of development, considerable variation from one child to another is normal. Consider, for example, the fact that there is typically a very wide range of developmental differences among children even in such skills as walking and talking. In general, then, it is possible to describe some broad stages of growth and development in children's thinking, but these are only guidelines— statistical statements about how and when changes may occur, rather than hard and fast rules by which to form expectations for any individual child's progress.

Children from about two to six or seven years of age tend to deal with ideas much like they deal with so many other parts of their life— vigorously, actively, and physically. They learn and express themselves through action, and many parts of their world are defined by the actions involved in them (as in, "a ball is to throw…"). As they grow older, they become better able to deal with pictures or other symbols, and with words, but from six or seven until the pre-teen years, their thinking is at its best when they have direct access to concrete, "hands on" objects and experiences. As they enter adolescence, their ability increases to: reason abstractly; deal effectively with possibilities or speculations, and with ideas they haven't encountered in a direct or concrete way; and explore mentally many possibilities and their possible consequences.

In relation to creative thinking, then, pre-school and primary children need experiences and activities they can do in very active ways. You will probably see their creativity in their physical play, and in their movement— skipping, climbing, dancing, and discovering movement and the senses. Elementary children still enjoy and use concrete objects to explore and imagine, but they will also become better able to use images, such as drawing or painting, to express new ideas in concrete ways. During the elementary years, they also begin to gain confidence and experience in using language and can use words in poems, stories, plays, or songs to express their imagination and ideas. As they mature, their ability expands to use many ways of expressing ideas and to experiment with new ways of creating and using ideas; the full palette of creative expression becomes more accessible.



Although the development of creativity and other thinking skills is generally orderly, and children steadily become more mature and competent as thinkers, there are in these regards— as just about everywhere in life— a good many ups and downs. Some of these will be highly individual, depending very much on the child's own experiences and development. Others are more general and therefore usually fairly predictable.

In modern, complex, highly developed societies, for example, researchers and educators often observed that there will be a slump or apparent decline in creative thinking in children at about the fourth-grade level, and again at about the seventh-grade level. These seem to be, in part, a natural ebb-and-flow in the course of development, but in much larger part, indicators of the strong effects of social and cultural factors. Fourth grade, for example, is often a period of considerable uncertainty and transition in schooling. It often marks the transition from the primary years to the intermediate grades, with increased demands and expectations on students. Similarly, seventh grade is often a period of considerable physical and psychological growth and change, marking the turbulence that commonly accompanies the adolescent years. These times of uncertainty, change, and shifting expectations and experiences seem to be disruptive to creative thinking.

Parents and teachers should be aware of these natural developmental trends and periods of change, so they will be able to recognize and support their children's needs in

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appropriate ways, and so they will not become overly concerned when periods of change or disruption occur. These changes do not mean that you, or anyone else, has done something wrong, nor that the child's creativity has been crushed or irreparably damaged! Continue to provide opportunities and challenges that will capture your children's attention and engage their creative thinking.

STYLES AND CREATIVE THINKING

Creativity will not be expressed the same way in every child, teen, or adult. People differ from each other in many, many ways; everyone is truly unique. We differ in

height, weight, and hair color; in interests, talents, and abilities; in personality; and in our preferences for many of the ways we learn, think, behave, and relate to other people. We control some of these differences more (or less!) than others. You would probably say, in at least some ways, "I am what I am; I didn't choose to be that way— it's just who I am and what I'm like." In a number of other ways, you might have much more choice and control about what you're like and how you operate. Knowing where those differences came from isn't really as important as understanding them and knowing how they influence your life and actions.

Some of these differences, which are often described as learning styles, have to do with the preferences that guide how we deal with many people and situations in life and how we approach learning and doing new and challenging tasks. When we first began studying many aspects of learning styles, we asked whether there was a certain kind of learning style that was associated with creative people. We tried to find out whether highly creative people learned and worked in consistently different ways from less creative people. The results were rather surprising: we were unable to find one common set of learning style preferences or characteristics for all creatively successful people. In fact, there were major differences among the people! Gradually, we began to understand that there was a better way to approach the question. Instead of trying to find one "creative" learning style, we began to realize that a person's learning style guides him or her in expressing creativity in the most appropriate and effective ways. That is, your creativity takes its form and expression through your learning style preferences. There's not just one way to be creative. As you understand the ways you function best, you discover the most promising avenues or pathways for your creativity to come forward.

Sometimes, for example, at any age level creativity can take the form of generating new and different ways of doing things. This kind of strikingly different, bold, adventurous, "break the mold completely" kind of thinking is one way to be creative, and it has been popularized as "thinking out of the box." For these people, the structure of the box becomes a barrier to their creativity. But "thinking out of the box" is not the only way to be creative, and it isn't everyone's style to operate that way. (Thank goodness— if it were, every rule, every procedure, and every way of doing anything might be up for grabs every day!) Other people express their creativity by making existing things work better, smoother, or more effectively. They can be just as creative working within the existing framework as are those who are busy building new frameworks. We might think of this as "thinking better inside the box." These people might modify, move, redecorate, or find other ways to make a better box! The structure of the box actually can be a tool for them, enabling creative thought.

Some people are at their best when they're in a group, sharing and discussing ideas actively and energetically, while others are at their sharpest and most ingenious when they can go off by themselves and mull the task over thoroughly in solitude. Some people want to use their senses to gather all the data they can before working on an idea; others discover new possibilities intuitively, playing their hunches and ignoring details to look at the bigger picture. Some people are their best working with plans, with images on paper or on a computer screen, and when they can be logical and rational. Others are much more immediately concerned with the needs, reactions, and feelings of people, and direct their creative energies to harmony and personal relationships.

Style researchers have also helped us to understand other ways people differ as they learn and work. These factors include: time of day, amount and kind of structure, sources of motivation, working with different kinds of learning materials, creating an appropriate physical environment, working alone or with others, need for mobility or for intake (food, beverages), and preferences for light, sound, or temperature (as when a parent says, "put on your sweater… I'm cold!").

For parents, the important message is really very simple: help your children to discover how they are best able to think, learn, and create and provide opportunities for them to develop and use those strengths. Be aware that a child's level of creativity may rise or fall based on developmental, social, or task challenges that are certain to arise in anyone's life from time to time. Be ready to support them as they use their skills to deal with those challenges. Help them to be creative in their own best way, not in some stereotyped, one-size-fits-all expectation about what creativity is or how creative people are supposed to act!

RECOMMENDED READING AND WEBSITES

Dunn, R., Dunn, K., & Treffinger, D. (1992). ***Bringing Out the Best in Your Child***. New York: John Wiley.

Meisgeier, C., & Meisgeier, C. (1989). ***A Parent's Guide to Type: Individual Differences at Home and in School***. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

For information about the Dunn and Dunn learning styles approach, visit The International Learning Styles Network website at www.learningstyles.net.

For information about psychological type, visit the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT) website, www.capt.org.

For information on problem solving style, visit the Center for Creative Learning website at www.creativelearning.com/Problemsolving.htm.

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