

Raising The Creative Child

By Dr. Courtney Crim

Let me introduce you to a child you may recognize. This child lives at my house and I am often guilty of looking at her in wonder, questioning where this little person came from, and what on earth I am going to do with her. Our daily issues seem small when compared to the larger challenge of teaching this small individual – the one that she is so quickly striving to become - how to function in a world that many times values behaviors that are different from her own. It is ironic that this same world that often values conformity will need individuals who look at the world through a different lens and who will find new solutions to the ever-changing questions that arise.

The Challenge

Like many young children, Payton exhibits unlimited energy, little need for sleep (so valued by her parents), and a spirit far beyond her four years. From infancy, she has demonstrated a curious mind and a determination always to be involved with events around her. Her presence is one that cannot be ignored. This presence, however, can be due to her pleasing charm or her difficult behavior – depending on her mood. Does this sound familiar? The world is a game that unfolds and develops as children grow; they are constantly acquiring more information and schema to work with. The rules are constantly shifting. The challenge as a parent is to develop guiding rules by which we can all live, without threatening the zest for life and the ability to meet new obstacles head on. We need to seek out and create partnerships with other adults who share our goals and can help facilitate positive creative development in our children.

A Different World

Many times, children who demonstrate their creativity early in life first realize their differences as they interact with their peers. One interesting experience Payton shared involved her early school activities. When taking turns picking songs to sing, she happily sang with those choosing *ABC's*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, and *Bingo*. When her turn came, the other children looked at her as if she were crazy as she belted out *The Day the Music Died (American Pie)*, by Don McLean. Her conversation

on the way home included that she had a very bad day, she did not want to go back to school, she felt different from the other kids, she didn't like this feeling, and how come the other kids didn't know her song anyway? After much discussion at home and working with a very understanding teacher, we remedied this situation by sending the CD to school so "the other kids would know it was a real song." She realized that she sometimes thought of things differently than the other children. At some point in their young lives, individuals who demonstrate higher levels of creativity earlier on realize that they may see the world from a different perspective than many of their peers.

Just as we can share the experience and excitement of a new "ah-ha" moment, parents can also experience sadness when their child feels hurt or disappointment at any scale. You and I may say, "it's just a song" but, to her, it was a realization that maybe she sometimes thinks differently than her friends. This realization is the beginning of creative consciousness originally discussed by Abraham Maslow. The realization that their thought processes may not be the norm, and that every individual experiences the world differently is a common experience shared by children who exhibit many of the characteristics associated with creativity. Although this experience is typical for children who exhibit gifted or creative characteristics, parents are not always prepared when it is their own child. It is possible to miss or overlook the signs of what was actually going on. The challenge, as these youngsters begin to realize differences, is to identify the non-conformity and praise the differences while helping to build a supportive and safe environment in which children can grow and continue to develop their creative consciousness.

In School

It is amazing to watch a person function who has no concept of her own limits. As parents, we often wonder when this acknowledgement of limitations may develop; they are children after all... It is interesting to find yourself sometimes wishing the very behaviors that at times make your child unique would disappear in favor of a calmer family environment. As the

world gets more hectic and many of our schools ask for conformity, the behaviors that are often associated with creativity can hinder acceptance. This is the situation we found ourselves in as our daughter rounded 4 1/2. She isn't a genius who can read at 3, do long division, or compose symphonies, but she is part of a large group of children who are above their peers in analytical/intellectual abilities, relate better to adults than children and, early on, show a well-developed understanding of creative thought. Unfortunately, many school districts provide gifted programs based on academically gifted characteristics alone. School programs that only identify and support high academic achievement potentially miss or can even hinder creative development. Additionally, many schools give little focus to enhancing creative potential in all children. As the children who develop their own creative consciousness at a younger age begin to see their differences, they often conform to their peers in order to minimize these differences and gain acceptance.

It is important, as a parent, not to underestimate our child's contributions but to open our eyes to how our child is expressing her creativity. For several reasons, some of which may include the structure of a classroom and the pressure of peer socialization, many children tend to experience a slight dip in creative expression and open curiosity as they initially enter school and again around 4th grade. Westby and Dawson conducted research in this area and, as they explored creativity in children, offered a list describing creative behaviors most typically associated with creativity as well as those behaviors least associated with creativity as derived from experts in the field. The characteristics Westby and Dawson found as most typical and least typical of a creative child are listed in the accompanying box.

The traits most often and least often identified as being associated with creativity are found, to some extent, in every individual. However, the combination and intensity of these traits is where creativity begins to develop and grow. It is interesting to identify the traits so evident in your own child and be gratefully reminded from whence some of her "difficult" behaviors may stem. Many children who display characteristics of creativity demonstrate a variety of these traits on a daily basis. However, some of these traits are often not conducive to the public school classroom. It is our responsibility, as parents, educators, and advocates, to help build partnerships with our schools so that the environments children experience support and foster these creative tendencies. Approaches such as differentiated instruction, interest-based study, and project-based curriculum allow these behaviors a place to exist without compromising the responsibility of the teacher to educate a classroom full of individual learners.

Behaviors most typical of creativity

- Makes up the rules as he/she goes along
- Impulsive
- Nonconformist
- Emotional
- Progressive
- Risk taker
- Independent
- Determined
- Individualistic
- Takes chances
- Tends not to know own limitations and tries to do what others think is impossible
- Likes to be alone when creating something new

Behaviors least typical of creativity

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|-----------------|----------------|
| • Tolerant | • Practical |
| • Reliable | • Dependable |
| • Responsible | • Logical |
| • Understanding | • Appreciative |
| • Good-natured | • Sincere |
| • Peaceable | • Steady |

Adapted from Westby & Dawson (1995)

Support at Home

The resistance to many creative behaviors that may be expressed by some schools can create frustration at home. Have you found yourself wishing for more of the "least typical" behaviors as your child brings home behavior reports and teacher notes? As a parent, it is easy to voice frustration about many of the research-based "creative" behaviors demonstrated by your child. This frustration is often shared by parents if they receive the message that their child would do better to conform. The bottom line is: when the challenging behaviors are so close to home, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture. Is my child a behavior problem or does she have ADHD? Is my child a day dreamer or is she involved in creative thinking? Rather, we need to realize that all of these options can be manifested in various degrees and kinds of creative expression. The daily challenge of guiding and living with an individual who naturally exhibits creative thinking, a very young one at that, can evoke reactions from the parent that unknowingly diminish the creative aspects of child's personality. Yet, developing an understanding of what the characteristics associated with creativity may look like can help parents and teachers see children through a different lens.

Valuing Differences

It took a step back and new perspective to remind me that many of our daily interactions are indeed valuable. The opportunity to raise a spirited child who strongly exhibits her creativity is an experience to be valued. As parents, it is our responsibility to reinforce the value of a child's personality in a world that may or may not always appreciate the same traits. We need to guide their development in an environment that may push for conformity. I am sure many parents agree that, at times, it is difficult not to lose focus. As parents of young children we need to remind ourselves to be their advocates and continue to read and learn about them. Payton will be in Kindergarten in the fall, and I now recognize that the behaviors she exhibits in connection with her creative thinking may, although unintentionally in most cases, face changes. It will be important to advocate that she be included in a classroom where the teacher's style and instruction supports her creative development. Teachers who are supportive of the behaviors associated with creativity and who recognize and value these creative characteristics can do wonders with a child who exhibits such traits in their classrooms. This risk-free environment that values the individual child who is the classroom I will seek out as a parent, and will support and develop as an educator.

Westby and Dawson also investigated which behaviors were valued by classroom teachers. Teachers' perceptions of characteristics associated with creativity agreed with the experts in the field of creativity only 40% of the time. Teachers reported behaviors they considered to be reflective of creativity that disagreed with previous research. Behavior traits such as sincere, responsible, good-natured, reliable, and logical appeared at the top of the teachers' creative behaviors list. As a public school educator, it is important to mention that all of these behaviors are desirable in the classroom and create a calmer classroom structure. Additionally, many of the characteristics the researchers identified as least typical still manifest themselves in various degrees in individuals who demonstrate creative thinking. However, adjectives associated by researchers as most typical of a creative child (including the top four characteristics): making up own rules as she/he goes long, impulsive, nonconformist, and emotional, were identified by teachers as being least associated with creativity. It is evident that many of the traits linked with creativity that are embodied in young children are not always valued or encouraged by teachers as these youngsters enter school. We need to partner with teachers in our children's schools and share knowledge of these creative characteristics. We need to be the first to volunteer to organize and support programs that allow our children outlets for their creative behaviors as well as channels for development of their creative growth. Working with teachers, helping facilitate creatively based programs, and supporting the schools

Programs to Develop Creative Behaviors

Camp Invention is a week-long summer program that lets children use their imagination through team work, creative problem solving, and inventive thinking. www.invent.org

Destination ImagiNation® is an international program that inspires participants to practice and learn the process, art, and skill associated with Creative Problem Solving. www.destinationimagination.org

Future Problem Solving Program stimulates critical and creative thinking. It encourages students, worldwide, to develop a vision for the future through competitive and non-competitive participation. www.fpsp.org

Odyssey of the Mind is an international program that provides opportunities for students to apply creative problem solving. www.odysseyofthemind.com

can all help develop the partnerships that will be necessary to promote creativity. Several popular creativity programs are listed in the box above.

It is sometimes difficult to go against popularly accepted behaviors or to accept a C on the report card because your child decided the project made more sense THIS way. This does not mean that I advocate promoting defiant or disruptive behaviors (indeed the behaviors listed by researcher as most typical of a creative child are difficult to manage in a classroom), all children certainly need limits and a classroom should maintain these limits. However, teachers who themselves think creatively are more apt to value these challenging behaviors in their classrooms. Locating and supporting these wonderful teachers who support children and their growth as creative individuals is imperative. Our job as parents is to recognize traits that embody the creative nature of our children and honor them. We need to guide them gently and not be one of the many factors that extinguish their creativity. We need to find teachers who will join us on this quest while we do all we can to support this partnership. Just as children learn through modeling, teachers and schools can learn to accept and support creative behaviors in children as parents and educators model such acceptance and understanding.

Raising a child is never an easy task, but it is an eventful and challenging journey – a journey all parents share as our children embody so many different combinations and intensities of creative traits. The creative behaviors demonstrated by children can seem obnoxious, but at the same time, useful. Regardless, they are also reflective of creative thinking. These behaviors can be guided without being suppressed as we protect the traits that make our children unique individuals and offer them opportunity for expression. When the frustration level rises, as it will, gaining a better understanding of creativity as a construct will help you deal with your child in a positive way. Know that their behaviors are indicative of their talents and, as you guide them through the 120th question of the day, remember to be grateful that your child thinks to ask so many great questions. As you read about the behaviors associated with your child, smile and remember what an amazing opportunity it is to know such a unique little person and advocate for her creative development. As you meet and work with those wonderful teachers who value the creative development in children, validate their work, and promote these educators to others. The partnerships between you and your child, between you and the teachers, between you and the schools, are multifaceted and need a creative approach, just as the development of creative traits in every individual.

Recommended Resources

- Davis, G. A. (2004). *Creativity Is Forever*. (5th ed.) Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Davis, G. A. & Rimm, S. B. (1998). *Education Of The Gifted And Talented*. (4th ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cramond, B. (1994). Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and creativity: What is the connection? *Journal Of Creative Behavior*, 28 (3), 193-205.
- Strom, R. D. & Strom, P. S. (2002). Changing the rules: Education for creative thinking. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 36, 183-200.
- Torrance, E. P. (1965). *Rewarding creative behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Westby, E. L. & Dawson, V. L. (1995). Creativity: Asset or burden in the classroom? *Creativity Research Journal*, 8, 1-10.
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