

7 Ways to Foster Creativity in Your Kids

Many people assume that creativity is an inborn talent that their kids either do or do not have: just as all children are not equally intelligent, all children are not equally creative. But actually, creativity is more skill than inborn talent, and it is a skill parents can help their kids develop.



Because it is a key to success in nearly everything we do, creativity is a key component of health and happiness and a core skill to practice with kids. Creativity is not limited to artistic and musical expression—it is also essential for science, math, and even social and emotional intelligence. Creative people are more flexible and better problem solvers, which makes them more able to adapt to technological advances and deal with change—as well as take advantage of new opportunities.

Many researchers believe we have fundamentally changed the experience of childhood in such a way that impairs creative development. Toy and entertainment companies feed kids an endless stream of prefab characters, images, props and plot-lines that allow children to put their imaginations to rest. Children no longer need to imagine a stick is a sword in a game or story they've imagined: they can play Star Wars with a specific light-saber in costumes designed for the specific role they are playing.

Here are some ideas for fostering creativity in your kids:

1. **Provide the resources they need for creative expression.** The key resource here is time. Kids need a lot of time for unstructured, child-directed, imaginative play—unencumbered by adult direction, and that doesn't depend on a lot of commercial stuff. Space is also a resource your kids need. Unless you don't mind creative messes everywhere, give them a specific place where they can make a mess, like room in your attic for dress-up, a place in the garage for painting, or a corner in your family room for Legos. Next time someone asks for a gift suggestion for your kids, ask for things like art supplies, cheap cameras, costume components, building materials. Put these in easy-to-deal-with bins that your kids can manage.
2. **Make your home a Petri dish for creativity.** In addition to creative spaces, you need to foster a creative atmosphere. Solicit a high volume of different ideas, but resist the urge to evaluate the ideas your kids come up with. At dinnertime, for example, you could brainstorm activities for the upcoming weekend, encouraging the kids to come up with things they've never done before. Don't point out which ideas aren't possible, and don't decide which ideas are best. The focus of creative activities should be on process: generating (vs. evaluating) new ideas. Encourage kids to make mistakes and fail. Yes, fail—kids who are afraid of failure and judgment will curb their own creative thought. Share the mistakes you've made recently, so they get the idea that it is okay to flub up. Laughing at yourself when you blow it is a happiness habit. Celebrate innovation and creativity. Cover your walls with art and other evidence of creative expression. Tell your kids all about your favorite artists, musicians, and scientists. Share your passion for architecture or photography or that new band you want to listen to all the time. Embrace new technologies like Twitter so your kids grow to find change exciting, not over-whelming or intimidating.
3. **Allow kids the freedom and autonomy to explore their ideas and do what they want.** Try not to be bossy. External constraints—making them color within the lines, so to speak—can reduce flexibility in thinking. In one study, just demonstrating how to put together a model reduced the creative ways that kids accomplished this task.
4. **Encourage children to read for pleasure and participate in the arts.** Limit TV and other screen time in order to make room for creative activities like rehearsing a play, learning to draw, reading every book written by a favorite author.

5. **Give children the opportunity to express "divergent thought."** Let them disagree with you. Encourage them to find more than one route to a solution, and more than one solution to a problem. When they successfully solve a problem, ask them to solve it again but to find a new way to do it (same solution, different route). Then ask them to come up with more solutions to the same problem.
6. **Don't reward children for exhibiting creativity:** incentives interfere with the creative process, reducing the quality of their responses and the flexibility of their thought. Allow children to develop mastery of creative activities that they are intrinsically motivated to do, rather than trying to motivate them with rewards and incentives. Instead of rewarding a child for practicing the piano, for example, allow her to do something she enjoys more – maybe sit at her desk and draw or take a science class.
7. **Try to stop caring what your kids achieve.** Emphasize process rather than product. One way you can do this is by asking questions about the process – Did you have fun? Are you finished? What did you like about that activity?

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