

***raise a trailblazer**

You can encourage innovative thinking by letting your child take the lead.

By Wendy Mogel, Ph.D.

The 5-year-old girl stood out from the throng of hikers striding up a steep hill. While the adults plowed upward, she leaned down, concentrating on selecting the next dusty rock worthy of adding to the collection she'd gathered up in the delicate tulle of her pink tutu. Her mother stood patiently nearby, neither encouraging nor discouraging, or commenting on, her young ballerina-geologist's project. I wanted to give this woman a high five.

Rather than simply following the familiar path, the girl was immersed in her own compelling discoveries—and this childlike willingness to blaze one's own trail may just be the most crucial skill for the 21st century. In our era of rapid change and daunting job competition, experts say that the capacity for thinking creatively and bravely doing one's own thing is essential for future success.

After all, the modern definition of creativity isn't just being imaginative, expressive, or artistic. It involves using mental muscles, planning, and self-control to produce something that is both original and useful. Many kids today will grow up to have jobs that haven't even been invented yet, so being able to find fresh solutions to ever-changing challenges is more valuable than ever.

Indeed, according to an IBM survey of 1,500 CEOs, creativity is now considered to be the most valuable trait for managers. Fascinating research by Jonathan Plucker, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, in Storrs, found that creativity tests given to elementary-school students in the 1950s were three times better than IQ tests at predicting adult achievements more than 30 years later. Having a creative outlook may mean that kids will grow up to design a radical new piece of software, discover a cancer cure, mediate a thorny global dispute, or found an innovative nonprofit.

It's helpful to know that there are two general approaches to problem solving: convergent and divergent thinking. Convergent thinking uses prior knowledge and logic to choose the one correct solution. This is the kind of thinking measured by most standardized tests with multiple-choice questions. Eight times seven is 56 ... every time.

Divergent thinking uses facts and experience to generate new ideas. Through brainstorming and free-flowing experimentation, solutions are tried on for size, and unexpected connections emerge. Of course, this is the mind-set that's integral to creativity, and it's what researchers like Dr. Plucker try to assess with quantitative creativity tests. For example, how many different uses can you think of for a paper clip?

As a psychologist specializing in helping parents raise self-reliant, resilient, enthusiastic children, I have the opportunity to study family dynamics and parental expectations on a micro level in my private practice, while taking a macro view of larger trends when I give talks to parents and educators around the world. For the past year, I've also been interviewing employers about their new hires as part of research for my next book, and I've heard repeatedly that young adults are often afraid to think out of the box.

The good news is that all children are endowed with massive creative potential. They may be natural philosophers, physicists, theologians, fresco artists, rappers, choreographers, general contractors, and even poets. Masters of the colorful metaphor! Sadly, however, cuts in arts funding, the emphasis on standardized testing, and parents' fears about giving kids freedom to explore on their own are making it increasingly difficult for children to follow their creative instincts. That's why we need to give them room to discover and lead the way.

Be an Enchanted Observer

Like the mom who watched her small daughter curate a dirty rock collection without panicking over a potential tear in a tutu, you can help your child develop creative zeal by doing less rather than more. "Treat your child like a seed that came in a packet without a label," an anonymous educator once said. "You can't tell what kind of flower you're going to get or in what season it will bloom. Your job is to pull the biggest weeds, provide sufficient food and water, and stand back and wait."

Of course, when it seems like every other parent is racing to music lessons, private sports coaching, and Kumon sessions, doing "less" can feel like neglect, like swimming against the tide of parents readying their children for a global race. In fact, our culture's focus on showcasing kids' talents—as if every night is opening night on Broadway—can make them inhibited or even rebellious. The child who feels pressure to contribute his gifts to the family portfolio may withhold them.

One boy told me that he was writing a secret play. “Why secret?” I asked. “I’m hiding it from my parents because if they find out, they’ll get too excited and then I won’t want to do it anymore.”

For loving parents, it’s tempting to offer praise for every brushstroke, lyric, or strum. Yet making a big fuss over every creative gesture can sow the seeds of doubt rather than pride: “My mom thinks I’m such a great artist, so I better not draw something that will disappoint her.” Instead, just be a cherishing witness. Appreciate your child’s effort and intrinsic pleasure in his work. Talk casually about the process, not the end product.

Go With the Flow

On a beach vacation, I befriended the mother of 2-year-old Theo. I sat with her as she watched him fill a bucket with sand, carefully pour the sand into a sieve, jiggle the sieve to get all the particles through, and then scoop up the pile with the bucket and begin again. She told me he’d been doing this for three hours. “It’s so hard,” she said. “I want to interrupt him and ask, ‘What color is the bucket?’ or ‘How many toys do you see?’ But I keep reminding myself that this is Theo’s vacation too.”

Children often seem to have a short attention span, but they can become deeply engrossed. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ph.D., founding codirector of the Quality of Life Research Center at the Claremont Graduate University, in California, has devoted his career to studying how creativity emanates from what he calls a state of flow: engaging in a challenging and pleasurable activity so intently that you lose track of time.

By letting Theo concentrate on his sand and strainer, his mother was introducing the toddler to the experience and habit of flow. As he grows older, this kind of focused and uninterrupted play might lead to the creation of elaborate sand castles and perhaps later to the design of new buildings or parks.

Embrace Nature

In our digital age, spending time outdoors is especially invigorating for children. Using all five senses in the three-dimensional world bathes the mind and the body in the kinds of rich sensations that can’t be had with a screen. Playing and exploring in nature encourages children

to repurpose materials and be inventive. Certainly, nature has always inspired painters and poets. As Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, “Find tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.”

Resist the urge to turn play into school. There is much to teach your child about the natural world, but he’ll be more mesmerized if discussions are driven by his own curiosity.

Keep Eyes on the Prize

Although it’s normal for young kids to want to explore in different directions, we should be striving to inspire them to have patience and commitment. Unfortunately, when every 5-year-old’s dance class ends in a “recital” with bouquets, and every “emerging artists” exhibition is heralded with publicity, it distorts our children’s perception of what is worthy of celebration and the effort required for real success.

Researchers who are studying the factors that help kids accomplish great things are now focusing on grit—the ability to stick with a goal even when the going gets tough. Gritty people are more like the tortoise than the hare, says Angela Duckworth, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and they’re less likely to get discouraged or distracted by new interests.

How can you help your child develop creative grit? When she’s involved with something that truly captivates her, she’ll be more motivated to stick with it. Your job is to notice and respect her unique gifts and inclinations—even if they are not ones that are typically recognized by teachers and coaches. Then try to give her the tools, materials, or opportunities to help her hone her craft, whatever that is.

Kids need to develop skills in areas like music, art, science, woodworking, computer programming, or writing in order to be truly creative, and that requires time, practice, and sometimes even tears. This type of discipline and hard work is embodied by the spread of Maker Faires (makerfaire.com) around the country, family festivals in which kids and adults showcase their DIY creations that celebrate “invention, creativity, and resourcefulness.” To encourage persistence, make space in your home for ongoing projects—block cities, murals, machine constructions, or botany experiments—so that they don’t have to be cleaned up every day and

can unfold over time.

Celebrate the Power of Play

Of course, young children should be focused on play rather than work. Creative play—whether it’s building a rocket ship or pretending to be aliens with a group of friends—teaches your child to rehearse scenarios in his mind and anticipate that his efforts will pay off in a way that delights others. As Bruce Nussbaum, professor of innovation and design at Parsons School of Design, in New York City, says in his book *Creative Intelligence*, “When people are playing, they take risks they would not ordinarily take. They experience failure not as a crushing blow but as an idea they tried that didn’t work. Play transforms problems into challenges, seriousness into fun, one right answer into any number of possible outcomes.”

I believe that young kids whose parents value playfulness can continue to tap into this childlike quality as they get older. As the years go on, it’s easy for us to place increasing emphasis on performance and grades, but I have seen how that has backfired with today’s stressed-out college graduates.

In my interviews with employers, I’ve learned that even young adults who had stellar transcripts and extracurricular activities are struggling on the job. They worry about carrying out assignments perfectly and lack initiative, decisiveness, and a zest for taking on challenges. Wound too tightly to think flexibly, they’re unable to come up with novel connections and solutions—in other words, to be creative visionaries.

Thinking about their bosses’ frustrations reminds me of a high-school art teacher I met. Her students had been stymied when she asked them to do an assignment without very clear parameters. They’d ask, “But what do you want? What will you base the grade on?” Instead of giving them more direction, she decided to stock her art room with Play-Doh, Legos, and jumbo cardboard bricks. The students started coming in during their free periods to play and build—and suddenly they stopped obsessing about their grades on their formal art assignments.

Remembering what it felt like to play and make things as a little kid was the creative fuel they needed to relax and think big.

As for the young ballerina-geologist, she was already on the right trail. No smartphone, no agenda, no educational narration from a parent. Instead, she had self-directed, unhurried immersion in nature and the opportunity to collect the materials needed to curate her own art show titled “My Favorite Rocks. Collected by Me. All by Myself.”

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