



home & school

R E P O R T



Creativity Shows Up Early and in Many Ways

Dr. Karen Meador

Let's look together at some of the behaviors we see in young children that might puzzle, amuse, bewilder, or even occasionally, annoy us. They might be good indications that your child's creativity is showing! Many experts view creativity as a valuable, or even essential, component of giftedness. Children with extremely strong creative thinking abilities are sometimes described as "creatively gifted." In a broader way, creativity contributes to giftedness or talent in many different content or interest areas, including the ways that children use or apply their ability, intelligence, or talent in real-life situations.

Many descriptions and definitions of creativity have been offered by researchers and practitioners, but they tend to agree that in order for the actions or words of a child to be creative, they must be both novel and appropriate. Novelty describes actions or words that involve more than repetition or imitation. Behavior is appropriate if it is meaningful, satisfying, and rewarding to the child or to others. Let's look at an example. One day my three year old crawled into the den with his socks hanging over his ears and the dog's collar around his neck.

Although I readily acknowledged that he was pretending to be a dog, he continued his play by licking my leg and barking each time I asked him a question. Each bark was different, and he seemed to indicate different types of responses for the varied questions. No amount of coaxing could make my son become a boy again. When I tired of the dog game, he continued his fantasy by engaging in various activities such as curling up in the corner on a towel, eating from an

imaginary dog dish and scratching on the door so he could go outside. Eventually, of course, the "dog" disappeared, and the boy returned. My son's actions went beyond imitation, particularly when he changed his barking according to the question.

There are many ways in which we might see creativity in our children's ideas and actions. Some of them appear when children:

- display a keen sense of humor,
- focus deeply on playing,
- enjoy using objects to represent other things,
- enjoy playing alone,
- invent new games,
- display extreme curiosity,
- resist completing a chosen task, or
- exhibit unusual sensitivity.

JOYFUL CREATIVITY

Creative behavior in children can make life interesting for the whole family by providing new perspectives on the ordinary. On several occasions, my daughter transformed yardsticks into snow skis, attached them to her feet with rubber bands, and holding fly swatters in her hands as ski poles, went skiing through the kitchen. This certainly added zest to the mundane task of cooking dinner!

My son enjoyed playing alone and at the age of four, he tape recorded radio shows in which he was the announcer for a local country music station. His shows included musical renditions, such as "Old McDonald Had a Farm," played on the organ; he also sang his original songs, and made up commercials and news announcements. At five, my son planned dramatic stories which he then acted out with the unwilling help of his mother. Most of these stories involved numerous characters who had

continued on page 24





home & school REPORT



continued from page 7

certain words to say on cue. However, I could never remember when to say my lines and my son would become very disgusted with me. In the end, he usually acted the parts of all the characters in the story himself.

Young children also demonstrate creativity in daily conversation. This includes adding humor, as opposed to silliness, to what they say and asking questions that show their curiosity. Years ago, one of my young piano students was extremely curious about why the artist's bench for my grand piano could be raised and lowered. After listening to his questions for several lessons,

we finally turned the bench upside down and examined the apparatus that allowed it to move. Once the boy understood how the bench worked, we were able to move ahead during his piano lessons.

We can also spot creativity in children's responses to questions. For example, I showed a cylinder with a 5 inch diameter and a height of 2 inches to a group of kindergarten students and asked if they knew what the object was or could suggest how it might be used. The cylinder had six small holes around the outside circumference. Common answers given by many of the children suggested that the object was a paper weight, wheel, or pencil holder. More creative answers included a bullet holder for a gun and a Ferris wheel for ants. In the latter two answers we can see that the children are changing a concrete object by looking at it in a new way.

Play is the work of children, and we can spot the intensity of their work by observing children constructing things. For

example, while children work with blocks or Legos®, they are often trying to replicate something they have seen such as a house or vehicle. Signs of creative thinking emerge when children purposefully attempt to modify a structure or create something new. For example, a child building houses with Legos® may initially make a simple rectangular structure, modify it by adding an extra story on one end of the house, and finally build a house in a shape they have not previously observed. It is often apparent that children resist closure on building tasks when work on this type of building project continues for more than one play episode, and they refuse to put away the structures they have created. They may be thinking about how to change a structure while they swing or play with friends and need to be able to return to their “stuff” to try out new ideas. Once they are satisfied, they may be willing to dismantle their buildings. A highly creative first grader once told me, “I wish I could keep the things I’m making away from my little sisters.” He had two younger sisters who often destroyed his buildings and art projects before he was “finished.”

IT'S NOT ALWAYS JOYFUL!

Unfortunately, there also can be some problems along with the joy which can come from your children's creative behavior. Adults as well as other children may become frustrated and impatient when creative curiosity leads to constant questioning.

When children resist closure on tasks, they may appear slow or unmotivated, or they might even refuse to begin tasks which require quick conclusion since they know this can lead to frustration. When working with kindergarten students on tasks which allowed for creative thinking through drawing, I noticed one girl continually refused to finish her job and move on to another activity. The drawing wasn't finished until she was satisfied. Rather than deciding immediately that this is stubborn and nonconforming behavior, we might well consider that the child wants time to think creatively.

Sometimes children's creative behavior tends to result in their being seen as deviant troublemakers. When my son colored his pilgrim purple in his preschool class, the teacher destroyed it in front of his classmates and threw it into the wastebasket while declaring “Pilgrims can't be purple!”

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

Value Creativity. We should value our children for the richness which they add to life and also for their tremendous potential. Early childhood can be a time when creative ideas flow freely, before children begin to be caught up in many new rules and responsibilities at school. We can provide a home environment which allows creative children to thrive while at the same time teaching survival strategies for other settings that might not be as friendly to creative ideas.

Give Freedom and Encouragement. Freedom followed by encouragement is

important to help foster creativity and build self-esteem in young children. Children need the autonomy to pursue activities and projects which interest them without interference from others. Encourage them in gathering their own materials and supplies and refrain from offering assistance that might not really be needed. Don't hover over the activities of your child; just be available when needed. When your child is ready for you to view a project, you will be notified. Praise the effort and creativity used by the child rather than the actual product. The way the child worked, solved problems, and overcame obstacles is most important. Statements such as “you've really been working hard” or “this is very interesting, tell me about it” are more appropriate than saying “this is a beautiful drawing.”

Use Appropriate Questioning Techniques. Ask questions that allow for many and varied answers, and that do not have a pre-determined “right” response. A young child could respond to the question of “how can you arrange your toys differently on the shelves” by demonstrating a variety of arrangements. This differs from asking “how were you taught to put the toys on the shelf?” The second question usually leads to a single right answer.

When reading with a young child, ask some open-ended questions about the story. For example, when reading the story of Little Red Riding Hood, if you ask where Red went when she left her house, you are hoping your child will respond by stating that Red was going to Grandma's house. This question calls for direct recall about the story and is good for developing listening skills. However, if you ask where else Red could have been going you provide an opportunity for your child to think more creatively and produce a novel answer. A good rule of thumb when using questions to facilitate creative thinking is if you know the right answer, it's not a question that provides the opportunity for a creative response.

Provide Opportunities for Creative Thinking. Young children must be given a chance to stretch their thinking beyond common activities. Don't be too hesitant to let them make a mess, dig materials out of drawers and closets, or to express themselves freely. With art activities in particular, a child's creativity may be restricted by a parent who continually says “don't make a mess.” Protect household items during messy activities, teach the children proper respect for things around them, and show them proper use of the materials. Be sure to purchase washable art supplies when possible. An ounce of prevention is far better than an hour of nervous nagging.

Participate in creative activities with your child. This does not mean that you must paint, draw, or make music. Creative thinking develops as we find and solve problems, look at things from varying perspectives, and open our minds to new possibili-



ties. For example, you and your child might randomly gather objects from around the house such as things from the kitchen, bathroom, office, etc. Then ask your child to sort these into three categories. This is more difficult if the objects have come from more than three rooms. After the child has explained how the groups were organized, suggest that they put into three different groups. Your child must use flexible thinking to solve this new problem.

I hope this article will help you observe, enjoy, and love your children's creative ideas and actions, and look forward to the wonderful adventure that may await you with each new day. 🙏

Some suggestions for further reading...

Amabile, T. (1996). *Growing Up Creative: Nurturing a Lifetime of Creativity*. Buffalo, NY: Creative Education Foundation.

Davis, G. A. (1998). *Creativity Is Forever*. (4th Ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

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

Meador, K. (1997). *Creative Thinking and Problem Solving for Young Learners*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press/Libraries Unlimited.

Meador, K. (1999). *It's In The Bag*. Marion, IL: Pieces of Learning.

Saunders, J. (1986). *Bringing Out the Best: A Resource Guide for Parents of Young Gifted Children*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Dr. Karen Meador is an independent consultant who lives in San Marcos, Texas, and specializes in gifted education, creativity, and primary education. She is the author of numerous articles, book chapters, and two books for teachers.

