

Fostering Creativity

By Mary Ann Kohl



There's no doubt about it: Creativity is as natural and necessary for children as fresh air and sunshine! By exposing children to creative experiences, we give them the gift of a rich and memorable childhood while laying the foundation for a lifetime of creative expression — all topped off with a heaping helping of important learning skills.

What Is Creativity?

Creativity focuses on the process of forming original ideas through exploration and discovery. In children, creativity develops from their experiences with the process, rather than concern for the finished product. Creativity is not to be confused with talent, skill, or intelligence. Creativity is not about doing something better than others, it is about thinking, exploring, discovering, and imagining.

Creativity is found in the obvious—art and music, but can also be found in science and play. Because we think of art, music, dance, and drama as examples of creative ideas, we may have forgotten that creative thought is found in all aspects of a growing child's life and can be learned from daily. Just look at how creativity shows itself when a scientist discovers a cure for a disease, how a business owner decides to increase sales, how the grocery clerk bags the groceries, or how a parent finds a way to entice a reluctant child to head off to bed.

Getting Started: Inviting Creativity

Providing the opportunity for creativity is as easy as allowing children to draw with crayons on blank paper, to bang a pot with a wooden spoon in time to music, to build an inviting reading area with blankets and cushions, or to hop and bop to a favorite children's recordings. Something as easy as drawing on a blank surface is surprisingly important. Research shows that children who draw frequently do better in reading and math and will shine at focusing on learning tasks. Choosing their own drawing materials empowers children and opens their eyes to the world around them.

What can we do as teachers to help creativity take hold? When a child presents you with a drawing and says, "Look at what I made!", respond by saying, "Tell me about your drawing," or ask, "What do you like about your drawing?" These open-ended responses let the child evaluate his own creativity while initiating conversation about the work at hand. Try not to guess what that gooey green glob of paint is supposed to be because it may only be a gooey green glob of paint. By not assuming anything about the child's work of art, the door to self-evaluation and communication opens.

How Can Teachers Encourage Creativity?

Encouraging creativity in young children is a process where teachers must open their own channels of allowing, accepting, and turning over some control to the children themselves. James D. Moran III, Dean of the College of Human Ecology at the University of Tennessee, suggests that teachers:

- EMPHASIZE PROCESS RATHER THAN PRODUCT.
- PROVIDE A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT THAT ALLOWS CHILDREN TO EXPLORE AND PLAY WITHOUT UNDUE RESTRAINTS.
- ADAPT TO CHILDREN'S IDEAS RATHER THAN TRYING TO STRUCTURE THE CHILDREN'S IDEAS TO FIT THE ADULT'S.
- ACCEPT UNUSUAL IDEAS FROM CHILDREN BY SUSPENDING JUDGEMENT OF CHILDREN'S DIVERGENT PROBLEM SOLVING.
- USE CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING IN ALL PARTS OF THE CURRICULUM. USE THE PROBLEMS THAT NATURALLY OCCUR IN EVERYDAY LIFE.
- ALLOW TIME FOR CHILDREN TO EXPLORE ALL POSSIBILITIES, MOVING FROM POPULAR TO MORE ORIGINAL IDEAS.

Sparking creativity is enjoyable and easy through common classroom activities. For example, go for a slow walk with your children outdoors and notice the world at hand. Talk about the many colors and precious details of nature. Come back to the classroom and give the children crayons, chalk, or paints to express what they remember seeing. On another day, take drawing materials along with you to a park or out into the schoolyard. Encourage the children to notice something that they might have overlooked before. Drawing is an excellent way for children to see in detail. The creative benefits are immense, and you will have fun, too.

Easy Tips for Nurturing Creativity Through Art

The art area is a favorite for children because it is easy and natural for them to be creative with art materials. The following tips will help you see how easy it is to incorporate creativity in art throughout your classroom.

- **Allow children spontaneous art explorations** they can do on their own. Crafts with directions to follow and planned projects are fine in moderation, but open-ended art should be at least 80 percent of the program. Having a collage area in your classroom is a great way to encourage children's creativity. Save odds and ends in plastic tubs or shoeboxes. Provide tape, glue, stapler, stickers, and cardboard or heavy paper. Watch as children assemble and design their own collages with the materials on hand. Change the buttons to beads and see the collage take on new creativity. Change the paper to cardboard, and it's an all-new experience.
- **Create an art center in your classroom where children can freely explore and discover** on their own with easy materials kept accessible for them. All you need is a table next to low shelves filled with tubs of supplies like crayons, glue, staplers, tape, scissors, scraps, colored paper, and collections of collage materials. Allow independent access based on the age of the children you teach. Older kids will have more materials and more freedom than younger ones, but younger kids can definitely work independently. Add a paint easel and tub of playdough to expand the possibilities.
- **Emphasize the enjoyment and the value of the "process" of creating art**, more than the results or the finished product. The finished results of a young child's work are not as important to that child as the exploration and experimentation that went into creating them. Products are usually an adult value, and once kids know they can explore and discover on their own, they stop worrying about how things must look. For example, a child may mix all the colors of the rainbow and make a brown smoochy painting. But think about what he saw and learned as he mixed all those colors together. The brown painting may not be much to look at, but the process he went through was thrilling for him, opening possibilities in creativity and thinking. It is important to add that children should expect to "make mistakes." It is in finding solutions or modifying their experiences that will make the value of creativity most evident.
- **Encourage children to try new ways of doing things.** Even when the children participate in a craft project, it is important to encourage the students to think up their own twists and turns to make their project unique. I like to tell children, "There is no right way and no wrong way to do art. There is only your way." When a child says to me, "Draw it for me," I simply respond by saying that I could never draw on their valuable, unique work, and that I would much rather see what they do on their own.
- **Expand creativity into other areas of the curriculum.** Put on some lively music, and encourage children to draw what they hear. Drawing squiggles and dots in time with music will nurture brain development and broaden the familiar activity of drawing to a new all-time high. All this creativity and joy will be a springboard to inquisitiveness about the sciences and the children's surrounding worlds.
- **Show your appreciation of your children's creativity by displaying the art they choose to display.** Many of their works will be experiments and may not be important to them; that is, they may not want or need to take them home or display them. Accept their evaluations of their own work.

Conclusion

Teachers who respect children's ideas help them learn to think and solve problems for themselves. Children who feel free to make mistakes and to explore and experiment will also feel free to invent, create, and find new ways to do things. **Grant the lasting gift of freedom to children—to make mistakes and learning from doing.** The side benefit is that fostering creativity in our classrooms makes teaching more rewarding and fun and gives children a zest for imagining and learning to last a lifetime.

*Mary Ann Kohl is the author of numerous award-winning art idea books for children, including *Mudworks—Creative Clay, Dough, and Modeling Experiences*, *Scribble Art—Independent Creative Art Experiences for Children*, and *Preschool Art—It's the Process, not the Product*. For more free art suggestions that value the process of art more than the finished product, visit MaryAnn's website at www.brightning.com.*