

**Parent Talk  
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### **Nurturing Your Child's Creativity**

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The first thing you need to know about parenting creative children is that it's quite OK if your gut-level response is, "No thanks! Creative children can be more unpredictable, unconventional, messy, and emotionally labile than I want to put up with." Not every parent of a gifted child has to want one who is "creative." The world needs its share of conventional thinkers who maintain the status quo at a high level as well as its share of those who keep busy imagining ways to change it.

The second thing you need to know that, while it's important to try to raise the kind of child you like, some children seem naturally to be more creative, more imaginative, and more risk-taking than others, and your parent job is to help them feel strong and confident, whatever path they take. Unfortunately, it's probably easier to stifle creativity than it is to induce it.

The third thing you need to know is that creative people are not "creative" all the time. Those who will make the most impact in the long run do indeed master the social conventions, become experts in their field, and have the skills to communicate the worth of their ideas. Creative people don't have to be misfits.

#### **The Creative Process**

Perhaps the most useful way for parents to look at creativity is as a habit of thinking and imagination that involves *originality*, *flexibility*, and *fluency*. It also

involves both *problem finding* (asking original questions) and *problem solving* (producing multiple solutions and non-obvious connections). The process needs an opportunity to germinate; it emerges in fits and starts; and it can be accompanied by frustration, irritability, and disorganization – as well as deep engagement and pure joy.

The creative process can yield unexpected ideas that tickle and delight, and awesome products that are unlike anything children’s peers are doing. It can also yield failed attempts, jokes that aren’t funny, inventions that don’t work. Even highly successful creative adults create a wealth of poems that aren’t worth publishing, mathematical proofs with fatal flaws, compositions that no one wants to play. It’s a necessary byproduct of the process.

### **What Parents Can Do**

*Create “safe space.”* Creativity flourishes when children feel confident that they will not get into trouble or encounter risks they can’t handle. Parents create safe zones by firmly maintaining basic rules of the household – places where it’s OK to be messy (as well as places where it’s not), stuff that can be experimented with such as junk appliances from Goodwill (and those that can’t, such as heirlooms), neighborhood boundaries within which it’s OK to roam, hours of free time as well as schedules of homework and other responsibilities, predictable bed times, and so on. (You can fudge a little when a child is so totally engaged in a creative activity that nothing else is meaningful.) Adults needn’t hem children in by unnecessary rules but neither is it helpful to be too flexible. Children deserve to feel protected from real danger, even when they make mistakes.

Imagine finding yourself at the edge of a cliff in a beautiful setting. You have to watch your step all the time. Now visualize a guard rail at the edge of the cliff. How

exhilarating! You can move, you can shout, you can sing! Safety makes you free. This is the way family rules set the stage for the creative process.

*Greet children's productions receptively, even when they're "garbage."* You needn't praise an idea, a drawing, a joke, as though it's the best thing you've ever seen. In fact, you needn't critique or evaluate it at all. That's something your child can do in due course, if need be. Appreciating effort and investment ("You were really thinking about that, I can see!"), asking questions ("Do you know anyone like the boy in your story?"), pointing out something new ("This looks different from the Lego structure you did last week,"), observing the child's interest ("You like trains,"), and so on, are plenty to reflect your approval of the enterprise.

*Recognize children's attempts as "experiments."* Sometimes, you'll be needed to shore up a disappointing outcome, as when a magic trick hasn't worked, an attempt to mix a beautiful color has resulted in a yucky brown, or a teacher hasn't recognized the creative process underlying an assignment done in a non-conventional way. You can help your child see that coming up with something new is *hard*. The more children view themselves as experimenters, willing to try something different and learn from the attempt, the stronger they will feel.

*Encourage multiple solutions.* Even during mundane routines, find different ways to get things done. Discover three new routes to the grocery store. Try a different ethnic restaurant every month. Put something goofy in your planter box. Make up rhymes and substitute silly words in songs. Encourage your child to find multiple ways to solve a math problem. Promote translations – word problems into graphs or equations, stories

into little plays, playing a tune upside down, drawing in the mirror, conversations in Pig Latin. Keep it fun.

*Encourage independence.* Children who learn to do for themselves develop a sense of confidence. When children can dress independently, make their own lunch, run neighborhood errands, and get their homework done, expect them to. But don't give up family rituals. Don't stop reading to readers; don't stop putting surprises in the lunch box. Do preserve times to be together, but give your child more opportunity to choose what you'll do.

Paradoxically, we find that many eminent creative people come from somewhat conflicted homes. Possibly this is because they had to be a little more independent and self-reliant than other children?

*Preserve free time.* Some children are so overscheduled after school that they have no free time to mess around. Don't make that mistake. And don't hover!

*Preserve privacy.* Depending on the activity, your child is likely to need space to do it, space to store it, and space to keep finished projects. This can be a problem in tight quarters and with younger siblings around. Be creative about this!

*Respect gumption.* Creativity takes gumption – the courage to try. Respect your child's ability to stand up for her self, to ask for a privilege, to argue that you're wrong about something. Don't tolerate rudeness or fruitless debates, but do value discourse.

*Teach skills.* To be truly creative, children need basic skills to express their complex ideas. If they love to draw, then classes that teach technique, composition, and perspective will help them to give their ideas depth and beauty. If they love to play with numbers, then insist that they get number facts and procedures down pat so they can play

with the relationships and transformations they're really interested in. Writers need to master tools such as spelling and punctuation so they can spend their attention on plot, character, and voice. Budding authors also need to learn touch typing skills as early as possible to the point that they can eventually type almost as fast as they can think. Composers need music theory; instrumentalists need fingering techniques. Everybody needs practice, practice, practice.

Separate this skill building from creative problem-solving. When your child brings you an original story, skip the editing and talk about the ideas. When your child is thrilled by "inventing" what square root really means, overlook numeric errors. Ignore dripped paint. Just tuck into the back of your mind that a few minutes spent on that skill – maybe tomorrow -- would be useful.

*Provide stuff.* Materials and tools are essential, such as good quality pencils and brushes, lots of paper, paints, musical instruments, carpentry tools, cameras – whatever. But don't invest so much money when your child is trying something new that you will be disappointed if he doesn't follow through.

*Provide models.* Children love to see creators at work. The young writer needs to read widely, partly for pure enjoyment and partly to learn the craft. The young musician deserves to hear live music. Find an artist who likes visitors. If you have a talent or hobby of your own, of course you want to share it.

If it fits, you can be a powerful model of the creative spirit. Experiment with different spices in the spaghetti sauce. Draw a different design on a birthday cake – no matter whether it's a masterpiece or a mess. Write a limerick instead of buying a card.

Remember to keep your good humor even if the soufflé falls and the paint you chose for the bedroom is too bright.

*What if your child doesn't have a talent or a passion?* A home that encourages a creative spirit doesn't always produce a world-renowned creator, but it is likely to nurture a gifted individual who sees and cherishes the richness in her world. A creative person appreciates many genres of music, art, literature, science – and different kinds of people. A creative person entertains unexpected ideas and is able to see multiple sides of complicated issues without becoming paralyzed. And sometimes, the child who didn't start with a passion finds possibilities later on, and has the courage to try them out.

Remember -- there are many ways for gifted children to express their abilities. Some will be highly creative and some won't. What you want for your child, as for yourself, is the courage to face challenges with a can-do attitude and to relish complexity. However it turns out, you can enjoy one another the more if you've each had encouragement to be yourselves.