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How Parents Can Encourage Creativity in Children

Henry, age four, wanted to be a knight for Halloween. The day before he learned the Biblical soldier terms of breast plate of righteousness, sword of faith and helmet of salvation. However, the day after Halloween the sword became a fire hose, the breastplate a fire fighting vest, the helmet was tipped back to protect his neck and the distinctive rhythmic sounds of a firefighters oxygen supply could be heard coming through the former knights face piece which was now a smoke filtering mask. The creativity vivaciousness of a four year old led the adults in his life to say, “What next?”

Children are apt to be far more gifted than their parents or teachers realize – and in different ways. IQ tests do not measure creativity talent (Fasko, 2001; Proctor & Burnett, 2004). By depending on them, we miss seventy of our most gifted youngsters. Most children start life with valuable creative potential. Unfortunately many of them have it knocked out of them by the time they reach the fourth grade (Worthington & Carruthers 2003). It is that parents and teachers deliberately squelch creativity; it is rather that they fail to recognize (Runco, 2003). They mistake it for unruliness, eccentricity and even stupidity. Creativity involves getting away from the obvious, safe and expected and producing something which – to the child-is new (Fasko, 2001; Moran, 1998).

To encourage creativity we need to enable children to develop their individual potential and ability. Unlike IQ, creative potential can't be measured by totaling the number of right answers a child gets on a standardized test and comparing this with the number of right answers obtained by majority of children his age. Sizing up a child's creative gifts will be a matter of individual judgment. By simply observing the child at work and at play, you may detect creativity if you look for the following key signs:

- **Curiosity.** The child's questioning is persistent and purposeful. She is not content with glib explanations but digs under the surface. Curiosity isn't always oral. A baby handles things, shakes, twists, and turns them upside down. A youngster takes things apart, not destructively but to see "how it works" or what is inside. The creative boy or girl experiments with words and objects and ideas, always trying to wring new meaning from them.
- **Flexibility.** If one approach doesn't work, he quickly thinks of another. To some older boys trying in vain to throw a rope over a high tree branch to make a swing, eight-year Jackie suggested, "Why not fly a kite over it and then pull up the rope with the string?"
- **Sensitive to problems.** She is quick to see gaps between the information. She is sensitive to contradictions between prior rules and what she hears or reads.
- **Redefinition.** He can see hidden meaning in statements the others take at face value, find new uses for familiar objects and see connections between things that seem unrelated to others. It was a creative child who said, "Eternity is a clock without hands."
- **Self-feeling.** She has a feeling of being somebody in particular. She is self-winding, self-directed and can work alone for long periods - provided it's on her own project. Merely following directions bores her.
- **Originality.** He has surprising, uncommon, intersecting ideas. His drawings and stories have a style that marks them as his own. Even the most creative child, of course, is unlikely to make any really new discoveries - it is the spontaneity that

counts. Have you ever watched a three-year-old mix blue and yellow and discover it makes green?

- **Insight.** She has easy access to realms of the mind which non-creative people visit only in their dreams. She toys with ideas that just come to her. As one five-year-old told her mother at a birthday party where she reached into a grab bag for favors, “That’s how I get ideas – just reach in and scrunch around in my mind till I feel like pulling something out.”

Qualities like these count very little in IQ tests, which measure memory, vocabulary, number ability, and general reasoning. These IQ abilities are valuable, and the creative child usually has them too. The child with a so-called genius IQ of 180 is in reality no more likely to be a genius than the child with a slightly above average IQ of around 120. In fact, there is evidence that some children with high IQs may develop memory and logical reasoning powers at the expense of insight, imagination and adventurousness – qualities that are essential to genius (Proctor & Burnett, 2004).

In school some teachers favor the high- IQ child over the highly creative one. In fact the highly creative child may have learned as much as the high-IQ child when measured on such standard achievement tests as the Iowa Basic Skills Battery and the Gates-MacGinitie Test. Why this prejudice against the highly creative child? Why is favoritism shown toward the high-IQ child? In larger part, it’s a matter of personality. The abilities that make a child creative also make him “different.”

Scores of personality studies listed the characterizations that have been found to describe creative children: accept disorder, attracted to the mysterious, playful, likes to toy with ideas, offbeat ideas, emotionally sensitive, a fault finder, spirited in

disagreement, courageous, takes risks and energy to burn (Proctor & Burnett, 2004; Worthington & Carruthers, 2003).

To find out the qualities teachers prefer and reward, several hundred were asked to rate a list of characters traits in order of preference. Toward the top of the list teachers placed such traits as promptness, courtesy, popularity, receptivity to ideas of others, ability to take criticism, and good memory. Toward the top of the list, in the category of least desirable, they put adventurous, always asking questions, courageous, unwilling to accept directive (say-so), willing to take risks, and visionary.

At the heart of the creative child's problem in finding acceptance is the fact that he is never content to learn only by authority, but persists in finding out for himself through constant questioning, probing and experimenting. To a larger extent, he is the victim of his virtues. His independence may make him appear rebellious. His capacity for complete absorption in his work may give the impression that he is antisocial. His humor and playfulness combined with his clear-eyed view of the world may strike grownups as mocking or disrespectful. His off-the-beaten-track ideas give him the reputation among his own contemporaries as a screwball. No wonder his teacher and parents sometimes groan, "Why can't he be like other kids?"

When children give up their creative spark, it is because of outside pressures. What are these pressures? How can you, as a parent or teacher, eliminate them or mitigate their effects on your child? Here are some suggestions:

Don't discourage fantasy. One of the qualities of the creative person, young or old is her ability to move freely back and forth between the world of facts and reason and the vast realms of the mind that lie just below the surface of consciousness. The creative person's

greater flexibility, depth of feeling and keenness of insight come from being open to vague feelings and hunches that others dismiss as silly.

Don't hold back. On the theory that nothing succeeds like success, American parents are so intent on sparing their hurt of failure that they deny them a chance to learn from their mistakes.

Make creativity rewarding. Children, like adults, achieve most along whatever lines bring the most satisfaction. Dr. Torrance found that when eight-grade children are rewarding for originality they produce about twice as many original ideas as when they are rewarding for sheer number of ideas regardless of quality (Torrance, 191974).

Avoid sexual stereotypes. Don't let a boy feel that it is "sissy" to be open to feelings and interested in color, form, movement, and ideas. Don't make a girl feel that it is wrong for her to be intellectual curious, interested in destructive, experiments, and competitive. Sexual stereotypes destroy creativity.

Don't judge by reading and writing. Creative children often lag behind the group in verbal abilities. It is sometimes difficult for them to put their ideas down on paper. One nine-year-old, at the bottom of his class because of reading and writing problems, turned out to be near the top on creativity tests.

Allow freedom to experiment. To think creatively, a child needs to toy with the subject, play around with ideas, and try out wild and far-fetched guesses. Instead of laughing at him, encourage him to test his statements, imagine what the world would be like if they were true. Don't pin him down to "right" or "wrong."

Help them use creativity in social relations. One of the biggest problems in life will be getting along with others without sacrificing the qualities that make them creative and

“different.” Help them use sensitivity to be kind, insight to be understanding and tolerant of those who don’t see things in the same way. Show them how to assert themselves without being domineering, work alone without being withdrawn, be honest with others without being overcritical. Prepare them to accept the fact anyone who has original ideas must be prepared to be a minority of one, at least for a time.

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