

## The Power of Creative Play

A stick is not always just a stick in the hands of a child. It can be anything from a make-believe weed whacker, boat oar, or magic wand to an actual stake for a backyard blanket fort or a spear for holding a roasted marshmallow.

Children are born with potential for great imagination, but too much time sitting passively in front of a television set or computer may stifle their abilities to explore or be creative. Too often parents believe they should schedule lots of play dates for their toddlers and frequent expensive indoor play arenas or enroll their kids in music and gymnastics classes. An equally important part of growing up, however, is for children to learn to explore their creativity through unstructured play. In fact, experts say the best kind of play costs very little or nothing at all and really only has one main requirement—imagination.

“When children learn to rely on themselves for playtime—improvising props, making up games and stories—they’re actually learning to pursue their own interests and tap into their own creativity at their own pace, without any outside pressure,” says one childhood development professional.

Research proves that kids who are encouraged to play in unstructured settings are more expressive, empathetic, and socially adept than those who aren’t, and their creativity may continue into adulthood.

“My son loves to listen to music and pretend that he’s playing the instruments he hears,” says a mother of a 4 year old. “He uses the vacuum cleaner attachments for his guitars and horns—to him they are not vacuum parts when music is playing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly discouraged television viewing for children ages two and younger. For older children, the Academy advises no more than one to two hours per day of educational, nonviolent programs.

Make-believe play also helps children mull over issues that are complex to them, such as love and power, control and loss of it, sickness and strength, friends and enemies.

For instance, a father of a 5 year old overheard his son and a friend playing pirates. The “bad pirate” was forcing the “good pirate” (his son) to walk the plank. But his son was explaining that he couldn’t walk the plank because he didn’t know how to swim. “In great detail, my son started to explain that he can’t swim because he gets water up his nose and that whenever he goes under the water he gets scared that he won’t be able to kick up to the surface,” says the father who, after witnessing his son play make-believe pirates, finally understood how anxious he was about the swimming lessons he’d been attending.

One child psychologist explains that it’s very normal to see big issues play out in young children’s games. “Not only is it normal, but it’s healthy for kids to express negative emotions and actions through made-up games,” she says. “In fact, by observing a child’s pretend world or—even better—stepping into it, parents can gain more insight into what he or she is going through.”

### Encouraging role play

A very important aspect of early childhood learning is the ability to role play. Children learn through doing and mimicking those around them. It's how they discover and learn about the world. Children who participate in creative role play will have to make decisions about important events and insert themselves in situations that require empathy and understanding of the role. For example, when children play "house" (an all-time favorite) they mimic their parents or caregivers in the way they care for the baby, perform chores, discipline the other children, and make household decisions. That is why it is vital that children be exposed to many opportunities to role play. Here are some ideas:

- **Playing shop.** Set up a grocery store using canned and boxed food items and a cash register. Work with your child to put price tags on all the goods. You can make pretend money with construction paper and a shopping cart out of a cardboard box. Decide who's going to be the shopper and who's going to work the register. Then make a grocery list and go shopping. While the children are having a great time pretending to play shop, they are learning organizational skills, math, and problem-solving skills.
- **Prop boxes.** Fill boxes with props for different scenarios and situations that render themselves to creative play. Teach a lesson about personal hygiene, for example, while having playing hairdresser. Fill a box with brushes, combs, hair ties, ribbons, clips, rollers, an old hair dryer (with the cord removed), empty shampoos bottles, etc. Throw in an apron and a towel and play hair salon. Reinforce manners by putting together a restaurant box with homemade menus, paper plates, play money, aprons and utensil. Practice ordering from the menu and discussing how to behave when eating out.
- **Dress up box.** One of the easiest ways to let children get inventive is to provide a dress up box full of old clothes, gloves, hats, scarves, wigs, jewelry and shoes. Let them experiment with taking on different personas by providing a variety of outfits.
- **Set up an office.** This is a great way for your children to understand the responsibilities that some adults do have in their work life. Set up a mini workstation and include an old keyboard, paper, pencils, and a phone, for example. Show them some of the things that have to get done in an office setting so they know what to mimic (answer the telephone, type out e-mails and reports, send faxes, etc.). "When my husband's fax machine broke, we removed the cords and plugs and gave it to our kids so they could play 'office' with it," says a mother of a 4 and 2 year old. "It's hilarious to hear my daughter pretend to talk on the phone and say 'Did you get my fax yet?'"

### **Drawing, cutting, and pasting for knowledge**

Role playing and make-believe are just some of the ways children express their creativity. Other ways include painting, drawing, coloring, cutting, pasting, or molding, to name a few. Either way, all children love being creative if they are given the chance. And while it might be tempting to leave all the "messy" creative activities for your children to do elsewhere, there are many skills they can learn by having the freedom to do them at home—and developing a love of the creative process can help your child become a lifelong creative thinker.

Some of the benefits and skills children learn through hands-on creative activities include:

- **Intellectual benefits.** Even at a young age, creative activities help children develop basic skills such as geometry (shapes and sizes), measuring, and sorting. Problem-solving and concentration skills are also honed when children learn to take what is in their head and put it onto paper. In the early years children learn to ask themselves basic questions such as will this glue be strong enough, if I cut here will it be the right size for my project, or how can I stop the paint from dripping? Experts say that solving these problems helps children learn about the creative thinking process. As children get a bit older, different arts and crafts require more complex thinking skills, and many activities need an understanding of basic science concepts to make sense. For example, things like mixing colors or creating patterns can lose their creative component if a child doesn't understand the concepts.
- **Physical benefits.** Cutting, drawing, painting, and pasting all help to develop fine-motor skills in young children. These skills are needed in order for youngsters to be writing-ready when they enter school. Since children are not born with these skills, it takes time and practice to develop them, and creative activities can help. In fact, it's important to recognize that a child's scribble represents a huge milestone in his physical development. In the space of a year or more, a child goes from not knowing they have hands to being able to pick up a crayon, move it over the paper, and apply enough pressure for it to actually leave a mark. As children get older, creative activities will help further define fine-motor skills and develop hand-eye coordination.
- **Emotional and social benefits.** Creative activities provide a positive outlet for children to express their emotions and are also a gateway for positive socialization. Through play and creative activities, children learn how to "play nicely" with others—to work together, follow rules, and communicate verbally and through body language. Research even shows that creative play may curb violent tendencies. By making a range of materials readily available for children shows them that creative expression and free play can become as normal as brushing their teeth.

### **What's needed for creative play?**

Encouraging creativity in your child doesn't need to be expensive. While it's important they have some basic equipment available such as crayons (wax, plastic, and oil), paints and brushes, colored paper, scissors, colored pencil and markers, glitter, clay or Play-Doh, and glue in their "art box," there are literally hundreds of other items you can include as well that can be found in your back yard or household. For example, fallen pinecones, leaves and twigs; empty paper towel and toilet paper rolls; cookie cutters; scraps of material and tissue paper; make-up sponges and brushes; cotton balls; empty and cleaned Jell-o and pudding cups; old magazines and newspaper flyers, etc.

Above all else, give your child the space and time to be creative. Keep a basket full of bits and pieces on hand, and try not to worry about the mess they will likely make. The skills a child will develop through creative play outweigh the spills and mishaps. To minimize the chance of messes, set up a spill-friendly area in your home for arts and crafts. Place a drop cloth or vinyl table cloth on the floor underneath and on top of your child's workspace (i.e., card table, child-sized table or desk, art easel, kitchen table) and keep her crayons, paper, paints, glue, etc. organized in baskets or boxes so she can easily reach them.

Children are more likely to keep themselves busy if activities are within reach,” says a preschool teacher. “One thing to remember, however, is that toddlers typically only spend 5 to 15 minutes per activity, preschoolers up to 30 minutes, and about an hour for kids 5 and over.”

### **Need help encouraging creativity?**

Even if you are not the most creative being in the world, that doesn’t mean you can’t encourage it in your children. Here are a few ways to help strengthen a child’s creativity.

- **Relax the reins.** A child’s spontaneity and self-confidence—which are essential for a creative spirit—can be stifled if parents are constantly controlling and organizing play time.
- **Inspire perseverance.** Creativity and the sense of pride are lost when a project or game is not completed. Parents should show appreciation for a child’s efforts, but resist the impulse to accomplish the task for them. Instead, encourage children to finish what they started.
- **Embrace the unique.** Let children know that it’s not always critical to have the “correct” answer to a problem. Teach them that unique and innovative approaches are valued as well. After all, this is how new games are invented and extraordinary artwork is created.
- **Encourage storytelling.** Making up stories and plays to act out later with friends or family is a great way to spark an interest in the arts and let your child’s imagination run wild. To spur this type of thinking, practice at home. Start a story and have each child and adult in the family add to it. You’ll be surprised the twists and turns the story will include.
- **Be silly during play time.** Not only are laughter and fun stress relievers—for children and adults alike—but they also promote bonding and strengthen discovery and creativity. Play silly games with your children that allow everyone to break out of their shell. For example, play the animal game where one person yells out an animal or reptile name (monkey, frog), that everyone then has to act like for one minute. Don’t forget the sound effects!