



Human Development and Family Studies
Colorado State University Cooperative Extension

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WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Creativity means having the power or quality to express yourself in your own way. Children are naturally creative. They see the world through fresh, new eyes and then use what they see in original ways. One of the most rewarding parts of working with children is the chance to watch them create. They do it all the time, all by themselves. Caregivers need only encourage the natural creativity that exists.

Children display creativity in all parts of play, but especially in four main areas: art, language, music, and fantasy.

- Art is a way of expressing ideas and feelings in visual form. It includes children's use of crayons, paint, scissors, glue, play dough, and other craft materials.
- Language is the expression of ideas and feelings through words, either written or spoken. It includes the stories children tell and their creative "plays" and "pretend" games.
- Music is the expression of ideas and feelings using bodily movements. It includes dancing, singing, playing instruments, and using the body to make movements such as leaping like a frog or exploring how many ways to make a circle with the body.
- Fantasy is expressing ideas and feelings through pretend. It can include playing "make-believe", day-dreaming, talking with imaginary companions, and reading fantasy books.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO LEARN ABOUT CREATIVITY?

The most important function of creativity is self-expression. Self-expression allows children to express ideas and feelings about themselves and the world around them. Three-year-olds may not know how to say they are frustrated and depressed, but they can paint a picture using dark colors and bold, angry-looking strokes. Eight-year-olds may not feel like talking about moving to a new city, but they may write stories about other children who have moved. Self-expression is a way for children to show their needs to those around them.

Children's abilities to imagine and observe also are strengthened through self-expression. Asking children "What if..." questions helps develop their imaginations. "What if cats had ears like elephants?" "What if there was no gravity?" "What if plants could walk?" As children begin to ask "what if" questions, they not only observe the way the world actually is but also imagine how it might be. Often caregivers are tempted to say "But plants do not walk and never will!" instead of imagining with children what it would be like if they did. If you do this, you discourage creativity rather than encourage its growth. Allow yourself to wonder right along with the child. "If plants could walk, they would probably follow us to school just like dogs do!"



Child Care Resources

Helping Families Find Child Care

Creativity provides for intellectual growth. Children who mix red and yellow paint to make orange are growing intellectually. The scientists who trained astronauts to deal with weightlessness in space may have been the same children who asked, "What if there were no gravity?" when they were young. Many people feel that, as our world continues to change so quickly, we will need more and more creative people who can come up with new answers to "what if...?"

Creativity also allows children to explore the world. In fantasy, they can pretend to be police officers or ballet dancers. Through language, they can test their ideas about the world. In art, they can show the world as they see it. As children grow, they increase their knowledge of themselves and the world around them. Encouraging their creativity helps them in this process.

Encouragement also helps provide children with a sense of mastery and self-worth. The 2-year-olds who hop and croak feel pride in their abilities to be frogs. Seven-year-olds who think about weightlessness and come up with ideas gain respect for their own ability to think. They learn, "I am good at thinking. I know how to do it." This pride and respect for themselves is important because it is a base for all their later accomplishments.

Creative play often provides exercise for children, which in turn stimulates physical growth. For example, playing "Star Wars" or "Superman" requires lots of running, jumping, and climbing. Even stringing beads on a shoestring to make a necklace or weaving yarn to make a wall hanging requires muscle coordination.

Creative play also can help children grow socially. It gives them a chance to see the world from other children's perspectives through their stories, pictures, fantasy plays, or movements. The more understanding children gain of other points of view, the more respect they will learn for other people's rights, opinions, and feelings.

Creativity helps children feel good about themselves. You can encourage this feeling by responding positively to what they do. For example, you might say, "I like the way you used blue in your picture," or "That's a good way to pretend to be an elephant. I like the way you move your trunk." Remember, there are hundreds of ways to be creative. Each child will have an individual and unique style.

Another way you can encourage children to be creative is to talk things over rather than to give specific instructions or make a model when they ask for help. If you show a child how to draw a flower or a person, they will try to draw one just like yours. This can be frustrating because no matter how hard children try, their pictures will not be as "good" as yours because they do not have the muscle control or skill that you have. Chances are that children will compare the two pictures and not be happy with their own. They may even decide not to try. Be creative yourself and think of ways to encourage children's creativity.

Children's creativity reflects their feelings, emotions, and imagination. Children are not often as concerned with how things "really" are but with how they "think" they are.

When working with young children, it is important to remember that the process of creating is more important than the product. This means that children are more interested in painting, singing, or moving



than they are in making a perfect picture or singing the right words to the song. Caregivers need to be sensitive to this. It is better to say "Tell me about your picture" (or song or about what you are doing) than it is to say "What is it?" Sometimes the child's final product may not be anything more than an expression of feelings.

TELEVISION

Children spend an average of 30 hours a week watching television. Some people feel this is too much since the time spent watching television cannot be spent in other, more active ways. Children grow and learn through active interaction with people and materials around them. Creativity encourages active interaction, but television often discourages it.

As a caregiver, there are several things you can do to help control the use of television and encourage creativity in children.

1. Talk to the parents about their rules for television viewing and program selection. Always follow these rules.
2. Do not use the television as a substitute caregiver. You are the caregiver, and need to spend time with the child. Children usually will not miss television if they have other fun things to do. Use the ideas in this book for alternatives. Remember, most children would rather play with another child or an adult than watch television.
3. If children are watching television, watch with them. Encourage them to think and talk with you by asking questions or making comments on what is happening. Play "What if..." and imagine different endings or happenings during the show. Discuss the creative parts of the program; the writing, acting, and making of the show. If you do not know a lot about these, you can find information in the children's section of your public library. Ask the children's librarian for help.

AGES AND STAGES

INFANTS

Infants (birth to 18 months) learn to grasp, sit-up, crawl, and walk. Older babies learn to talk and express themselves using one or two word sentences. Activities for this stage of development should encourage creativity. You, as a caregiver, can build on what infants do by offering them a variety of safe materials to play with. For example, when infants use a pan as a drum and hit it with their hands, offer them other things to hit the pan with, like wooden spoons. Or offer them other drums like plastic bowls or empty boxes. For more on safe toys for infants, see *Good Times with Toys*.

How you can help

1. Hang a colorful mobile over the crib, or place pictures where babies can focus on them.
2. Play sound games with infants. Repeat the sounds babies make back to them. Make up nonsense words or rhyming words when talking to infants.



3. Sing to babies. Play a variety of music around them. By 7 or 8 months, even infants "dance" to music. You can encourage this dancing by taking the infant's hands and moving with the music.

For more ideas on music activities, see [*Good Times with Music and Rhythm*](#).

4. Encourage babies' safe and creative use of household materials. For example, give them margarine tubs, empty boxes, or large empty spools - any safe materials that are handy around the house - and let them experiment. Show excitement and interest in what they do.

TODDLERS

Toddlers (18 months to 4 years) have growing hand control and coordination. They should be given opportunities to draw with paint, crayons, and chalk. Toddlers will need to be supervised in these activities to understand the right place for drawing. Young toddlers, especially, often use walls, sheets, floors, tables, and other surfaces for drawing, if not given guidance.

For most toddlers, this is a scribbling stage in art and a picture rarely looks like a recognizable object. Using muscles and discovering how things feel is what counts. Toddlers enjoy art experiences such as play dough, clay, shaving cream painting, cornstarch and water, and finger painting. Recipes and directions for these are in the Learn by Doing section.

Later, toddlers are ready for experiences with scissors and glue. Toddlers need careful supervision until they learn the rules for using these materials.

Toddlers have a growing vocabulary and can tell short stories. They also can make-up simple stories about pictures you show them. Encourage the toddler to talk to you and tell you about their experiences.

Toddlers can do much with creative movements. They are learning the names of their body parts and enjoy activities that use these, such as touching toes, eyes, or elbows. Toddlers can do simple creative movements like imitating animals. They enjoy dancing and, like infants, should be exposed to all kinds of music. Toddlers also enjoy making their own music with simple instruments like bells and sticks.

The fantasy play of toddlers comes naturally. They still are learning what is real and what is pretend. Fantasy play, pretending to be the mother or doctor, is how young children learn about the world. It also helps children feel powerful and in control. In make-believe, children are the ones who get to do the ordering instead of being ordered.

How you can help:

1. Check your local library for books without words such as **Do You Want To Be My Friend?** by Eric Carle. Your librarian can suggest others. Because they are only pictures, let the child tell the story to you. Read [*Good Times with Stories and Poems*](#) for more ideas on using books creatively with young children.

2. Take pictures from magazines and mount them on a piece of paper. Ask the child to tell you about it, then write down what they say. Later you can read these stories back to the child.



3. Play a variation of "Twister" with toddlers. Make up such directions as "Put your elbow on yellow." "Put your little finger on green." "Put your ear on blue."
4. Provide art materials for the child using suggestions and recipes from the Learn by Doing section. Always check with the child's parent ahead of time to make sure it is all right. Protect the work area during messy activities by putting newspaper on table and floor. Protect the child's clothes with a bib or smock. A used adult shirt with the sleeves cut off works well. Remember toddlers need careful supervision during art activities. Always clean-up afterwards.
5. A good place for a toddler to do finger painting is in the bathtub. The toddler can paint the bathtub (and themselves) as much as they want and then bathtub and toddler can be washed off. Remember to check with parents before trying this kind of activity.
6. Encourage creative movement in toddlers by pretending you all are: kites blowing in the wind; a kitten with a sore paw; a balloon blowing up and popping; a jet airplane taking off; eating an ice cream cone. Make up ideas of your own. Be creative.
7. Encourage toddlers in their fantasy play. Read [*Good Times with Toys*](#) for ideas and guidelines on how to do this.

PRESCHOOLERS

Preschoolers have greater muscle control than toddlers. They enjoy the same creative materials but are able to use them in more complex ways. Most preschoolers know the correct place for drawing, but will sometimes give in to the temptation to write on walls or floors, if left unsupervised for long. By 4 or 5, some children start drawing recognizable objects, although many details may be missing. By 6, most children are interested in explaining the pictures they create.

Preschoolers also are good story tellers. They enjoy making books of their stories, drawing pictures to go along with their words. They also enjoy telling stories in groups with each person telling a part.

The creative movement of preschoolers shows much attention to detail. They enjoy dancing and generally are aware of others dancing around them. They enjoy making up songs and music with instruments.

The fantasy play of preschoolers also is more complex than toddlers. Preschoolers often direct each other on what to do as they play "Let's pretend." "You be the Mom, and I'll be the Dad..." By 6, preschoolers have developed a good idea about what is real and what is fantasy. Usually around this age, they figure out that Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter bunny are more fantasy than reality.

Children may choose to go on pretending anyway. Many children of preschool age have imaginary friends. These usually vanish by school age when they get more involved with real, live friends.

How you can help:

1. As children create pictures, encourage feeling and talking by asking questions about size, shape, and color, or by saying "Tell me about your picture."



2. Let the children help you mix simple art materials. Follow the art guidelines suggested under How You Can Help Toddlers.
3. Add textures to art materials.
 - Add beans or rice to play dough for texture.
 - Put sawdust or cornmeal in paint for texture.
4. Make egg carton caterpillars by cutting a cardboard egg carton bottom in four sections. Each group of three humps makes one caterpillar. Use a pipe cleaner for antenna and paint or color the caterpillar as desired. Caterpillars also can be longer or shorter.
5. Take turns with the preschooler in writing a story. For example, you might begin "Once upon a time, a little boy wanted to go to the moon." Then let the preschooler tell you the next part, and take turns. Write the story down and read it to the parents when they get home.
6. Encourage more complex creative movement in children by asking how they would move if they were: happy, angry, scared, very heavy, cold, sneaky, very little, etc. Use your imagination to come up with other ideas.
7. Expand the make-believe play of preschoolers by giving them a prop box. Some ideas for these are in [*Good Times with Toys*](#).

EARLY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Early school-age children (6 to 9 years) usually draw recognizable pictures. However, they may exaggerate the parts of the picture that are most important to them. They still leave out details. For example, people in their pictures may have hands, but no arms, or furniture in their pictures may not be on the floor, but rather floating in space. They enjoy color, but do not always use it realistically. People may have red feet and green faces. Animals might be orange. This is okay! They are being creative!

How you can help:

School-age children are not only able to tell stories, but also write them down and illustrate the stories themselves. Early school-age children enjoy reading these and other stories to you.

By this age, many children may be taking classes in gymnastics. Early school-age children often try to imitate the current dance craze in movement and may be learning to play a real musical instrument.

The fantasy play of early school-age children contains some make-believe. By this age, fantasy usually includes action-oriented games like "superheroes" or "horses." Much of the school-age child's time also deals with daydreaming. Some daydreams become real as children start to act out stories and plays.

1. Provide early school-age children with art and craft materials based on their interests. It is still important to allow children to be original and use materials as they wish.



2. Early school-age children enjoy simple needlework activities. They can draw a design on plastic needlepoint canvas with permanent markers and then use yarn to sew the design.
3. Be a receptive audience when children want to read to you from either a story they have written or a book.
4. Allow children to show you the skills they have been learning in dance and gymnastics classes. Teach them dances and movements you know.
5. Try some simple ball activities using a 6- to 8- inch ball for each person. Ask the child, "How would you:
 - hold the ball without using your hands?"
 - hold the ball without using your hands in another way?"
 - bounce the ball with your body?"
 - balance the ball on three different body parts?"
 - catch the ball without using your hands?"

Come up with other ideas of your own.

6. Help the early school-age child make a simple puppet (see the resources at the end of this section). Use the puppet to act out a play.
7. Be a producer, and help early school-age children put on a play. Organize props, and help at rehearsal, but be careful not to stifle creativity and the children's input and ideas.

LEARN BY DOING

The following are recipes or suggestions for basic art projects. Remember to use smocks, and follow the other guidelines listed in the How You Can Help sections.

1. Purchase mixed tempera paints at an art or craft store. Dry tempera is more versatile, and you can mix it yourself according to directions. Children enjoy and should have opportunities to use water colors.
2. Finger paint can be made according to any of the following recipes.

Cornstarch Finger Paint

6 tablespoons cold water
2 tablespoons cornstarch
1/2 cup boiling water

Dissolve starch in cold water. Add this mixture to boiling water, stirring constantly. Heat until it becomes



glossy. Add food coloring or dry tempera for color. (Because food coloring can stain, use carefully and in small amounts.)

Flour and Salt Finger Paint

1 cup flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 cups cold water
1 cup hot water

Add salt to flour, then pour in cold water gradually, and beat mixture until smooth. Add hot water, and boil until mixture becomes glossy. Beat until smooth, then mix in food coloring or dry tempera for color.

Liquid Starch Finger Paint

Spread liquid starch on dry paper. Shake dry tempera paint on paper and spread with hands.

Finger paint works best on glossy white paper, such as freezer wrap. It also can be used on cookie sheets and rinsed off. If children want to keep their pictures, lay a sheet of paper on top of the painted pictures, and rub gently. Lift up and you have prints of the pictures.

3. Play dough can be made in a variety of ways. Children can help make the uncooked varieties.

Uncooked Play Dough

2 cups flour
1 cup salt
2 cups water (approximately)

Mix together flour and salt. Add enough water to make a dough the consistency of stiff cookie dough. Color by adding food coloring to the water before mixing or by kneading in dry tempera after mixing. The dry tempera gives deeper, more brilliant colors. This can be air dried or baked in a 225 degrees Fahrenheit oven for 2 to 3 hours if desired.

Cooked Play Dough

1 cup flour
1/2 cup salt
1 cup water
2 teaspoons cream of tartar
1 tablespoon oil

Mix all ingredients together in a sauce pan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until a firm ball is formed. Remove from heat and knead. Food coloring can be added to water before cooking or dry tempera kneaded in afterward. This play dough is similar to dough you buy in the store. It does not dry well.



Sawdust Play Dough

1 cup sawdust
1 1/2 cups flour
1/2 cup salt
water (as needed)

Mix all ingredients together. This dough dries hard and is not as breakable as others.

Storage of Play Dough

Play dough should be stored in air-tight containers. The cooked play dough keeps particularly well. Play dough can be left white and painted when dry. It can be pounded, kneaded, poked, rolled, shaped, and squeezed. You can expand its use by giving the child rolling pins, cookie cutters, spoons, straws, toothpicks, a garlic press, etc.

4. Shaving cream can be used in many ways by creative children. They love the way it feels when it mashes between their fingers! It can be used like fingerpaint on either paper or a tray. (It does not make good prints.) It can be used white or colored with dry tempera. If colored, it can be used with Q-tips as face paint or make-up for children. The smell is noticeable, so pick a scent you like.

5. Cornstarch and water is another fun, sensory, creative experience for children and adults. Pour cornstarch on a cookie sheet with an equal amount of water. The mixture should be liquid, but not runny. It can be colored with a small amount of food coloring if desired. Then, touch, draw in, lift, and play with the mixture. The cornstarch can be left to dry (spread it out so it is not more than 1/4-inch deep) and reused later.

6. Children enjoy making collages. A collage is a picture made by gluing items of one or several different kinds on a background. Following are some common items you could use for collages: beans, glitter, egg shells, popcorn, rice, magazine pictures, spices, cornmeal, straws, fabric, toothpicks, torn and cut paper pieces.

7. Try paper mache with the children. Use newspaper strips dipped in homemade paste to cover an object. Homemade paste can be made by mixing 1/4 cup sugar with 1/3 cup flour. Add 2 cups water, and stir out lumps. Stir and cook until mixture is a smooth pudding-like consistency (about 3 to 5 minutes). Cool. Refrigerate unused portion in a covered jar for future use. Balloons can be covered to make piñatas and milk cartons to make houses. Or use your imagination to create your own projects. The dry structure can be painted to finish it.

8. Crayons are a common creative material. Below are some different ideas for using crayons.

Texture Rubbings

Tape a piece of paper over a flat textured item (screen, coin, comb, etc.). Rub the paper with the flat side of a crayon until you can see the texture underneath. You also can take the paper outside to rub on textures.



Paper Batik

Draw with crayon on paper. When done, soak paper in water, and crumple into a ball. Uncrumple and blot excess water. Paint the surface with water colors.

Sgraffito

Cover a sheet of paper heavily with a light colored crayon. Cover the first layer with a darker color, which also is applied heavily. With a toothpick, scratch a design through the top layer of crayon so the lighter crayon underneath can be seen.

9. Help the child create a "Me" book. You will need paper and crayons or felt-tip pens. Have the child draw a picture, or write down what the child says or both.

I like ____.

It's hard for me to ____.

I'm pretty good at ____.

My favorite toy (place, clothing) is ____.

My eyes are ____.

I have ____ teeth.

Books for older children can be more imaginative. Those for younger children should be about simple ideas. When finished, put a cover on the book and staple the pages together.

10. Help children make a magic crystal garden.

6 tablespoons water
1 tablespoon ammonia
6 tablespoons blueing
6 tablespoons salt
food coloring
5 pieces charcoal

Mix the first four ingredients. Pour over charcoal then drop the food coloring over all. Set the dish in a warm, dry place for one day. Check it for crystal growth.

11. If you use coloring books as part of your caregiving activities, encourage creativity instead of neatness and a finished product. It is not important for children to color within the lines or to use the right colors for trees, animals, or people. What is important, is self-expression and fun!

12. For variations of the above, and for more ideas, try some of the publications listed in the resource section, or check your local public library for simple activity books.

13. You might find *Good Times with Toys*, *Good Time with Music and Rhythm*, and *Good Times with Stories and Poems* especially helpful.



RESOURCES

There is a lot of information available on creative activities to do with children. Check the public libraries, local book stores, and your local Cooperative Extension office.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

[Creative Play Helps Children Grow](#) (National Network for Child Care)

[Child Development: Creativity in Young Children](#) (North Carolina Cooperative Extension)

[Music and Movement Activities](#) (National Network for Child Care)

OTHER RESOURCES

*Resources for Creative Teaching in Early Childhood Education by Bonnie Mack Flemming, Darlene Softley Hamilton and JoAnne Deal Hicks (1990)

*Learning Through Play: Dramatic Play edited by Nancy Jo Hereford and Jane Schall (1991)

*The Kids' Multicultural Art Book: Art and Craft Experiences from Around the World by Alexandria M. Terzian (1993)

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