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How to Nurture Creativity in Kids

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by Linda Wasmer Andrews

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Candi Wingate always is looking for fun ways to spark her sons' creativity. One favorite activity of Trent, 11, and Tyson, 5, is using sidewalk chalk to draw elaborate mazes for their bicycles.

"By choosing how they draw the paths and where they put the dead ends, they can change up the game in an infinite number of ways," says Wingate, 40, of Norfolk, Neb. (pop. 24,210). "It's so simple, yet so creative."

"They also love golf, so they invent games where the objective is to hit a golf ball from here to here to there," Wingate says. "On rainy days, they do things like creating silly hats out of cardboard and gluing on everything from pieces of candy to newspaper clippings."

Children are naturally creative, says Charlotte Reznick, a child educational psychologist in Los Angeles and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*. "Some say, 'I'm not creative because I can't play the guitar,' or 'I can't draw faces.' But there are many ways to express creativity," Reznick says. A child who's not musically inclined may be a Lego whiz.

Parents can nurture their children's creativity by encouraging them to use original ideas and imagination, whether through storytelling, painting, singing, dancing, playing dress-up or other activities.

3 keys to creativity

While all children are born with creative potential, their experiences growing up shape how they use it-or lose it. That's where parents can make a big difference:

- Give them the tools. The latest educational toy with all the electronic bells and whistles has its place. But for cultivating creativity, it's hard to beat old standbys such as building blocks, modeling clay, and crayons and paper. "With open-ended toys, kids have to figure out 'What could this be?'" Reznick says. "They get a chance to stretch their minds and pretend."

- Give them the time. Between school, band practice, karate class and youth group, some kids have a packed schedule that rivals the busiest CEOs. "Lack of free time is a creativity killer," says Susan Smith Kuczarski, an educator and social scientist in Chicago. "Kids need what I call hammock time: an opportunity to daydream and get lost in their thoughts."

- Get out of the way. It's wonderful to teach kids how to play a song, build a model, or sew a banner. But it's equally important to step back afterward and let them experiment with new skills on their own. "Over-control by parents is another creativity crusher," Kuczarski says.

Creative ideas for every age

The best creative activities are ones that match your child's interests and maturity level. Try these ideas geared to kids of different ages:

- Toddlers and preschoolers. Encourage young kids to playact the role of their favorite character from a book, movie or TV show, whether that means slithering like a lizard or casting spells like a wizard. "Young kids learn through physical activity," Reznick says. Meanwhile, trying out different changes in the storyline exercises budding imaginations.

- Elementary-school kids. "At this age, kids start worrying about coloring inside the lines and making a duck yellow, not red," Reznick says. While social rules are important, so is originality. Give kids permission to break the rules in art. "I have children draw self-portraits using colors and abstract shapes instead of actual features," Reznick says.

- Preteens and teenagers. At this age, young people are learning about themselves and making big life decisions on their own for the first time. Show them how creative thinking can help. One method: Give them a pen for each hand. First they write a question with their dominant hand. Then they write the first answers that come to mind with the other hand. Switching up hands helps tap into creative thinking areas of the brain.

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