

Imagination Boosters You've Never Heard of Before

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I know that many experts feel that too much screen time can kill creativity, but I've got to say, some of the shows that my kids watch not only educate them, but inspire them as well. Half the time, when they're running around the house pretending to be crime fighters or superheroes or friendly monsters, it's clear that they're playing with concepts from their favorite shows. Their latest game is playing space monkeys, jetting off to explore space, after watching the "Red Planet Monkey" episode of [Curious George](#), oh, a jillion times. I can only imagine how many more of their favorite episodes they'll watch over and over now that all nine seasons of Curious

George are now available on [Hulu!](#)

It got me thinking about other things that get their creativity flowing, aside from just setting up an easel in the backyard, or pulling out the dress up box. "The thing about children's imagination is that you less you give them, the more they'll have to work with," says child educational psychologist Charlotte Reznick, PhD, founder of [Imagery for Kids](#), and author of [The Power of Your Child's Imagination](#). "Toys with all the bells and whistles and sounds do too much for the child, and there's no room for imagination and free-thinking. So the simpler, the better."

Here are several surprising ways to light up that bright imagination bulb in their brain...

1. Build a junk box. You know all those bottle caps and Popsicle sticks and scraps of wrapping paper you were just gonna throw out? Save it all in one big "art" box. "Load on as many different materials as you can and then just bring it all out, with string and glue and scissors, and see what they'll come up with on their own," says Reznick. "Don't give them any direction, and they're likely to come up with some really cool things to create."

2. Chat about observations on your next car trip. Instead of spending long drives listening to kiddie pop music, engage them in imaginative thinking. Keep an eye out for billboards to point out to them or interesting looking stores and ask questions. For example, "Did you see that store with the big fish painted out front? What do you think they sell? What do you think it looks like in there?" Or if you sign for a national park, ask, "See that forest up there? What animals do you think live there?"

3. Get creative with problem solving. One tool Reznick uses to teach kids problem-solving and creative-thinking is to ask an (imaginary) animal friend for help. So if your child is, say, fighting with his brother, you can say, "I can see you're not happy about this. Who can we call in to help us? What animal friend?" They then might suggest a puppy, bunny, zebra, whatever.

Following that ask, "What did the animal friend bring that can help you get along better with your brother?" The child then uses his own imagination to decide what tools he needs to get along with his brother, even if it's just a quiet chair where he can be alone until he feels better. "It's easy and useful, helping them deal with everyday challenges by using their imaginations," says Reznick.

4. Play with flashlights to experiment with light and shadow. Shadow puppets are a classic here, and my kids fell in love with them after watching "Curious George Takes Another Job," an episode they still love. Playing with light and shadow is a great way to get a child's creativity going, as well as stimulate their critical thinking. They can simply put a flashlight on the ground in a dark room and observe their own shadows and the shapes they can make with their bodies. Or, have one kid get inside a tent with the flashlight, making shapes, while another stands outside and interprets what she's seeing, says Traci Demuth, Ed.D, founder of [Dream AcadeME](#), an educational program centered on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) in Los Angeles.

5. Ask your child to create something from a line you draw. It's amazing to see how you can make something out of nothing. So, Demuth recommends drawing an odd line on a plain piece of white paper, whether it's a squiggle or a diagonal or a zig-gag. Then, have your child turn your line into a picture of some sort. "It uses their imagination, but also engages their critical thinking as they decide the best way to transform the line into something cool," she says.

6. Play music without words. You've probably heard that classical music will turn your kid into a genius and, yes, there is some truth to that. "It's the Mozart effect, which is the idea that classical music, or at least instrumental music, relaxes and opens up the mind, making it more receptive to creative ideas." So while your child is playing, skip the Taylor Swift, and have some soothing tunes playing in the background.

7. Get them in a Zen state of mind with thoughtful breathing. While the idea of your kid meditating may seem hokey, there's something to it. "Have your child imagine a balloon below his belly button, and have him breathe in slowly to fill up the balloon, and then let it out," says Reznick. "This kind of breathing actually changes the brain, and helps them think more clearly and creatively. It's also a great way to help them calm themselves down." With a clear head, there's no telling where their little minds will take them.

**Sponsor note: All nine seasons of Curious George, as well as the animated film Curious George 2: Follow That Monkey, are now streaming, commercial-free, only on [Hulu](https://www.hulu.com). Visit [hulu.com](https://www.hulu.com) to start your free one-month trial, for a limited time only.*