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5 amazing ways that unschooling develops children's creativity

In *Unschooling to University*, parenting expert and author Judy Arnall argues that prescribed curriculum kills creativity, while free play promotes it.

By **Judy Arnall** March 3, 2020



Photo: iStockPhoto

One day, my daughter's **kindergarten class** was doing an art project. The children cut pieces of fruit in half and dipped them in paint to make prints on paper. As the parent

volunteer, I was assigned a group of five children to supervise. I showed them the “template” to make the fruit art. I watched as four children dipped the fruit into the paint. Most matched the colors—the lemon halves got dipped into yellow paint, the orange halves into orange paint, and so on. One little boy decided to dip his lemon half into blue paint. I watched in fascination as he swooshed his fruit in beautiful swirls all over his paper. He continued to do that with other fruits and other paint colors. Swooshes, not prints. Different colors. I thought, this kid is creative! I told him that I loved his interpretation. We parent volunteers collected our groups’ artworks and laid them on the table to dry. Twenty minutes later, I saw the teacher quietly look over the pieces while the children were engaged in another activity. She held out the swirled painting and asked the parent volunteers whose group it was from. I was instantly transported back to my own school days. Filled with fear, I raised my hand and managed to stammer out, “He’s in my group. Isn’t it beautiful?” She asked me to sit down with the child and show him how to redo the painting. “The paintings are to be displayed on the bulletin board outside the classroom and this one doesn’t match the rest.”

What do kids bring to kindergarten? Creativity, curiosity, initiative, and lots of self-confidence. If their ideas get shut down in the interest of adhering to the established curriculum, children give up their curiosity and acquiesce. Most of those lovely, spontaneous qualities are stifled out of them by Grade 3. It’s easier for them to follow the norm than be forced into a do-over.

We need to consistently provide supportive environments that allow kids to come up with new ideas; we need to throw out the old model of force-feeding and regurgitation. Children should be encouraged to invent new outcomes, not conform to outdated ones. We need to teach kids to love **learning for the joy of discovery**—not to score an A on a test by giving the “right” answers. No one in the field of education

denies that creativity is important; yet the reality is that creativity is often shut down in subtle but very clear ways: a child challenges the teacher's knowledge and gets a detention; a student reaches the correct answer on a test in a non-conformist way and it gets marked wrong. It happens frequently in math—a correct answer attained through an “incorrect” method.

Never has there been a more critical need for innovation as the primary rationale for education; the world's problems today demand it. Creativity—innovation—involves experimentation, risk-taking, failures. Failure is essential to the creative process, in forcing both trial after trial to perfect the end result, and the perseverance necessary to do so.

Our society badly needs innovators, engineers, architects, designers, researchers, inventors, thought-leaders, and scientists. Everyone is creative. Let's keep it flowing. Here is how:

1. No plan, template, model, image or expectation is preconceived

Templates lead children down the tried and true path meant to result in a preconceived outcome. In unschooling, kids are encouraged to come up with original ideas.

2. More freedom with resources and supplies

Unconventional ideas sometimes benefit from resources and supplies not obtainable through the school supply systems. Unschoolers are in the enviable position of being able to purchase interesting materials for their projects, or even rummage through

attics or scavenge through sewing rooms or garages to find things to complete their projects or **fuel their creativity**.

3. Unlimited time

Everyone knows that the brain needs water, nutritious food, and adequate sleep to function well. Exercise is also important. But to be creative, the brain also needs downtime. Children spend six hours a day in school, three hours being transported, and another three hours doing homework.

They often have very little time to process their thinking and just “be.” Yet this is critical. Freedom from the **distractions of mobile phones**, people, and screens is important in order for the brain to postulate, formulate, imagine, and percolate new ideas. People today do not have enough time to “veg out.” Brains need to be able to relax and de-focus. To wander wherever their thoughts take them. Creative blocks happen; when they do, allowing the brain to relax is helpful. Often a resolution comes unexpectedly when we are not under pressure to force it.

Many people do their creative thinking on the treadmill, or while in the shower, meditating, or lying awake in bed. An idea might wake them during the night. Some people feel more creative in the early morning, waking up refreshed after a good night’s sleep; others late at night, with their brain in a relaxed and unfocused state. Curiously, those who routinely exercise their creativity are more likely to be extreme “morning” or “night” people.

4. Mistakes are celebrated

We have all seen little children try to hold a heavy project together with a little piece of tape or a spot of glue. It takes a lot of messing around to figure out what will work. I remember building a sugar cube castle with \$27 worth of sugar cubes and some liquid glue. It was the wrong glue and melted the sugar into one gloppy mess. Kids in school today don't learn such things because projects, materials, instruction, and outcomes are pre-planned and prescribed.

When people are afraid of making mistakes, they refuse to let themselves entertain creative ideas. They overthink them and discard them. Ideas flow when they are not weighted in evaluation. That's why brainstorming with other people is helpful in coming up with creative solutions. The more ideas that are generated, the more likely it is that at least one of them will work.

In our family, when someone makes a mistake, we ask, "What did you learn from this?" Instead of developing a climate of blame and punishment, we forgive mistakes and encourage learning. Our society would be better if everyone did their best to support others' ideas and promote the ones that work.

I dream of a day when kids will win scholarships based not on academic averages, but on how many mistakes they have made, taken responsibility for, and creatively fixed!

5. Self-esteem is nurtured

The overwhelming punitive peer environment in school can be heavily damaging to an individual's **child self-esteem**. Even the most popular kids are always on guard, afraid of making mistakes. Yet the ability to make mistakes and learn from them is an essential component of creativity and risk-taking. Kids with healthy self-esteem will take risks and not be afraid of failing. We need kids to be able to say, "Oh well. That

didn't work. Let's try this..." The ability to pick themselves up and try again is critical to attaining success in their careers and in their lives.

For our family, the phrase, "I wonder if..." has been the best idea stimulator. No one is criticized for any idea, whether it is feasible or not. We all have enough self-esteem to let things go if they aren't working, and the freedom to recombine elements in a different way to try something a second time. The day my kids combined the elements of play-dough, sand, and water, my visiting friends were horrified because "it's just not done,"—yet my kids did it, had fun, and discovered the properties of breaded play-dough.

Unschooling allows children to play and explore during the school years, fostering creativity that a prescribed curriculum cannot. This is one of the most crucial reasons for re-examining our school system.

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