

# The Creative Spark

Preschoolers often draw amazing creatures, tell fantastic stories, play with old toys in new ways, compose songs and even make up words. Yet most of us tend to be less innovative as we get older. We may be afraid of looking silly or simply not want to risk failure.

That's a shame, since creativity can be of help in nearly every aspect of our lives. We use it not only in the arts, but also at work and school. A high-school student uses creativity to write a new software program for her computer. A marketing executive uses it to dream up a new product for her customers.

But the good news is that there are ways to ignite and nurture children's creative spark. Once your youngster has acquired some basic habits, she's likely to remain inventive the rest of her life.

Scientists who study creativity find that our most innovative thinking happens when a new idea challenges existing ones. The new idea and the old ones then begin to compete with each other, forcing us to come up with new insights or behavior. This dynamic process—called the “generative” process by scientists—operates all the time in everyone.

Your creative juices may start to flow, for example, when your normally cooperative preschooler refuses to pick up her toys. You ask her a second time, but when that doesn't work, you begin to experiment until you find a creative solution: You make cleaning up into a race, and before you know it, the toys are put away.

Most of us don't stop to think about such everyday creativity. But scientists have done just that and identified four basic creative skills we can teach our kids.

**1. Capturing:** Grab that rabbit before it gets away! A good idea is like a

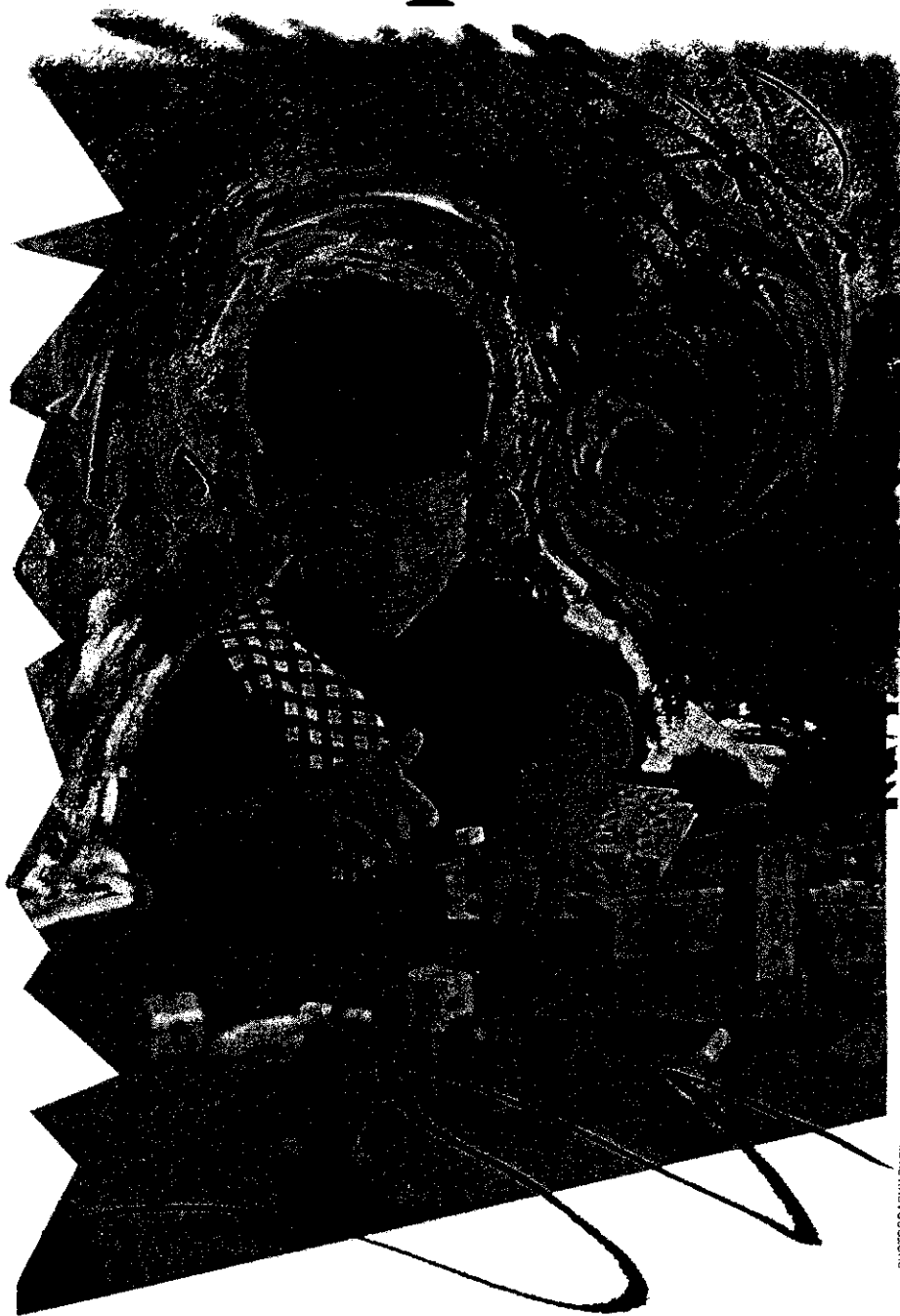


ILLUSTRATION BY SHARMEN LIAO

Kids are naturally inventive. Try  
these ideas to nurture their imagination  
and encourage good thinking

By Robert Epstein

rabbit, a little girl once told me. You have to grab it quickly before it hops away. She was right—to be creative, we often have to capture the fleeting inspiration. That's why a nature photographer stays poised with camera ready to snap the antelope in motion and many professional writers carry notebooks everywhere they go to record a new idea.

You can teach your child to capture new ideas. The key is to give her some nets: Set up an "Idea Box" or an "Idea Jar" by her bed where she can drop in interesting thoughts as they occur to her. Or put a blackboard on her bedroom wall where she can jot down her ideas.

Teach your child that *any* new idea might have some value. A funny word combination—"the kitten's sittin' on my mitten"—might help in composing his first poem. A weird set of squiggles might make a great new design for the frosting on a birthday cake. Artists and inventors will hold on to almost any doodles and scratchings for years, uncertain as to which ones will pay off later. Teach your child that any new insight is valuable, even if he isn't sure how he will use it.

**2. Challenging: No mountain is too high for us!** As adults, we're often reluctant to take on a problem that has no clear solution—after all, we might fail! So we stick to the tried and true rather than risk an embarrassing setback.

But it's important to teach our children to enjoy new challenges, because each one forces them to be creative—to put old ideas in a new sequence or to blend them in an innovative way. It's something like encountering a locked door that won't open as it usually does with a key. When the old behavior doesn't work, we try something new: We jiggle the key. Then

we push and pull the door with the key in place. Finally, the door flies open when we put a couple of old ideas into brand-new sequence: We jiggle the key while pulling the door and bingo!—it opens.

Tell your child not to feel silly if many attempts are needed to solve a problem. After all, Thomas Edison failed thousands of times before he finally invented a working light bulb. Encourage your youngster to keep trying until he finds a solution.

I recently watched my son work his way through a problem in our house. His new dog was eating the cat's food. First, he tried saying "no" and pushing the dog away from the cat's bowl. Then he tried putting the dog's food right next to the cat's, in hopes the dog would concentrate on his own bowl. When that failed, he put the dog food downstairs and the cat food upstairs. But nothing worked until he put the cat food inside a closet, with the door open just wide enough for the cat. My son's invention may not have been as profound a discovery as Edison's light bulb, but he learned the power of new ideas.

Kids will even benefit from tackling huge, fanciful problems that don't have solutions, but stimulate the imagination. Ask children how to get to the moon, or how to travel in time, or how to disappear. You won't get real solutions, but you will inspire some interesting thinking.

**3. Broadening: You can never know too much!** New ideas do not arise out of thin air; rather, they emerge from prior experiences and information. Honky-tonk piano, for example, combines classical and jazz techniques. Reggae and hip-hop are blends of other musical styles.

Thus, it pays to help your child pursue a wide array of interests and hobbies. Instead of signing her up for another ballet

class, try one in pottery-making or even soccer. The more diverse her base of knowledge, the more plentiful and interesting the new ideas.

**4. Surrounding: Create a new environment!** Kids get fresh insights when something in the world around them changes. The same is true for most of us—you may have noticed how easily ideas occur to you when you take a vacation away from home. Suddenly, you see your hometown and its customs in a new light. You might start to incorporate a new spice into your cooking or cook fruits and vegetables in a new way.

That doesn't mean you need to take an expensive or elaborate trip. Kids respond to simple changes at home, such as putting a drum and a piano in a room at the same time. Suddenly, your teenage son decides to compose music that incorporates both instruments. Or you might put Play-doh next to your daughter's Lego set. Soon she is creating clay landscapes for her Lego buildings.

As you can see, there's nothing very magical about these four key habits. The truth is that the creative process is going on for all of us all the time. Even if we don't bother to stimulate ourselves in special ways, new ideas keep on occurring to us naturally because we are always growing and changing.

Unfortunately, many of us learn to turn off the creative process. Why? In our schools, socialization is often the culprit. Every culture needs to convey a large base of common knowledge—reading, history, arithmetic, and so on. Unfortunately, this often translates into memorizing and reciting the same old answers instead of inventing new ones.

But you can teach your own child that new ideas are valuable, fun and enriching. Once she starts to capture and record the whimsical and fantastic, once she starts taking on new challenges with relish, she'll bring a creativity to her life that she'll never want to abandon. ■

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