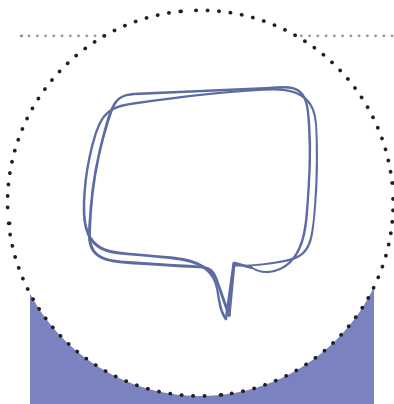




HANNAH DAY SUGGESTS SIX WAYS TO NURTURE CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN

Let's start with a startling fact. The World Economic Forum predicts that by 2020 creativity will be one of the top three most important skills for future jobs – jobs that in many cases do not currently exist. We also know that UK government policy of late has focused on what it calls STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths, subjects that students may well flourish in if they can apply creativity thinking but are not generally focused on developing that skill set.

Creativity doesn't just mean painting or model making. It is thinking about situations in new and unusual ways that might not be thought of by other people. By presenting new ideas, creative thinkers can help bring about innovations across all sectors within our society, not just those labelled part of the creative industries.

Creativity, like all skills, can be nurtured. So, how do we draw it out from our children? Here are a few tips to get you started, and if they work, you and your family will have your own set of ideas before you have got through mine.

GIVE CHILDREN OPEN-ENDED GAMES. Many educational games are built around a particular aim, such as teaching children to tell the time, but for creative play the outcome needs to be open rather than preset. This means picking a tub of bricks over a set with instructions, or a sketchpad over a colouring book. The more choices the child has to make when engaging with a toy, the better the creative play.

DISRUPT OR REDIRECT. Ever played noughts and crosses with a preschooler? Before you've drawn your first circle they have already decided where their three crosses will go. Interrupt that plan, and they have to find the resources to recalculate rather than giving up or carrying on regardless, drawing over your marks and miraculously winning. This is an early experience of disruption or redirecting through play, and it builds the skills needed to reassess situations and reformulate plans. With older children, storytelling can offer a more sophisticated approach to the same idea. With two to four people, build a story where each person only gets to offer one sentence before the next person takes on the story. Moving around the circle, the story can change dramatically, quickly taking on new directions. Tellers have to react to new characters, situations and events and yet keep the narrative going. This can also be done through collective drawing, where several people work on the same composition.

ASK THEM TO COME UP WITH ALTERNATIVES. The most famous task in the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking is to come up with as many different uses you can think of for a familiar object such as a paper clip. The idea is that the number of answers and the level of rarity for each answer given indicates the depth of your creative thought. Another simple game to play at home involves getting five objects – say, a houseplant, a spatula, a pillow, a chair and a ball of string. Now ask a series of questions, such as which you would use to steer a boat. The objects are then placed in order of suitability, with justifications added such as that the spatula is light and easy to use, but the pillow would just soak up water. The objects cease to be what they are and become a collection of qualities that relate to their shape, material, weight, and so on.

LESS IS MORE. Simply put, fewer toys means they will be played with more often, and the more often the same objects are revisited, the more varied the play will become. This is because the most obvious outcomes will become boring. To reinvigorate the play, children will use their imagination to take their toys in new directions and to play outcomes they were not specifically designed for.

ENCOURAGE THEM TO GO WHERE THEIR IMAGINATION TAKES THEM. My daughter loves hide and seek. So much so, that we play it when she's in the bath. Just think about that. She knows she's in the bath. I know she's in the bath. She knows I know she's in the bath. But we still love it. It started off fairly subdued. "Is she under the sink?" "Is she behind the towels?" but soon it turned into the absurd. "Has she squeezed into the taps?" "Has she gone down the plughole?" This plays around with the idea that the impossible becomes possible: that options rejected for being ridiculous could still be the correct answer. Imagine the problem-solving skills developed through this type of play. Children do this with ease; I had to relearn it.

GET IN THE PROFESSIONALS. I'm writing this as my 5-year-old attends a two-hour Saturday morning art club. They are exploring 2D and 3D approaches to drawing based on a painting in the museum where the club is held. I have plenty of good ideas but not a monopoly on creative play, so sometimes it's good to get a fresh approach in a new setting with a new collection of materials.

Do just a few of these, and you will be building connections within your children's thoughts and imagination that will put them in good stead for whatever the 21st century has in store for them – and let's not forget that all these ideas are also great fun right now. ●

Hannah Day lives in Shropshire with her husband and daughter. By day she teaches art to sixth-formers. By night she likes to do her own illustration work. She believes in creativity beyond the art room and how it can support our problem solving and imagination in all disciplines.