

Supporting children's development

Creative expression

Jan McFarlane explores strategies that child care professionals can use to enhance children's creative experiences and development in child care settings.

Inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy, Edwards, Gandini and Foreman (1993) describe the endless ways children are able to express their ideas as the 'hundred languages of children'. Yet, all too often, we define creativity very narrowly by focussing on the visual and expressive arts. There is a tendency to believe that creativity is a gift or talent that only some people are born with.

In reality we can all be creative in almost every aspect of our lives, including the arts, sciences, humanities, sport, cookery and even commerce. It is a way of thinking, inquiring, making and doing that involves originality of thought and expression. Creativity adds value to our lives by allowing us to look beyond what we already know and to recognise and appreciate the myriad of possibilities in life. Creativity 'celebrates the possibilities of the human mind' (Bruce, 2004).

Creating something truly original is rare, but each of us is being creative when we express our thoughts and feelings in a drawing or by writing in a journal, by combining ingredients to create a meal, by finding new ways to use recycled



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 2.2, 3.1-3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 5.1-5.4

QIAS Principles: 4.1-4.6

materials or by developing strategies to resolve a conflict. Being creative involves nurturing our interests, expressing our ideas and working with others to come up with solutions to everyday problems.

Children have many more ideas than we 'teach' them (Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2004)

Children are creative beings. They have a natural curiosity that leads them to constantly explore, investigate and experiment to gain an understanding of the possibilities in their environment. Play provides the means by which children discover and communicate an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Play provides them with the medium for some of the richest and most powerful learning experiences.

From birth, children explore and understand their world through touching, seeing, hearing and responding to colours, textures, sights and sounds in their environment. It is from these early explorations that lifelong attitudes about creativity and our own capacity to be creative are formed.

Children who are required to do everything in the same way can become dependent on others to tell them what to do and think. They are less likely to think independently or to do something different, new or original. When children have opportunities to follow their own interests, use their imagination and explore the possibilities of the materials available to them, they will become more skilled and creative.

Children's exploration of materials is a necessary part of the creative process.

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When encouraged to experiment and express themselves in their own way, children will often demonstrate greater creative ability than when they are expected to achieve a pre-determined outcome or product. For example, opportunities to explore musical instruments, play with sound or make up songs and dances provide children with a richer and more meaningful form of expression than experiencing music and dance passively through radio, television or video recordings.

Similarly, engaging in storytelling through dramatic and imaginative play provides opportunities for children to experience a range of emotions and relationships, and to experiment with new theories and possibilities. While children's first stories and imaginative play experiences are most often a commentary on what is happening in their daily lives, as they develop their stories and play become more complex. Children may assume a specific role in their story, or animate the voices of different characters. Roles may be assigned to their friends and the story developed over days or even weeks. This type of play both feeds and is fed by children's imagination.

Supporting children's creative expression

Child care professionals can respond to children's developing creative expression and arouse their curiosity by creating opportunities to stimulate, extend or challenge their thinking. This involves paying attention to the environment, materials and experiences planned for children and the ways in which child care professionals can interact with children to develop their interests and creativity.

Establish an environment with potential for learning

An environment that is rich in beautiful things to see and touch and where attention has been paid to light, textures and sound can foster an appreciation of beauty and stimulate children's creativity. Simple and inexpensive things, such as plants, flowers, fabrics and natural materials such as stones and pebbles, shells, leaves and feathers, invite children to explore. Children can also be inspired by reproductions of artworks and

photographs through the inclusion of art posters, postcards and calendars in the environment.

An environment in which there are small well defined spaces that encourage concentration and discourage interruptions invites children's participation and empowers them to engage independently with materials and equipment. Similarly, an environment that provides independent access to open ended materials will engage children's curiosity. An environment filled with things to talk and wonder about, materials that are interesting to explore and work with, in contrast to those that have a designated purpose, provides endless opportunities for creative expression.

Environments for babies and toddlers

When developing environments for babies, child care professionals might consider bright, colourful things for them to look at and touch. For example, light curtains or strips of fabric that move in the breeze, different surfaces to roll and crawl over, and shaded outdoor areas where babies can watch the effects of light and experience new textures.

Toddlers need room to explore using their whole body and often prefer to stand at a table rather than sit when they are working with drawing or craft materials, clay or dough. Outdoors, toddlers need spaces to explore and natural materials to collect and sort, such as stones, sticks and leaves. Space for pretend play with materials and props such as cardboard boxes, sheets and pieces of fabrics to make cubbies and dress up clothing, are also important for this age group.

Environments for older children

Child care professionals can create spaces for preschool and school age children where they have continuous access to materials which they can use to express themselves through art, movement, construction, music, dramatic play, puppetry and storytelling. Media, tools and materials should be chosen carefully so that they extend children's investigations and encourage them to recognise patterns and symmetry.

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School age children, especially when they have been in a classroom all day, also need the space and materials to support their engagement in the sorts of creative experiences they might be involved in at home, such as building a model, developing a new dance routine, building a billy-cart or participating in a complex adventure game with their friends.

Planning experiences to support children's creative expression

Children are at their most creative when their environment and materials are organised in ways that enable them to initiate their own experiences, act on their ideas and use trial and error to find solutions to the problems they encounter along the way. When children are free to make choices about what they do, they become focussed and the experience becomes meaningful.

Working on a project that has been sparked by a real interest is more satisfying and has more meaning for a child than creative activities that is adult initiated or directed. Working collaboratively with their peers provides opportunities for children to extend their ideas by taking on multiple perspectives and seeing new possibilities.

Most importantly, children need time to explore materials in their environment; time to look, touch and choose; time to experiment and repeat things over and over again, and opportunities to leave play areas and projects set up so that they can return to them over several days or even weeks. When each session is planned so that there are long periods of uninterrupted time, children are able to become fully engaged in their investigations.

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Child care professionals provide the best support for children's creative expression when they share children's enthusiasm for exploration and delight in their discoveries. In turn, children will be more motivated to explore something more thoroughly when they believe adults see this as being important.

Adults support children by being available to them: near enough to support and provide resources and materials but not directing or taking over the experience. For example, a child care professional can hold a piece of wood so that a child can work on it, they can demonstrate the potential of different materials and tools or

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suggest a next step or highlight something the child might have overlooked when they become stuck or frustrated. Observing and listening to children helps child care professionals to understand what and how children are learning. This, in turn, enables child care professionals to understand the best way to support children.

Conversations stimulate children's creative thinking and problem solving. Child care professionals encourage children to test their ideas and spark their imagination by asking open ended questions about the materials and tools they are using, for example:

- "Can you tell me about..."
- "What do you notice about..."
- "What happens when you..."
- "What could this be used for..."
- "Who might have used this..."
- "Where did this come from..."

Care should be taken to ensure that the questions child care professionals ask model curiosity and promote the pleasure of shared exploration. Asking questions such as "What is it?" or "What are you making" may pressure a child into responding, when they may be simply enjoying

exploring a new medium with no particular product in mind. Similarly, making observations such as "It looks like a..." can limit children's thinking and creativity.

Respect for the hundred languages of children

Child care professionals demonstrate a genuine respect for children's creativity and express their confidence in children as capable and competent learners when they provide opportunities for them to express their ideas in an infinite number of ways every day. They also celebrate children's creativity by providing opportunities for children and their families to appreciate their own work and that of others when they observe and document children's creative processes.

When child care professionals support children's creative expression they are also supporting children's ability to use their intelligence and imagination to the full and providing them with a sense of agency; the self-confidence to 'have a go', to try alternatives and new ways of doing things ■

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