

nurturing creativity

Einstein imagined himself riding on a beam of light. Steven Spielberg made his first movie when he was a Boy Scout. Martha Graham focussed on and transformed dance until her death at 96.

What is it about these individuals that makes them unforgettable, revolutionary, powerful? How did they discover their passions, and then go on to pursue them so that they ended up revolutionising their respective fields of physics, film-making and dance?

It's called creativity, and, the experts say, we are all born with it. "The kernel of creativity is there in the infant: the desire and drive to explore, to find out about things, to try things out, to experiment with different ways of handling things and looking at things," says Dr. Teresa Amabile, quoted in *The Creative Spirit*.

You could say that the essence of being an infant is about being creative. In fact, we don't have a choice but to be creative. Of all the animal species on earth, human beings alone must learn and master from scratch every skill necessary for survival.

So, we all start with these impulses, but experts now know that these same impulses – best described as an "anything-is-possible-everything-is-conceivable" attitude – do not necessarily remain active as we grow.

Bear in mind that a child's brain and central nervous system continue to develop from birth to adolescence. A child's brain has a much greater predisposition for flexibility of thought and experimentation than an adult's.

Why is this? Just before puberty, the brain undergoes a process called "pruning," in which millions of neurological connections die. Those that don't die settle into lifelong patterns that determine the way one responds to the external world, for instance.

Which means, simply, that if a child's natural sense of wonder, experimentation and lack of self-censorship is encouraged, then it becomes the way his brain regularly works. If it isn't encouraged, and if he is encouraged instead to not be spontaneous in his thoughts, to have the "right" ideas, and so on, then that becomes the way his brain typically works.

When pruning season comes around, the impulses that will die are the ones that aren't regularly used.

So if creativity is something we are born with, how can we encourage and tap on it so that it becomes a lifelong skill? If we can encourage creativity, does this mean we can also discourage it?

Continued on next page >



nurturing creativity

Creativity can be nurtured, but in order for this to happen, the environment must be conducive to exploring new ideas and exploring alternative ways of thinking. This means it should not

be "ruled" by rules. For young people, the environment must encourage positive thinking. How do you do this?

"Most importantly, we must realise that nurturing creativity is something that must be done holistically. It is not a programme that has a beginning, a middle and an end, with a grade thrown in," says Ms. Carolyn Kee, a psychologist who has worked at the Child Guidance Clinic of the Institute of Mental Health for six years.

The open, non-judgemental attitude needed to nurture it must be applied at all times, and not just during certain time slots, she adds.

"Encourage the child to see that a problem is a challenge; that mistakes are not occasions for condemnation, but for learning; that one doesn't have to have the 'right' answer all the time; that unconventional responses are worthy of consideration," suggests Ms. Kee.

When children feel that differences are nothing to be afraid of, they feel confident to try different ways of doing things.

In order to successfully nurture creativity, parents and teachers themselves must be open to new experiences, no matter how mundane. For instance, chances are that you take the same route taking your child to school each day. Try a different route, note the new things to see along the way, let your child realise that even though it's a different route, it leads to the same place. Change his schedule once in a while, so that he learns that change is fine and flexibility important.

"Brainstorm and encourage wild ideas. Create a time where you create a scenario for your child, and encourage him to come up with wild ideas in response. The agreement is that no idea will be rejected," advises Ms. Kee, who adds that parents and teachers need to "listen

more than lecture." Children, after all, need to express themselves, as part of their development.

But all of this is not to say that children should be allowed free

rein, with no rules, discipline or goals. "There are limits, for instance, there must be right answers and wrong answers a lot of the time. And there must be rules to follow. It is how these situations are dealt with that matters. Positive and negative feedback condition a child to move in a certain direction."

In her therapy and psycho-educational work with parents and their children, Ms. Kee often encounters parents who are concerned when their children prefer to look at pictures rather than read words. Because their children are not suffering from any kind of reading disability, the parents tend to see this tendency as something that must be corrected. "But there is nothing wrong with this, pictures stimulate the imagination. Censure a child for reasons like these, and you are actively curbing his creativity."

It doesn't help that much of the time, we associate creativity with specific talent. "We've become narrow in the ways we think about creativity. We tend to think about creativity as rarefied: artists, musicians, poets and filmmakers are creative. But the chef in her kitchen is showing creativity when she invents a variation on a recipe. A bricklayer shows creativity when he devises a new way of laying bricks..." says Dr. Amabile.

So when your child gets passionate about doodling, or singing, or pretend-cooking, encourage it, enjoy it with him, applaud him, instead of hurrying him through it or discouraging him because it won't get him better grades in maths.

Grades are important, but they don't help you solve problems, scale new heights of achievement, and inspire....these take that special ability called creativity.

And how can we be creative, or begin to be, as an adult? What if your early childhood experiences had the effect of

curtailing experimentation; if you grew up in a judgemental environment that taught you to practise self-censorship? How do you – and can you – set the stage for creative moments?

You can set the stage, declares Mr. Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University. Quoted in *The Creative Spirit*, Mr. Gardner describes a creative person as “one who can regularly solve a problem, or come up with something novel that becomes a valued product in a particular domain.”

Creative people, he says, are always thinking about the domains in which they work. They’re always tinkering, asking questions, asking how to make it better. From Freud to Darwin to Einstein and Martin Luther King, it is clear that there is, in fact, a process to creating those magic moments of insight, that is shared by creative people in various disciplines.

First, there is preparation, when you gather every possible piece of information on the subject you are on. You saturate yourself. Then you incubate yourself, let your thoughts roam freely, mull, take flights of fancy, daydream, doze. Then comes illumination, when the inspired idea, the solution, hits, in what is often described as a “flash of inspiration.” Then comes translation, when the brilliant insight is translated into relevant terms.

A person, explains Mr. Gardner, isn’t creative in general. Each of us is creative in specific areas of our work or life, whether it’s writing concept papers, designing software programmes or gardening. We are creative in these areas because we care about them, we are good at them, or we feel an emotional connection with them. We feel confident and positive enough about them to let our minds roam freely in search of new approaches.

The potential for creativity is always present, and does not wane as life goes on. The trick is to keep an open, willing and flexible mind and spirit, spend time reviewing the facts, spend time just mulling or daydreaming, ensure your mind always has space to flex its muscles. ■

Creativity Killers — Are You Guilty?

Surveillance: When a child feels he is being watched, the risk-taking creative impulse goes into hiding.

Evaluation: When children worry about how they’re performing compared to their peers rather than enjoying their own accomplishments, creativity suffers.

Rewards: Too many rewards and the pleasure in creative activity wanes.

Competition: There can only be one winner, and this pressure forces creative impulse to take a back seat.

Overcontrol: Too much instruction and you communicate the message that originality is a waste of time.

Restricting choices: What you offer as good choices may not be where the child’s passion lies.

Pressure: Too much pressure to master something kills interest and passion for it.

Rushing for time: Adults have time constraints, which, when imposed too strongly on children, curb creative impulse through disruption.