

Killing Creativity

Why It's Declining and What Parents Can Do About It

By Heidi Smith Luedtke

Creative possibilities are everywhere. If you doubt that, watch your kids. They stir dirt, leaves and pool water into pretend pies. They turn wine boxes into parking garages for toy cars. They tape a badminton racquet on the end of a fishing pole to retrieve the Frisbee from the roof. They tinker with your cell phone and—as a result—learn to use it in ways you can't. During play, creativity is automatic.

Unfortunately, studies show families are becoming less creative. Researcher Kyung Hee Kim, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology at the College of William and Mary finds that creativity test scores are declining dramatically. The most extreme decrease she found—a drop of 37% between 1984 and 2008—was in elaboration, which includes the ability to elaborate on ideas and the motivation to be creative. If creativity is built in, why are we losing it?

Five Creativity Killers

The creativity crisis begins at home, according to Kim. Parents with little tolerance for mess, noise, and ambiguity may demand kids speak, think, and act “correctly” and leave little room for individuality. And leisure activities like television and video games can make kids passive consumers, rather than stimulating their innovative energies.

Educational strategies that confuse mimicry with learning also take a toll. Kids learn to ask “what do I have to do to get an A?” and to follow directions without deviation. When kids are motivated to get the right answer, they become afraid to take creative and original leaps, says Rebecca Weingarten, a former classroom teacher and produced playwright who works as an education coach in New York. They grow leery of situations where they feel off-balance or uncertain.

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Testing practices reinforce these feelings. "If we generate thinkers who just know responses that fit into precise bubbles, we cannot foster creativity," says Gail Humphries Mardirosian, Associate Professor of Theatre at American University and director of more than 120 productions. Deep learning involves making meaning of information and experiences in ways that cannot be measured with multiple-choice tests. "I am interested in how information is assimilated, articulated and questioned in multiple ways," Mardirosian says.

Our increasingly complicated world is also to blame. To manage the overwhelming cognitive load, our brains process information using mental models of past experiences, and we see things the same way we've seen them before. We repeat previous behavior because it worked and because acting on autopilot is faster than starting from scratch. We have come to value efficiency more than innovation.

Roadblocks come from within, too, according to creativity expert Stephen Eiffert, author of *Cross-train Your Brain: A Mental Fitness Program for Maximizing Creativity and Achieving Success*. If you believe you just aren't a creative person or you fear looking foolish, wasting time, or making mistakes, you'll continue doing things the way you've always done them. "Creative people do not confuse their personal value with the learning process," Eiffert says. They play with elements or concepts and accept that mistakes are part of the deal. They know failure isn't fatal.

Nurturing Creativity

"At all levels of education, an integrated arts education nurtures creative thinking and encourages 'practical imagination,'" Mardirosian says. When kids use music, movement, and role-playing in the learning process, they come to understand lesson content in deep and profound ways. Kids with a variety of learning styles find content accessible and interesting. And creative strategies make kids active learners, ready to apply what they learn beyond the classroom.

You can apply arts-based learning at home, too. When her own daughter was young, Mardirosian recalls helping her learn addition and subtraction by stepping up and down the stairs. Starting at the bottom, she might step up 2, then add 4 (now at step 6) then subtract 3. As a kinesthetic learner, she needed to move while she computed results, Mardirosian says. She wasn't a sit-still kind of kid.

Parents can also encourage kids' creativity by accepting child-initiated work instead of expecting teacher-initiated work, says Susan Cooper, M.Ed. If your child brings home a paper watermelon made from a perfectly-shaped semicircle and black cut-out seeds, that's probably teacher-initiated, she says. Kids' creations may not look like anything at all! But when parents are pleased with the red and purple marks the child describes as a watermelon, they encourage the child's creativity and allow the teacher to encourage it as well.

And remember to be a good role model. When your child asks you to draw a monkey, don't say "Mommy isn't good at drawing." Take your best shot. If your monkey looks more like a bear or a mouse, don't give up—add a banana! Approach the situation with a spirit of learning, not a focus on failure. Remember: in most situations, there isn't only one right answer.

When you approach life with a creative spirit, you'll find lots of opportunities to stretch your practical imagination. You can learn new things every day. Cook without a recipe. Take a different route to work. Solve household problems with ingenuity. Let your creative self come out and play. You've still got a lot to learn, right? ★

Heidi Smith Luedtke, PhD is a personality psychologist and mom whose work is enriched by the constant chaos of her kids' activities. Read her blog on parenting and leadership at www.leadingmama.com

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Creative Resources for You

If you're stuck in the same old patterns of thinking and action, reclaim your creative self with these tools.

- Read a thought-provoking interview with creativity researcher Kyung-Hee Kim to learn how to preserve and strengthen creativity in your kids www.britannica.com/blogs/2010/10/the-decline-of-creativity-in-the-united-states-5-questions-for-educational-psychologist-kyung-hee-kim/
- Find a wide range of idea generation strategies and devices at www.mindtools.com
- Learn to organize information, uncover mental models, and represent connections using mind maps (*The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential* by Tony Buzan, 1996). Download software for free at freemind.sourceforge.net
- Get inspired. Read *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (Daniel H. Pink, 2009)
- Learn the *Six Thinking Hats* (Edward DeBono, 1999) method for viewing a problem and potential solutions from a variety of perspectives. See a visual representation at www.loosetooth.com/Viscom/gf/6thinkinghats.htm

