

CREATIVITY

and higher-order thinking



This fundamental creative ability in human beings is something that I want to celebrate. The human ability to respond to the challenges of our environment through technologies, our desire to communicate and make sense of our world through language and to express our sense of wonder through the arts, is truly astounding.

So what do we mean when we think about creativity or creative thinking? How do we define it and why is it so important to foster this in our young children? What can we do in our homes and early childhood centres to nurture our young children's creative abilities?

Creativity or creative thinking can be defined in a number of ways, but what is important to remember is that we all have the capacity to be creative. Thinking creatively is not just for the gifted few. Certainly creativity can be found in the great works of art, architecture, technology, engineering, mathematics, in the work of our great writers, in fact it can be expressed in all areas of human endeavour. But it can also be expressed in our everyday lives, helping us solve problems, develop resilience and a sense of confidence in our own capacity to manage our increasingly complex lives.

We know that encouraging our young children to express their creativity with confidence supports their personal and emotional development which in turn supports their learning across the curriculum, and this is enshrined in the *Early Years Learning Framework* under principles such as:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners (DEEWR, 2009).

However, this commitment to fostering children's creativity goes beyond the personal. We can speculate about our

One of my favourite television programs over the years has been ABC's *New inventors*. I have often been left awestruck by the ingenuity of ordinary people to solve a day-to-day problem and come up with a spectacular solution.

'Time to play offers young children opportunities to problem solve ...'

personal futures in a 'local' sense by making plans for our children's education, or buying a new house, or indeed studying for a new career, but in a global sense, the future of human beings as a species is less clear. We know that the global future will be challenging and it will need new skills and new ways of thinking in order for us to respond to the changes in our environment that we will be faced with.

This means that we need our children, the custodians of our future, to be able to think flexibly and creatively. We need to educate our very youngest to have confidence in their own abilities, to be adaptable, to think creatively and problem solve imaginatively, and we won't do that unless we nurture that human capacity for creativity from a very early age.

Encouraging children to think for themselves (in reality no-one can actually 'think' for another person, our thoughts are our own) and be confident in their own ideas can start from birth. Providing a secure base for young babies' explorations is essential through warm and nurturing interactions and responsiveness to their attempts to communicate.

The simple resources that we provide for our babies at home can also help nurture their creative processes. 'Treasure baskets', recommended by Elinor Goldschmied (Goldschmied & Jackson, 2000), are full of objects of different colours, textures and sizes which can draw on the natural curiosity of young babies, offering open-ended play materials and encouraging 'what happens if' and 'why' questions. Curiosity and problem solving can be fostered with inexpensive resources such as short pieces of plastic piping or guttering in the yard, giving children the opportunity

to explore, for example, what happens to water flow or the speed of toy cars if the incline is increased or decreased.

When young children enter community care we need to think carefully about the environment that we offer them and ask ourselves whether or not the messages that the children pick up from this encourage or hinder their creative thinking.

How accessible and open-ended are resources? Do the children have the time to follow through with their projects and are we respectful of their ideas? Sometimes the day-to-day routines of an early childhood centre can seem to dominate what happens during the day and the focus on what the children are actually learning can be lost. We may also need to challenge the kind of curriculum we offer the children in our care. What, for example, is more essential at three years old—learning to copy one's name or learning that one can be a creator of stories?

Time to play offers young children opportunities to problem solve, negotiate, create, make mistakes, make connections, tell stories and develop a theory of mind—seeing things from someone else's point of view. Children need a wide range of culturally diverse resources to do this.

The kind of environment and resources that we offer children both at home and in our early childhood centres can either nurture or create barriers to young children's creativity. The 'hidden curriculum'—those unplanned, unspoken and often unacknowledged messages that children pick up from their environments—can have a profound effect on their confidence and self-belief and we need to be conscious at all times about how this impacts on our young learners.

Adults also need to be aware of their own roles in the 'hidden curriculum'. How do we respond to their emerging creativity? Do we engage in 'sustained shared thinking' with our children, encouraging them to express their ideas through meaningful conversations with adults or do we sometimes cut across their thinking by pre-empting their decisions? Do we celebrate their creations and treat them with respect? Do we see our role as a facilitator or instructor? Do we offer them time and space to follow through their ideas or do we constrain them with too rigid a timetable?

To promote an environment that nurtures young children's creativity, the adults in their lives can work together to ensure that the time, space and resources are available for our children, both at home and in our centres. Communities, parents and educators will need to have a shared understanding of the fundamental importance of encouraging children to think creatively. Above all though, we need to know our children. We need to understand and appreciate their current preoccupations and interests and tune in to what engages them. We support our children in their creative adventures with our confidence, encouragement and fundamental respect for who they are now and what they may become in the future.

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