

Promoting Creativity Through Curiosity and Engagement: Wonder Is Not Enough

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Parenting for High Potential September 2008

Like most young children, my 7-month-old daughter came into the world curious about her new environment and programmed to explore it. As her muscular control develops, she is more and more able to embrace and discover her environment, as she makes meaning of each new event she encounters. As parents, my wife and I are encouraging her curiosity and hope that she matures into a curious and creative adult.

Why is encouraging curiosity and creativity important? Being curious contributes to children's well being in three ways. First, it leads to a better understanding of their surroundings. As young people explore and discover, they are better able to comprehend the way things work. Second, curiosity expands children's knowledge base. They simply know more because they are exposed to more through their various explorations. Finally, curiosity leads to better problem solving—an essential and useful life skill. Problem solving and the decision-making process that it utilizes are inextricably linked with curiosity.

Unfortunately, the curiosity and creativity that young children naturally exhibit is often lost before they reach adulthood. The famed creativity researcher E. Paul Torrance found that creativity dropped when children entered kindergarten, in fourth grade, and again in seventh grade. The largest drop occurs in fourth grade. Torrance attributed these drops to social influence, expectations, and conformity pressure.

Another researcher, Gary Davis, noted that creative people are very aware of their creativity. Creative people develop a creative consciousness. In other words, they give themselves permission to be creative. Unfortunately, society and parents often do not give young people permission to be curious and creative.

Creativity researcher Mark Runco found that parental creativity is predictive of children's creativity. How much of this relationship is genetically inherited or environmental is debatable. As parents, we have some control over the environment. We not only need to give our children permission to be creative, we need to model curiosity and creativity in our lives. We can encourage our children to ask questions and investigate things that do not make sense to them. One of the characteristics of gifted children is their insatiable curiosity and questioning. This can sometimes be frustrating and tiresome, but this curiosity can be guided through modeling.

Modeling curiosity and creativity is a two-step process. The wonder that is exhibited in questioning is only the first step. As parents we must also model follow-

through in seeking answers to those questions. When our little one asks, “Why is the sky blue?” we can respond, “That is a great question. What made you think of it? Where do you think we could find the answer?” This may be followed by a visit to the local library or a search on the Internet. In other words, we must demonstrate how we transform curiosity and wonder into taking action. Although asking the question is important, searching for the answer is more important.

As parents, we can provide varied experiences for our children. Children need to understand that there are often multiple paths to solutions and understanding. They should be encouraged to explore different areas and pursue a variety of interests. Who knows what untapped talent or interest lies below the surface?

Parents also can encourage their children to take intellectual risks and try new things. This includes helping them understand that mistakes are part of the learning process. As Thomas Watson noted, “If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate.” Children should be encouraged to be risk-takers without promoting unnecessary or unhealthy choices. Risk-taking can be a double-edged sword. It is important to make a distinction between intellectual risk-taking and physical risk-taking such as using illicit drugs and engaging in daredevil-type behaviors. By their very nature, young people do not always make wise decisions. It is important to support and guide them through this period.

Each of us is an evolving “work in progress.” Our role as parents is to support and promote our children as they grow and mature. Part of that task is helping them to appreciate the talents and skills they have developed. It also involves recognizing and valuing what is important to them. Finally, it involves helping them find the necessary resources to be successful. With support and appropriate modeling, parents can help their children retain a sense of childlike wonder and transform it into a creative and productive life.