



by Karen Stephens

# 20 Ways to Encourage Children's Resourcefulness and Creativity

Resourcefulness, the ability to meet challenges in a variety of ways, is a by-product of creative intelligence. As children develop resourcefulness, they learn to trust their instincts and unique abilities. They acquire a positive attitude toward problem solving. Resourceful children mature into confident and industrious people. Just as important, they tap into the multitude of joys life has to offer.

The capacity to be resourceful stems from our miraculous brain, but not just any brain. No, creativity can only be harvested from a well-nourished brain. It requires a partnership between genetic inheritance and responsive adults willing to nurture and stimulate. With the right *greenhouse* conditions, creativity flowers to its natural conclusion — expression of the human spirit!

If we raise children brave enough to be creative, we bestow a gift money can't buy. So apply the following tips and seed your child's imagination. Enjoy the bloom, and may the harvest be unending.

## Tips for Encouraging Creativity

- *Encourage curiosity and seeking answers.* One of the best ways parents can respond to a child's questions is by saying, "I don't know. How could we find the answer?"
- *Don't stifle and numb creativity with too many manufactured toys.* Resist buying kids every accessory marketed with the latest movie or cartoon character so resourcefulness will have room to grow. Dolls are nifty, but kids don't stretch their imagination when we supply every dress and play prop. Pre-assembled kits rob kids of chances to think on their own.
- *Value varying ideas and opinions.* Encourage brainstorming by saying: "Well, that sure is one way of looking at it," or "What a GOOD idea, I've never thought of that before. Let's try it!"
- *Encourage exploration.* Make specific, motivating comments, such as: "How interesting; you created a secret passage-way with the blocks," or "The way you mixed different greens for leaves makes your tree look very real."
- *Avoid shaming or embarrassing children who experiment through trial and error.* Don't say: "What in the WORLD were you thinking of?" Instead offer support, "If that didn't work, try something else; you'll get it." Encourage reasonable risk taking that fuels creativity.
- *Stimulate imaginative, independent thought by posing questions.* In projects, avoid telling kids exactly what to do. For instance, when making a birdfeeder say, "I wonder what would hold the cracked corn and sunflower seeds. What would you suggest?"
- *Resist perfectionism.* Don't take over a child's project because you can do it better or faster. (Of course, you can!) Likewise, resist putting *finishing touches* on a child's project to make it perfect. Respect the learning that takes place while a project is made. That process is more important than the final product. With practice, products improve.
- *Avoid discouraging phrases and negativity.* Judgmental comments penalize creative experimentation. Resist phrases such as: "No, that's not how you do it; here, let me do it for you," "That would never work," or "Can't you ever do anything right?"

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- *Show respect for creative effort.* Display children's stories or artwork on refrigerators and bulletin boards. Kids love to see their labors of love at their parents' workplaces, too.
- *Avoid making unflattering comparisons between siblings' work and talent.* Please don't say things like: "You sure can't tell a story as good as your brother." Or, "Why can't you paint a pretty picture like your sister; you use all those dark muddy colors."
- *Encourage ingenious humor.* Humor helps kids take joy in their creative intelligence. Laugh together often, and don't be shy about saying: "You tickled my funny bone with that one!"
- *Facilitate play; don't dictate it.* Kids get a big boost from parents' getting on the floor and really playing with them. During play follow your child's lead. Play should be a dance between you, not a concert with you as sole conductor.
- *Play games that could have different answers.* Include "What if" questions in play. "What if we want to build a sand castle? How can we make the sand stick together better?" "What if we made designs on our castle, what could we use to make them?"
- *Play imaginative word games.* For instance, devise ways to build a house if you landed on the moon. Or make lists of all the different and imaginative ways you could use a simple household item, like a leaf rake or a hand mixer. Enjoy wacky answers!
- *Play make-believe games.* You know, pretend that you're a monkey. Or pretend to be machines like lawn mowers, popcorn poppers, or leaf blowers!
- *Provide a safe messable place where kids can explore a variety of art materials.* Offer recyclables such as paper and cardboard with crayons, chalk, markers, glue, stickers, finger-paint, clay, etc.
- *Make homemade instruments and put on a concert.* Be accepting of all compositions. Make room for movement so spirited kids can show off their grace to the max.
- *Make up cumulative family stories.* One person starts a storyline, and then the next has to add to it, then the next. The zanier the plot, the more fun!
- *Change the endings of well-known stories.* "What's another way 'The Three Little Pigs' could end?"
- *Play mental gymnastics games with school-agers.* These can be knock-knock jokes or puns. Making the brain stretch to establish analogies is also fun. For instance, creative thought percolates when kids state ways a clock and an owl are alike. Or they list all the things a cat and a computer have in common.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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