

# Preschool Insights & Research

## THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

**“Many highly talented, brilliant, creative people think they’re not [intelligent], because the thing they were good at in school wasn’t valued, or was actually stigmatized.”**

– Sir Ken Robinson

**“It is super easy [to tell a story about princesses and castles]. I close my eyes and imagine it”**

– Beth, 6 years

If you read any modern job description, under the list of required skills, it will come as no surprise to see certain words and phrases that have made their way to the top: flexible, problem-solver, team player, critical thinker, creative, versatile, and yes, even playful.

Beth and her classmates from South Bend, Indiana, will certainly be able to prove they have these skills. Beth’s teacher, Ronnie, puts play front and center. It is apparent to Ronnie, as it is to many of her colleagues, that playful learning experiences are crucial for developing the 21st century skills that her children will need in future workplaces. “There are three Steve Jobs, several J.K. Rowlings and a whole host of Donna Karans in this class.” It is clear from the passion and energy in the room that she has ignited a love of learning in her children, and she attributes it to imagination and creativity.

In their paper, “Where Learning Meets Creativity: The Promise of Guided Play,” Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Dore (2017) cite many studies that define creativity in different ways. They state that scientists themselves are often unsure of how to gauge creativity and of the best way to design curriculum lessons that best develop these skills. Behaviours such as divergent thinking, fluency, variety and originality are positioned as predictors of creative achievement, which over time will have obvious educational impact. Creativity does not have to be an entirely natural, organic entity either. Plenty of researchers suggest ways in which it can be taught.

Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek’s article, “Becoming Brilliant” (2016) agrees with earlier studies suggesting four approaches for enabling children to be more creative:

- Experimentation – an exploration of a certain space and tools to “see what happens,” without preconceived notions of how things should work, and therefore little fear of failure
- Means-ended creativity –an attempt to solve a problem and learning how to work within given constraints to create diverse outcomes
- Developing own voice – being able to express creative accomplishments, providing one’s own views and interpretations, rather than simply recounting
- Create a vision – building on pre-existing knowledge to solve a problem, creating new pieces to complete old puzzles

In Ronnie’s classroom, the walls are adorned not with children’s ordinary schoolwork, not with the outcomes of a science project or poem-writing session, but with How-tos describing practical ways the children can successfully work together and be active in their learning. There is no mistake though, that the posters, artwork, photos and word-processed documents belong to the children themselves. The

room is a veritable gallery of motivational posters and self-help guides. It does not appear the children need them, engaged as they are in playful activities, until Beth points to the poster entitled “Sharing” before settling back down with her partner in the serious experiment they were engrossed in.

## What role does play have in stimulating imagination and creativity in the classroom?

It is somewhat more obvious how play occupies and stimulates children at home and in the park, for example. However, this form of play, even the most outlandishly imaginative, open-ended, anarchic activities, have their place in school. A research summary on play and learning by Dr. Rachel White of Minnesota Children’s Museum (2012) points directly to the different behaviours children exhibit when playing. Imagination, flexibility and experimentation develop the creativity and strategies necessary to successfully tackle new and unfamiliar problems. Dr. White describes play as practicing divergent thinking because children come up with new ideas and recombine them to create something new.

There is something important in play being voluntary. There is an intrinsic motivation to participate and be active in any learning taking place. Teachers who use hands-on manipulatives to inspire learning, to ignite a passion for discovery and to promote the development of skills and knowledge in playful ways. The open-ended nature of building with blocks, paper or junk materials, for example, allows children to play, tinker and learn 1000’s of ways in which something might not work, before discovering a solution – just like Edison and the light bulb. Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2017) agree that teachers should stress there is no single “right” answer, as it prevents children from thinking flexibly and creatively. They judged physical manipulatives to have the greatest impact when free form play was allowed without overly defined goals, even if that is mostly associated with the type of play children do at home.

## What teachers say

“Play combines fun, adventure, bravery and lots of good humor. The LEGO® bricks are energizing and provoking. We have invited the class to have fun. If I had invited them to study, or read, or learn something new, then some of them would have switched off. They are being social, being creative. They use the LEGO [bricks] because they are familiar with them from sets at home. They have fun with them at home. They unwind with them. Here we help harness all that creative energy and potential and we can teach them how to think creatively... and they’ll learn math, and science, and writing along the way. Most of all, the creativity and imagination they bring to tasks, instills the sense of bravery. I love brave learners. They go so much further in their learning.”

- Ronnie, 1st Grade Teacher, US

## References

Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Dore (2017) Where Learning Meets Creativity: The Promise of Guided Play in Creative Contradictions in Education, *Creativity Theory and Action in Education* 1, DOI

White, E. (2012) *The Power of Play: A Research Summary on Play and Learning*, Minnesota Children's Museum