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# Awaken the secret artist

Encourage creativity in the lives of our children, says Diana Thompson

**H**elen Dillon, the visionary gardener with the most photographed garden in Ireland, states, "Creative things happen when you're just walking about letting your mind run free, when you're just playing...>(\*1) Similarly, as we all know, our best ideas come in the bath, when the whole body and mind relaxes.

A famous naturalist attributes his lifelong fascination to childhood summers spent in Scotland. There was so

little to do that to cure his boredom he spent weeks watching insects, creating hides and devising simple experiments.

Children have a deep and crucial need for freedom to mooch around devising games, playing out imaginary dramas and making things, thus coming to terms with their world. Yet a growing number of them end busy days at school by returning to a home-life packed with clubs, subject coaching, sports events and homework, all in the false belief that children must be constantly kept busy.

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But how will these children ever learn to happily occupy themselves, let alone use their creative abilities?

It is a credit to the ingenuity of heads and staff that many creative opportunities still exist in schools when the timetable is increasingly crammed full of subject demands. Some particularly visionary establishments actively promote creative thinking and these are well worth seeking out for a totally balanced education, exercising all parts of the brain and feeding the soul.



Whatever creative opportunities are, or are not, offered in school, it is possible with a little thought and effort to create conditions at home which will nurture and encourage creative contributions from our youngsters. Older children too and even adults will gain from many of the activities, with a little modification. Even if you believe you have not a creative bone in your own body, here are some simple, practical things we can all do to benefit our children:

**Firstly, we have to be aware of the messages we give them through our own attitudes.** How many of us have called, "Stop wasting time and practice your piece!" when a child is improvising on the piano, and who can resist the opportunity to give a spelling critique when shown the germ of a story or poem in the making? Creative thinking can only too easily be discouraged, however helpful we are meaning to be.

Acknowledgement, respect and praise for effort and ideas whilst keeping a blind eye to the limitations that we as adults so clearly see, will play enormous dividends. The resulting pride and huge enthusiasm will lead to more concentrated efforts.

**If you have enough room, set up an art corner with masses of materials - paints, colours, glues, scissors, sequins, where a child can just fiddle around making things.** An elasticated laundry bag can store packaging and bits and pieces for models. Remember that it



**Every child has a hidden talent. We must awaken their sensitivities to the world, and allow them to express their feelings and sensations freely; this will enhance their lives in many ways, not least in their ability to create**

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**Encourage children to play and experiment with sounds. They need not be proper musical instruments but can be pots and pans**

is the PROCESS that counts, and not the end product, so do refrain from demanding a wonderful picture.

**Drawing can be a serious tool for thinking, a mind-opening preliminary to writing (illustrations drawn after writing is finished miss out on a wonderful planning aid).** A special writing area can be tremendously helpful: provide not only a variety of notebooks and pens, but plain paper of all sizes, scissors, crayons, pencils, paperclips, a stapler, and stiff card for covers, so that story books can be built from scratch. A pre-school child will simply make marks, and then seriously 'read' them back to you, creating his own story.

**There will be hours of musical fun if you festoon the inside of a tent with suspended kitchen items, saucepans, crinkly packaging and plastic bowls, with a selection of wooden and metal spoons to tap and scrape.** Sounds need not be loud - great control and musical sensitivity can be developed by producing soundscapes for magic and mystery, a poem, or lullaby.

**Search for versatile pieces of material for your dressing-up box, newspapers, doilies, large safety pins, old hats, inviting so much more imagination than shop-bought costumes.** Allow for hours of fulfilling dramatic play to follow. Encourage a group of children to create their own games and act out their own dramas, rather than automatically organising a game of rounders; this will bring surprising rewards as they learn to entertain themselves happily, needing less

of our attention and direction.

**We must foster our children's questioning minds and value their opinions, to enable them to grow in confidence and self esteem, keen to explore and unafraid of taking risks and trying out ideas.** We must awaken their sensitivities to the world, and allow them to express their feelings and sensations freely; this will enhance their lives in many ways, not least in their ability to create.

**Above all, we must not mastermind every hour of our child's day.** Ursula Kolbe writes, "Take time to watch. Observe children's absorbed attention . . . their sheer delight as they play with colours and shapes ... appreciate what they do. Most importantly, give children time - time to look and ponder . . ." (\*2)

As the great music educator and composer, Carl Orff, wrote about his approach to creative music-making. "I believe that there is something of an artist in every human being. This something can be destroyed or educated. My educational aim was always to seek out and awaken this secret artist in everyone." We too must search for the secret artist in each of our children.

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**\*1 from House and Garden magazine, June, 2011**

**\*2 from "Rapunzel's Supermarket - all about children and their art"**