

See What I'm Saying

How to Inspire Creative Expression



Dr. Myra Levick

How to Inspire Creative Expression

Myra Levick Ph.D.

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *See What I'm Saying* by Myra Levick Ph.D.

Copyright © 2003 by Myra Levick Ph.D.

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Table of Contents

[How to Inspire Creative Expression](#)

[Encouraging Creativity in Children](#)

How to Inspire Creative Expression

Acting creatively is essential to successful everyday living. Children are naturally creative. This creativity must be encouraged if they are to learn to express themselves freely and develop skills required for intellectual and emotional growth. This chapter offers recommendations to help you create an atmosphere in which this free expression can occur. We will suggest what kinds of media should be available at various ages and what you can do to stimulate a child's natural creative expression. We will also discuss what not to do—things parents and teachers do and say that can inhibit this expression and that make children self-conscious about their artistic endeavors.

Encouraging Creativity in Children

The word sublimation is familiar to most of us. However, the meaning of this word is often disputed by mental health professionals and is frequently misused. Most psychologists accept a definition of sublimation as the ability to obtain pleasure in a socially acceptable way. This explanation of sublimation relates closely to the creative process. Frequently, students of psychology are given this example of sublimation: “The artist is considered a well-sublimated person. The artist has learned to repress the infantile desire to smear, replacing it with the pleasure obtained through painting or sculpturing.”

The artists in our art therapy classes bristle at the notion that artists are adults who have found a socially acceptable way to smear. I try to help them over this hurdle by sharing a story my mother enjoyed telling—one that I could not appreciate until I began to learn more about psychology. At about age 2, I discovered a way to peel off sections of wallpaper and dig out the plaster underneath. I would then entertain myself by playing with the plaster—rolling it, molding it, and even tasting it. Obviously, such behaviors could not be allowed for too long. It must have been around this time that my mother began to provide me with art materials. From then on, I drew constantly, and whatever I produced was accepted, praised, and saved. I had started the process of sublimation.

Over the years we have learned a great deal about the process and significance of sublimation. Early psychiatrists and psychologists thought that sublimation was a way of coping with anxiety. In more

recent times, however, it has been considered a normal function of the healthy individual—a capacity present in all of us from birth. In other words, sublimation is not only an integral part of the artist's creative process. As for example, an especially curious child, who destroys every toy in an effort to discover how it works, may eventually sublimate this aggressive urge by pursuing a career as a research scientist—discovering why or how things work as they do.

There are many other examples of sublimation. What we need to understand for the purpose of this book is why, if we are all born with this capacity, some people seem to have it while others do not. Far from being an unnatural way of satisfying base urges, sublimating is the normal way most people achieve balance between their own desires and the demands of living in society. This ability to find alternate acceptable ways to gratify our most primitive wishes needs to be nurtured. This nourishment should begin with the earliest caregivers: mothers, fathers or anyone else involved in creating the environment in which the child is growing.

There are specific developmental tasks that must be achieved before a child can take crayon in hand and begin to learn the fun of making images on paper. These will be covered in detail in the next chapter. For now we will discuss the kind of environment that is necessary in order for children to begin creating.

First, any art activity should take place in a safe area in which the child can explore art materials. The very young child should be able to move freely. Attention spans are short in these early years, and we must remember that the child may lose interest in something in a very brief period of time. When the child is a little older, the “art area” should allow for spilling or cutting or pasting. This area need not be one devoted exclusively to the child—it can be the kitchen table, the basement floor, or the outside porch. A good place is any that provides freedom to use the art materials in an unrestricted and individual way.

Regardless of the child's age, production should be encouraged and the art works valued. Also the child's wishes about what happens to those art productions should be respected. This is not to say that the works must be displayed in areas that are not acceptable to the rest of the family, but there should be a place to show the artwork and a place to store them. Showing respect for the child's work is a way to help children to begin to respect the property rights of others. For the same reason, very young siblings

should be allowed to have their own sets of materials and their own space.

I know too well how difficult it is for the teacher, whether in a preschool, elementary school or junior high school, to provide individual freedom of artistic expression in a classroom of twenty or more children. Whatever the physical restrictions, however, teachers are responsible for helping students achieve many goals. Teachers will demonstrate how to use various media, and they help students learn how to draw objects in the environment so that the images produced are aesthetically pleasing. All of these goals are necessary steps in the learning process. Every new task a child masters provides skills that can be applied to a variety of other learning tasks. But children should not be expected to complete all assignments in the same “cookie cutter” way. I remember one first grade student who decided to make her tree trunk purple and the leaves brown. Although the student teacher had no special training in art or art therapy, she did know that individual expression was to be encouraged and, fortunately, responded to this image with the same enthusiasm she showed when looking at more realistically colored trees.

Once, at a social gathering, I met a woman who told me how pleased she was with her son’s art teacher in junior high school. When she mentioned the teacher by name, I recognized it immediately. He was an artist who had consulted me for psychotherapy while completing his education for certification as an art teacher. The woman described how he made the weekly art class an exciting event for the children by providing a variety of materials such as pieces of cloth, wood, and shells, in addition to paints and clay. The children were invited to create whatever they wanted, either individually or working with other classmates. Special help was provided to students who were unfamiliar with certain supplies. Each piece of art produced by his students was accepted by this teacher as a unique and special creation. When I called to report the nice things I had been told about his teaching methods, he said that his experience in art therapy had made him realize how valuable it is to encourage the creative process rather than emphasize the final art product.

Not all art teachers can be or should be art therapists, but all teachers should provide a climate for individual expression. Speaking with teachers at conferences over the years, I know that more and more teachers are becoming aware of this need. They are working very hard to change rigid approaches to teaching art, such as requiring everyone in a class to produce the same image in the same way. Art

teachers and art therapists have established task forces in which representatives from each group share ideas on how to help children grow through art expression. Teachers and art therapists are also defining their individual roles and responsibilities in this process.

While a favorable environment is the first element necessary for free expression, second is providing the tools to create that expression. Children can learn to express themselves at a very early age with any materials available. Infants and toddlers have an instinctive desire to play with food, mud, and sand simply because they enjoy the feel of these elements and derive pleasure from the newly gained control over body movement. It is obvious that around age of 18 months to 2 years, the child recognizes simple commands, such as the meaning of “no.” When the toddler can understand such simple directions, grasp small objects, and control arm movement, it is time to provide crayons and paper.

Big, fat crayons are probably best in the beginning, as these can be managed easily by small hands. Any inexpensive paper is fine. Large pads of newsprint are good, but you can use almost any kind of paper available around the house, so long as one side of it is blank. The only caution is to be sure that any coloring on the paper is nontoxic. Toddlers sometimes enjoy crumpling and tasting the paper as much as coloring on it. They may also want to taste the crayons, just as they may have tasted sand or mud. When children are this young, you need to supervise and show the child how these new objects should be handled. Sit down on the floor and scribble with the child—yes, scribble. Watching and imitating you is the beginning of learning how to be a grown-up person.

If a child has no physical impairments, dexterity will naturally increase. When a child reaches age 4 or 5, you may want to teach how to cut with blunt scissors. Construction paper is wonderful for this purpose. Throughout the child’s artistic development, you must be patient and observant. Children will let you know when they are ready to try new and more complicated art supplies.

Paint can be introduced as early as 3 years of age. Large jars of tempera paint and wide brushes can be purchased at a hobby or toy shop. Be sure to read labels when you buy paint or colored pencils, avoiding any material that contains lead. Swallowing of any lead-based art materials can lead to brain damage. Be sure that your child is safe from this readily avoidable catastrophe. You should also be aware that so-called “lead” pencils contain not lead but graphite, a form of carbon. It is not recommended that

children eat graphite, but it is not harmful in small quantities. Some toddlers who are still struggling with toilet training may wish to avoid the messiness of paints; this is not unusual. There is no rush. Make paints available when you feel the child is ready. Be sure to supply clothes so the child can feel free to move. Because tempera is a water-based paint it washes off easily. Demonstrate this to the child and explain that it is okay to be messy and have fun. Toddlers generally enjoy finger painting, delighting in creating designs with this wonderful, smeary substance. However, I do not encourage older children or adults to use this medium. Finger paints encourage smearing, and while their use is a step forward in art for the toddler, it is a step backward for the older child or adult.

As mentioned earlier, scribbling with the younger child is a step forward in learning how to hold and direct crayons on paper and imitate an adult. It may appear contradictory here to encourage the slightly older child now to use finger paints. The toddler is struggling with the primary issue of learning to control their bodily functions and may or may not be comfortable with being messy. Finger paints, along with tempera paint, provide a way of defining when and with what it is okay to be messy. Art materials are both manageable and compliant, and they can be manipulated to provide more or less control, depending on the age of the child. As the child moves forward, it is important to introduce more intricate art activities such as cutting and pasting, clay modeling and oil painting. Through these creative expressions, children advance by mastering these new media and developing more control.

I like to illustrate the importance of maintaining control by describing an interesting phenomenon that I have observed repeatedly when introducing art therapy concepts to student nurses and medical students. I ask these students to do a free drawing, and provide paper, crayons and colored pencils. Like most adults, these students have not drawn since grade school and feel very intimidated initially. Many of them invariably produce designs by outlining shapes and filling in the outlines. This is something children learn to do early in their school years. Outlining the shapes provides control; filling in is reminiscent of scribbling. The response of these students is understandable. They perceive that I am asking them to do something they consider childish. Discussion of this process is effective in helping these students develop some appreciation for art therapy. If I had offered them finger paints, their perception of being asked to behave in a childish manner would have been stronger. They could not have established their own controls as easily, and I would have done them a disservice by inviting more regression, and perhaps even causing embarrassment.

The child's school environment can be an important factor in creative expression. Children in preschool often learn things more quickly than they do at home because their setting provides the added incentive of doing what the other children are doing. However, in preschool there may also be a shortage of teachers or aides to help the preschooler test new experiences. Both teachers and parents should be aware of each child's progress, assessing whether it is consistent with that of other children and appropriate for the child's age level.

Going to school for the first time should open new vistas for the child who has been encouraged to be creative. New ideas, and perhaps new materials, will be introduced in the classroom and in peer activities. Parents should show an interest in new creative projects and encourage children to continue to create at home. Both parents and teachers should be aware of what children are saying in their art work.

Stimulating creativity in your children requires using your own creative resources. There is no need to buy elaborate art supplies; many things around the house can be used. Bits of fabric, pieces of string or yarn, and old boxes all can be combined in a wonderful variety of ways. Styrofoam egg cartons or paper cups make excellent watercolor pans. Vegetables and sponges can be dipped in paint and used to print interesting designs. All of us who have "made art" with children or worked where there were limited funds for art supplies have learned to improvise with whatever was available. Books purchased or borrowed from the library can help you think of new ideas.

It is not necessary or even important to run out and buy the very best art supplies. It is important to show the child that you are interested in their artwork, no matter what subject matter and no matter what materials have been selected for artistic expression.

Creativity can be expressed through sewing and building as through drawing, and the lessons to be learned can be applied to any form of creative expression as the following examples make clear.

Lynne, age 6, loved to watch her mother sew clothes for her and her sisters. It was obvious that Lynne wanted to be like Mommy by making clothes for her dolls. To encourage this interest, Lynne's mother gave her a toy sewing machine that actually sewed and taught her how to use it. She also showed Lynne where fabric scraps were kept and encouraged her to use these scraps to make her creations.

When not in school or playing outside, Lynne would spend hours sewing. After several months a friend asked Lynne's mother to make pillow covers from some very expensive fabric. The fabric was stored temporarily on the "fabric shelf." Lynne, having been told she could take scraps from that shelf, discovered this beautiful fabric and decided to cut it up for a doll's dress. Needless to say, Lynne's mother was horrified, and she panicked when she discovered that the fabric had been cut. How could she handle this situation? She realized that she was responsible because she should have stored the fabric in a different place or explained to Lynne not to use it. To punish the child would have been unfair. Lynne's mother said that she would explain the disaster to her friend. She also acknowledged to Lynne that she had made a mistake, and she asked Lynne to check with her in the future before selecting fabric. She was careful to praise Lynne's creativity and to encourage her to continue sewing, so that this one bad experience would not discourage Lynne from expressing herself in the future. Telling Lynne about the situation demonstrated how people must be responsible for their actions. Showing her how the problem was resolved helped her to learn to take responsibility for her own actions.

Nine-year-old Evan was very involved in "Dungeons and Dragons," a fantasy adventure game. Evan was very talented artistically, creating his own characters and adventures. His father, who enjoyed miniature train sets, decided that he and Evan should build a train platform. Evan did not agree. He wanted to spend the time building a castle for his "Dungeons and Dragons" characters. Evan's father was very disappointed; he thought sharing a creative activity with his son would be a special experience for them both. His basic assumption was correct, but the experience had to be one that interested Evan. Suppressing his own disappointment, the father told Evan that he would be very glad to help with the castle. Together they shopped for necessary supplies, and the father was available whenever Evan heeded help. Evan's mother suggested that space in Evan's bedroom could be used to build the castle, and she offered praise as the project progressed. Evan's younger brother was told that he could watch but not touch. It is not always easy to have our children reject our interests, but Evan's father knew that, in this instance, favoring his son's interests over his own would be more productive.

Evan's story is a good reminder that when you are trying to inspire creative expression in your child that it is the child's interests that should be fostered. Sometimes, unconsciously, adults plan a project or shared art activity that expresses their own wishes, wants, and needs rather than those of the child.

