

Everyday Creativity: Spaces and Places for Ideas to Flourish

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In an era of early learning standards, packaged curriculums, and state quality rating systems, many directors lament that the accountability movement has sapped the creativity out of their programs. They say their teachers feel constricted, as though their own good ideas just don't matter anymore. Not true. In fact, it's more vital than ever that we promote learning environments where staff find their own voice and become innovative in their work with children.

But a spirit of creativity and vibrancy in programs doesn't just happen; it has to be cultivated. As director, you are in an influential role to rev up your center's creativity quotient. Your words and your actions can encourage or stifle experimentation and your teachers' willingness to look at their classroom practices in new and innovative ways.

So how can you help bring those sparks of creativity back into your program? It all comes down to being intentional about providing the time, the physical space, and the emotional climate to create a work environment where new ideas can flourish. Here are some things to think about.

Tilling the Soil So Ideas Can Germinate

When we think of creativity, notables like Edison and Einstein usually come to mind. But everyone has the capacity to be creative — to look at the old with a fresh perspective, to alter patterns of behavior just slightly to consider new possibilities, to stretch the mind to create different frames of reference. As Jonah Lehrer argues in his book *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (2012), imagination is not an impenetrable biological gift; it is a variety of distinct thought processes that we can all learn to use more effectively. Thus our goal in early childhood education is not only to create learning environments that might nurture the next Steve Jobs or Steve Wozniak, but also to foster creativity everyday by everyone in the program.

Foster creativity everyday by everyone. Wow, that sounds like a tall order! Probably not something you recall seeing on your job description when you were hired. When you think of it, though, isn't that really what program excellence is all about — creating the conditions where staff are continually thinking of creative ways to refine their work to better serve children and families?

It sounds counterintuitive, but the surest way to short-circuit the creative process is to sound like a cheerleader encouraging people to be innovative. The first thing we need to do if we want to create a climate where ideas can flourish is to drop the talk about being bold and innovative. Nothing intimidates teachers more than to hear their esteemed director admonish them to "think out of the box!" Instead, help people think of creative ways they can refine and do their jobs better, small doable improvements. The Japanese use the term *kaizen* to describe how small incremental steps can often lead to bold change. In examining the characteristics of exemplary high schools, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot used the term 'consciousness of imperfection' to describe teachers' willingness to look at

their imperfections and create a climate of continuous improvement. That is the same mindset that is needed in our early childhood programs. “How could you do it differently next time?” or “How can we avoid that problem in the future?” are just two ways you might help teachers think of a fresh approach to their work. Try to avoid one-right-answer questions, but rather frame questions to prompt multiple ideas that might work.

Seizing the Moment

Very few people can come up with original ideas that will shake the planet, but all of us can adapt, modify, rearrange, and turn upside down existing ideas to create new patterns and ways of looking at the world and the work we do. Even George Lucas, the creative genius behind the Star Wars phenomena, once quipped, “If you adapt from enough sources, you can create the illusion of originality.” In our work, some of the best seeds of creativity come from the children themselves. The trick is to tune into those ideas and seize the moment to build upon them.

At London Bridge Child Care Centre in London, Ontario, the entire center became inspired by the small act of a child. One of the three-year-old children drew her first piece of representational art — a house. That picture, so proudly shared, led to a lively discussion about different kinds of houses. That led to an elaborate class project of constructing houses. Pretty soon the children from the classroom next door, peering through the window, wanted to know what was happening and began communicating by placing Post-It® Notes on the window. This led to the creation of a classroom mailbox. As the idea took hold, mailboxes popped up around the center — one for each classroom and even for the cook, janitor, and receptionist too! When visitors came to the center they were invited to write a letter to the children and put it in the classroom’s mailbox.

London Bridge’s story of innovation did not happen purely by accident. It took a teacher seizing the moment, tuning into and sharing in the excitement of a child’s piece of work to start the process. It also took a director who was accessible and interested in what was transpiring in the classroom. By supporting her teachers to ‘run with it,’ the director encouraged this seed of creativity to germinate.

Finding Making Time and Space Where Ideas Can Blossom

From how-to books and herbal supplements to yoga poses and exotic teas, there is no shortage of recommended ways to boost your creativity index. But the most essential ingredients in the process are perhaps the most challenging in our whirlwind world of child care — time and space. People need time to let their minds wander; time to let their ideas percolate. They also need space free from distractions; space to serve as a mental and physical refuge from the hustle and bustle of daily activities. The combination of time and space can literally stimulate the neural connections that spark insight and prompt a whole new way to looking at an issue.

It is unrealistic to expect creative thinking to simply blossom on its own. If you believe meaningful learning environments need dynamic teachers to set the stage, you will want to be more intentional in your plans to create the time and space where ideas can take hold.

At London Bridge, the house and mailbox project took flight because teachers initiated brown bag lunch meetings to kick around ideas and build on one another's excitement and creativity.

Steven Johnson, author of *Where Good Ideas Come From* (2010), has studied the environmental spaces where many great ideas throughout history have hatched. He found a recurring pattern. Ideas usually start with a slow hunch and need time to incubate. Typically one person has only part of the idea. Space, he argues, is needed where 'ideas can mingle.' Johnson believes that it is through connectivity and networking that ideas come to life.

How might you structure schedules and design space for staff that encourages both solitude for quiet reflection, as well as the exchange and free flow of ideas between colleagues? We've grown to appreciate the need for a soft, cozy corner in the classroom where a child can escape the hectic pace of the classroom. Might there be a way to create a similar space for staff to escape from the technology, paperwork, and demands of child care?

You may be feeling a sense of despair when considering the notion that ideas need time to formulate and spaces where ideas can mingle. Most programs for young children struggle to find time and space where staff can gather and meet. If you are committed to creating an environment where ideas can blossom, though, it's not about finding time and space; it's about making time and space to ensure it happens.

One strategy might be to pose this challenge to your staff and ask them to suggest ways to make time to meet and good places to gather. You might be surprised to discover some of their solutions such as flexing their lunch hour or taking turns covering each other's naptime supervision on certain days of the week. If you have already created a dedicated space for a staff lounge, consider infusing elements that stimulate creativity — books and articles about creative thinkers, brainteasers and mind-stretching puzzles, and, of course, posters with inspirational quotes. Don't forget the suggestion box that encourages serious as well as silly submissions.

Getting the Creative Juices Flowing

Honoring different perspectives, points of view, and ways of thinking is at the core of creating the synergy needed to help new ideas take flight. Allocating time to generate solutions to pressing issues at your regularly scheduled staff meetings is probably the best way to make that happen. We've already underscored the point that creativity is seldom a solo enterprise; it is usually the result of people working together to pool their knowledge, skills, and creative energy — what Lehrer (2012) refers to as "the human friction that generates the sparks." When handled right, staff meetings can both nurture team creativity and solve the nettlesome problems that confront a program. As Einstein said, "To solve a problem, you need to reconstruct it in order to see it from many different angles." Staff meetings may be the perfect venue for making that happen.

A word of caution. In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop*

Talking, Susan Cain (2012) reminds us that not everyone loves the buzz of energy characteristic of brainstorming sessions. Indeed, introverts often say they find their greatest moments of inspiration in solitude. For that reason, it is best to give advance notice of what you plan to discuss so folks have time to let ideas percolate before the meeting. Introverts, in particular, often experience 'evaluation apprehension,' the fear of looking stupid in front of one's peers. So setting a respectful and trusting tone is crucial for establishing the emotional support needed to foster full participation. Brainstorming works best when the problem being tackled is fairly narrow and well defined — how to increase attendance at the annual fundraiser; how to make drop-off and pick-up routines less frantic; how to encourage more elaborate and focused block play. Your role as facilitator is critical in maintaining momentum. "We've come up with six interesting suggestions. Let's see if we can generate two more in our remaining time."

Beyond generating lots of ideas to consider, the larger goal is to encourage 'hitchhiking' or building upon one another's ideas. "Can anyone think of a variation of Jennifer's idea that we could also consider?" You also need to be adept at handling any negative or evaluative reactions expressed. Comments like "We've tried that before," "Sounds too expensive," or "We'd never have time to do that," can stifle creativity. When this happens, use the opportunity to remind participants of the importance of suspending judgment until all ideas have been expressed.

Some directors have experimented with reverse brainstorming to stimulate creative ideas. This is where staff present ideas counter to their goal ("What are all the ways we can discourage parents from attending our annual fundraiser?" "How can we make sure our drop-off and pick-up will be really chaotic?"). Sometimes when a group thinks how to make things go wrong, creative solutions for solving difficult problems evolve.

Finally, don't underestimate the power of your words. Even saying, "That's a great idea!" might not be such a great idea if it inhibits thinking of additional ideas that might be just as good or stifles contributions from others.

In Sum

So you see, achieving everyday creativity is clearly within your reach. By creating the spaces and places for ideas to flourish you will also be reinforcing an organizational value that shapes interpersonal interactions and strengthens teachers' commitment to the important work they do. Everyday creativity is really a mindset, a commitment to being open to new ideas and celebrating each and every person's potential to contribute to the creative process.

References

Cain, S. (2012) *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. New York: Crown.

Johnson, S. (2010). *Where good ideas come from*. New York: Riverhead Books. Lehrer, J. (2012). *Imagine: How creativity works*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Strategies for Igniting the Sparks for New Ideas

Rethinking daily routines.

Ask people to think of their typical daily routines (the time they wake up, what they eat for breakfast, the route they drive to work, the radio station they listen to in their car, where they park when they arrive at work, the time they go to bed). Ask them to modify just one routine over the course of a week and share the results with their colleagues at your next staff meeting. Extend the conversation to a discussion about established routines at the center. “Why do we do it this way?” “Is it time to consider a change?” The goal is to identify and challenge assumptions. Just because you’ve done something a certain way for the last decade, is it still the best way?

Shining the spotlight on the creative endeavors of others.

The Internet is an amazing treasure trove of videos, pictures, and examples of literary and graphic arts capturing the creative talents of ordinary and not-so-ordinary folks who have a little extra time on their hands. Start each meeting with a YouTube video or other viral example capturing a unique display of creativity. A couple of our favorites are:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXDMoiEkyuQU

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZyPp8Bj6oQ

www.streetartutopia.com/

www.angelfire.com/ak2/intelligencerreport/stethoscope.html

www.wimp.com/airswimmers/

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZFkZiwMLZ4

Looking at common things in an uncommon way.

Pair up teachers and ask each twosome to select one item from a basket of common objects (for example, a spatula, ball of yarn, slipper, ruler, mouse pad, coffee mug). Then ask them to generate as many unique uses for the item they can think of in five minutes. After the allotted time, invite people to share the creative ideas they came up with. Extend the discussion to considering some of the common objects that are in each teacher’s classroom (a bookcase, chair, mirror, window shade) and how those commonplace items might be used in a new way.

Considering different points of view.

Most people listen to news commentaries or read articles and books that support their firmly-established views about the world or their specific cultural heritage.

Ask people to broaden their perspective by listening to a radio station, reading a magazine, or attending a religious or political gathering that is contrary to their point of view. They can even interview someone who practices a different cultural tradition. At your staff meeting, invite folks to share any insights they learned from the experience.

Harnessing the power of metaphorical thinking.

Whenever possible in your group discussions, ask people to think in metaphorical terms (“A really successful fundraiser is like a . . .” or “A smooth lunch transition is like a . . .”).

Connecting concrete experiences with the use of a metaphor or simile frees the brain to think about the essential characteristics of the issue or experience.

Expanding perspectives.

Ask teachers to take a fresh look at their classrooms from two different perspectives. First, ask them to enter the room and view the space from a new parent's perspective. What are their eyes drawn to? What kind of a first impression would a parent have of the learning environment? Second, ask them to get on their knees and move about the classroom to view the space from a child's three-foot perspective. What do they notice that they might not have considered before? Encouraging rough-draft thinking. Teachers are often reluctant to share ideas for fear of being judged or evaluated, but if their ideas are framed as rough-draft thinking they may be more open to feedback from their colleagues. At each staff meeting encourage a few teachers to share just one thing they are thinking about changing in their classrooms. Have them begin their description by stating, "I'm thinking about . . ." ("I'm thinking about taking away the divider between the block area and dramatic play area") or "What if . . . ?" ("What if we moved snack time outdoors during the summer?"). The goal of this activity is not to judge the merits of the idea, but rather to elicit additional ideas that will help deepen and expand the original idea. These helpful comments should take no more than a few minutes and should be framed "Have you thought about . . . ?" or "If you move forward with this idea, you might want to consider . . ."

Celebrating the wacky and weird.

Rev up the levity factor at your center by hosting a Crazy Hairdo Day, an Ugly Sweater Day, or an Outrageous Outfit Day. Consider providing a camera for teachers to take photographs of everyday items used in unusual ways.

Making time for reflection.

Periodically devote a portion of a staff meeting for quiet reflection. Provide a journal for people to jot down their thoughts. Offer a picture, poem, or song lyrics and ask staff to reflect on what resonates for them. How might it relate to their work?