

# Creativity

*An Essay by Claudia Stafford, BA.Ed*

I was asked by an intelligent, creative and resourceful friend of mine about my thoughts on the question of why today's children tend to be less creative thinkers, OR why we have so many creatively-challenged adults walking around today.

I read the question again and again and thought about whether this was indeed reflective and indicative of this current generation. Is this true? Do we see obvious evidences of less creativity in children and adults happening today? Or has the framework in which we consider “creativity” to happen shifted? Our society has undergone major changes in culture, technology and media in the past twenty years. Consequently, our point of reference for measuring this ability may perhaps be irrelevant in this day and age. Thus, I sought to examine this question of creativity through my experience of these changes as a Montessori educator, observer and consumer for the past two decades or so. Keeping this in mind, I would like to approach the question of *creative thinking* in today’s children and adults by first, defining what creativity is, secondly, how this ability affected by *some* variable influences, and finally, children and adults’ general response to some of these influences.

Creative according to the Webster’s dictionary is defined as : *having the ability or power to create; "a creative imagination" 2: promoting construction or creation; "creative work" 3: having the power to bring into being.* It can also be defined as the ability that ‘allows the production of new or unusual associations among known ideas or concepts.’<sup>1</sup>

It is has been my experience with children and adults that, frequently, creativity happens best when the mind is at rest, free from disruptions, and the soul is at peace. The creative thinking process flows well when a child or adult is focused without interruption. The world is perceived as a meaningful place to play, discover and explore. For example, I have experienced while quietly at rest on a beach, soaking up sun rays, and listening to the rhythmic sound of the ocean, that quite unexpectedly, several brilliant ideas surfaced up to my consciousness for teaching writing skills to my students, much to my delight. Rest and relaxation had given way to some purposeful, meaningful creative flow that I did not plan for, or work at. Alright, alright, perhaps some of us simply need a few more vacations!

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<sup>1</sup> MD Preti, Antonio; and MD Miott, Paola, The Contribution of Psychiatry to the Study of Creativity: Implications for AI research

What is tepidly touted as effective time management masks a disintegration of pure quality time, the necessary time to clear your mind, to explore, to ramble, to experiment — all the activities necessary to allow ideas to form and to incubate. What is needed to jumpstart the process is a sabbatical from the land of multitasking — which begins with an acknowledgment that all this activity is no longer about staying ahead of the curve. It is, in fact, about keeping afloat and that is not to anyone's competitive advantage.<sup>2</sup>

Assuming this need for rest, and relaxation are indeed a vital elements to the creative flow, then the premise that ‘today’s children tend to be less creative thinkers’ may be examined against such optimal conditions for creativity to take place. These conditions are affected by a plethora of influences, such as societal values and roles, work ethics, family life, technology, communication, culture, and this list is by no means exhaustive.

As a Montessori educator, for the past twenty years or so, the mission has been to help the young child develop their potential by encouraging self discipline and concentration in the classroom. In a true Montessori classroom, creativity is exercised and developed through the given freedom the child has to choose particular activities in a prepared environment. This freedom within a structured prepared classroom is given in an uninterrupted three hour work cycle for the child to engage in activities or observe others. This three hour work cycle, according to Dr. Montessori, gives the young child freedom to observe others or engage in activities of their interest with or without the direction of the educator or disengage at their leisure. The outcome for the child is joy in learning, peace, and creativity. For example, one day I observed a young child creatively organize each sea shell according to shape after learning their names with the teacher and then later without direction used the shells as petals of a flower on the floor. This young child not only created a way to sort shells but also made an new association with the shells’ shape to that of flower petals. It seems when a child’s inner needs for exploring and order are met then creativity explodes from the joy of having needs met.

I have often observed that creative thinking children are likely to have had their early inner needs met, and will maintain sense a wonder in learning. Creative thinkers appear to be those who are free to enjoy and apply what they learn in a variety of ways. These students have been given the precious gift of time to explore and express themselves without unsolicited imposition of another’s will. A picture of this is a child who takes a walk, and has time to stop, explore the surrounding, and ask questions, as opposed to the child who is hurriedly whisked to the next dance recital and then to swimming lesson. This is not to say a child should not have a dance lesson or a swimming lesson, but the question is, are these activities hindering something the child needs more to nurture creativity abilities? Are primary caregivers aware of the young child’s natural curiosity and need for interaction and study of surroundings when preoccupied by schedules, and tasks to be done? Adults’ sense of time is different than a child; it is often hurried or driven by tasks to be accomplished.<sup>3</sup> A child’s time is driven by a sense of wonder and curiosity of world around him/her.

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<sup>2</sup> February 14, 2006 *Cultivate Corporate Creativity* Butcher, David R.

<sup>3</sup> The Secret of Childhood, Montessori Maria p. 196

Today, the young child (ages three to six) who enters the Montessori classroom needs uninterrupted time more than ever given the present hurried pace in society. The Montessori classroom could be said to be a refuge place for children from the harried schedules at home. Hence, Dr. David Elkind has coined the buzz term “the hurried child” for the condition where parents over schedule their children's lives, push them hard for academic success, and expect them to behave and react as miniature adults. Emotional, cognitive, and social stages of development are dismissed in lieu of the pace and expectations set by today’s society.

The uncompromised Montessori classroom helps today’s child engage in uninterrupted time with purposeful materials which appeal to having the mind and hand working together. It is in this place they discover the joy of learning by active participation. For example, a young child of three may learn to count up to 20 by rote from a computer, yet the child may have no understanding of the concept of what each quantity is. Active work with concrete quantities in the classroom under the direction of a teacher would enhance the child’s sensory *and* cognitive understanding which in turn promotes creativity in learning concepts. Giving the child the abstract symbols without satisfying the inner need to comprehend its representation dismisses the need for the child to assimilate this concept accurately and creatively, and would be like building a house without a foundation. Comparatively, creative ability is developed accordingly to the framework it finds itself. *The question is, “How well do we allow the young child to develop personal creativity and allow it to mature?”*

More children are prey to the pressures of achieving and performing within a societal structure that disregards their stage of development. Their inner needs for developing concentration, order, and creative powers to help others, and to apply their knowledge wisely are exchanged for what appears as a short circuit to learning new concepts.

Today’s young child may be said to be exposed to more pre-made products than any other generation. Many innovative educational products are thought up by one or more creative minds, as well as modifications to these products, from the LeapFrog<sup>®</sup> computerized reading books to the ReaderRabbit<sup>®</sup> software for the young five year old child. A young child who wishes to simply play in the sand, is now likely to be inundated with lessons or fancy accessories to play in the sand. Superior enjoyment or learning outcome is the subtle message to the consumer, as though the child’s natural desire to play in the sand isn’t quite enough.

Today’s marketplace has affected many Montessori schools fundamental educational principles, and principals too. No pun intended. We, Montessori educators are faced with the appeal of bringing in newer, and more educational products into the classroom for the sake of being current with the market trends and attracting clients. New products and programs, unfortunately, can serve to cut into the child’s natural rhythm and time with already simple and successful materials within the classroom. Most toys for the child, ages two to five, have shown over and over that they are temporary pleasures which are soon discarded for the next new toy. Often they serve to distract the child from learning from that which is already found in the environment. Creativity has been defined as the power to make new and unusual association between ideas and concepts. The educator has to

then determine how such toy products help the child do this effectively in a learning environment. Trends come and go, and the appeal to indulge a child has increased in variety while their true inner need to explore and study goes unmet.

I have observed the outcome of some extended programs offered by some Montessori schools, which are comprised of hours or days that suit for the working parent. These extended programs do meet the need of working parent but unfortunately compromise the young child's need for consistency and order to develop creativity when acquiring skills. For example, a young child who is entering a classroom at random times will likely have much more difficulty settling into the routines and with socially bonding with other children. It has been observed that a part time student who participates a Montessori two day per week program may take up to two months before settling into the routines contrary to the full time student (of the same age) who participates in a five day program who settles within two weeks. The work economy has generally worked against the needs of young children. The family structure where the values and priorities are most influential and taught has been for the most part adversely affected. It appears that two working parents have less time to spend qualitative interactive time with their children, unless there is a specific or creative plan to do so.

Creative thinking adults often are those who are interested in their surroundings, and characteristically express their talent within their workplace. Creative thinkers will interact with their surroundings by using the resources available to them or pro-actively finding resources to help interact with their surroundings. Creative thinking adults will keep their antenna open to new information and assimilate or accommodate this information according to their interest. Those creative adults who think outside the box, for the most part, are determined to safeguard their minds and souls from the interruptions that are not purposeful or useful to them. For example, wasteful distractions may be watching TV everyday for long periods of time without actively using what is learned productively. Creative individuals guard against such indulgences because often they are already interacting with their surroundings in ways that nurture new experiences and ideas. Often it is the creative adult inadvertently safeguards children from indulgences that hinder creativity and grant children the gift of time to explore. Stress affects creativity in both adults and children and often results in characteristics of inflexibility and passivity. Thus, it is important to note how today's children and adults are safeguarding and responding to today's milieu of information.

Creativity appears to be alive and well despite some major shifts in today's society. In particular, we see many more innovative products thought up by one or more creative minds, as well as modifications to these products in the marketplace. Products that meet a need in today's society are continually being resourced and marketed in creative ways. Global marketing and product sourcing has rapidly changed today's marketplace. According to the World Economics Forum's meeting in 2006, "Business, government and social innovators are taking on new creative capabilities and innovation strategies in response to a rapidly changing global landscape."<sup>4</sup> More innovative products

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<sup>4</sup> February 14, 2006, *Cultivate Corporate Creativity* Butcher, David R.

are being sourced to compete in today's rapid technology. Products innovated by creative minds reflect everything and anything that readily problem solve the consumer potential need. Consequently, this competitive market has instilled a standard that says we may obtain a lifestyle of convenience for a price.

Children and adults' creativity have been challenged by the proposed needs of today's society. For example, the large use of computers in today's society has impacted our increasing need for them in order to stay connected to our culture, and surroundings. Today, conformity to this new wave in communications has challenged creative minds to express and publish themselves via Personal blogs, Websites, YouTube, and EBay, just to name a few.

"I've talked so often about how life teaches me that there's more than one right answer. It seems so simple, but I believe it's not only the key to creativity; it's the key to a happy life. A life based on a vision of possibilities. A life of continually finding the next right answer. A future view so bright and grateful that it wouldn't be discouraged by a typhoon, much less a Northern California drizzle."<sup>5</sup>

As we move into the next century, the possibilities of creativity remain to be seen. Rapid growth of knowledge in media, technology and resources over the past several decades has shifted our thinking paradigms. Creative thinking adults are those who may be competing for a position in the marketplace. Creative thinkers will cope with all these influences and direct their energies into using the resources available to them. Those who think outside the box and are creative and follow the natural developmental needs of the body, mind and spirit, safeguarding themselves from indulgences that bypass these needs. The question as to why today's children tend to be less creative or why there are so many creatively challenged adults remains evident by how well they have chosen to adapt to the powerful influences of media, education system, and rapidly growing competitive marketplace of North America. The discovery of new possibilities with today's resources will hopefully enrich the world, rather than destroy it. So it appears we may indeed live in a creatively challenged age unlike any other in history!

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<sup>5</sup> 2007, Celebrating what is Right with the World, Jones, Dewitt