Rae Pica

Can Movement Promote Creativity?

The teacher stands among the children, who are scattered throughout the room. "Show me a crooked shape," she says.

The children quickly get to work. Several bend at the waist, some leaning forward, others to one side. A few children bend at the knees and the waist. One child lies on her back and bends her knees and elbows; another child lies on her side with knees drawn up to her chest. One boy raises his arms in a shape reminiscent of a scarecrow. Another twists himself into a pretzel shape.

The teacher moves among them, comments aloud on the children's various responses, and conveys with her tone of voice that all are excellent solutions to her challenge!

Creativity can be an elusive concept.

Even its definition can differ, depending on whom you ask. Moreover, there are a number of misconceptions related to creativity that can cause confusion. For example, people often believe that children who show high academic achievement are the most creative. Given this belief, some adults value correct answers more highly than original thought. In fact, a creative child may or may not be academically gifted; some children who struggle academically show tremendous creativity. And an emphasis on one "right" answer means that children find it "less rewarding to express interest in things, to be curious, to be creative in investigating their world" (Mayesky 2006).

Many people see creativity as the domain of artists—painters, writers, composers, and so on. Clearly, the world benefits from artistic creativity, but it also benefits from creativity in business and industry, science, education, and life itself. Goleman, Kaufman, and Ray (1992) assert that daily life is "a major arena for innovation and problem solving—the largest but least honored realm of the creative spirit" (p. 29).

Creativity may be misunderstood and difficult to define, but it is clearly necessary, particularly in a world so rapidly changing. Creative people are those who can imagine. This means they can imagine solutions to problems and challenges faced. They can also imagine what it is like to be someone or something else—that is, they possess empathy. They can imagine answers to the question, What if . . . ? They can plan full and satisfying futures. According to Schirrmacher (2005), in addition to helping with personal development, "creativity advances civilization and society by addressing and attempting to solve the global problems of hunger, poverty, disease, war, and pollution."

Although all children engage in creative thinking, they aren't likely to continue thinking creatively if their ideas are discouraged and they are continually told there is only one correct answer to any question (which, sadly, is what many types of testing teach them).

To Do More

Certainly movement activities that require children merely to imitate the teacher do not foster creativity. But movement activities like the one described at the beginning of this column, with its emphasis on divergent problem solving, discovery, and self-expression, can make a substantial contribution.

When you present children with a challenge, such as "Show me how crooked you can be," chances are that no two responses will be alike. Divergent thinking, one of the cognitive skills required for creativity, is enhanced through problem-solving challenges that allow for various responses. In addition, when you validate the different responses received, children realize that it's OK to find their own individual solutions and to not have to compete with one another. Their confidence grows, and they continue to take greater creative risks.

Creative movement activities also foster imagination. To replicate the movement of a turtle, children must imagine the slowness of that animal. To move as though they are sad, they must call to mind a time when they weren't happy. To achieve a certain group shape or an act of balance, they must first envision it.

Movement exploration, then, is an effective teaching method. Because it results in a variety of responses to each challenge presented, it is an example of divergent problem solving. For example, a challenge to balance on two body parts can result in one child balancing on her feet, another balancing on his knees, and

Rae Pica is the author of numerous books on movement in early childhood and is cocreator and host of "BAM! Body, Mind, & Child" (**www.bodymindandchild.com**) and cocreator and cohost of NAEYC Radio. You can contact her at raepica@movingandlearning.com.

This column is available online at **www.naeyc.org/yc/columns**.

still another—who may take a gymnastics class—performing a handstand.

Present children with a challenge (for example, "Show me how tall you can be" or "Find three ways to move across the balance beam in a forward direction"), and allow them to respond in any way they choose. Then issue additional challenges to continue and vary the exploration (extend the activity, for example, by saying, "Find another way"). A teacher can ask follow-up questions and present challenges intended to improve what she has seen (refining her query, for example, by saying, "Is there some way to use your feet to make you even taller?" if the children have been asked to make themselves as tall as possible and one child doesn't get on tiptoes).

You'll want to be careful to accept all responses and to provide the encouragement that children need to continue producing divergent responses. The encouragement should consist of neutral feedback (for example, "I see you're moving across the beam on your tummy"), as opposed to feedback involving judgment, such as "Good job" or "I liked the way you did that." The children will know from your tone of voice and smiling face that you are pleased. You'll also want to comment on the responses of two or three children at once; otherwise, if you remark on only one child's response, the other children will assume it is the best one and will hurry to replicate it. That, of course, promotes conformity, not creativity.

Goleman, Kaufman, and Ray (1992) explain that creativity doesn't happen only in the mind. Rather, they believe relationships "between thinking and feelings, between mind and body, are critical to unleashing creativity" (p. 27). What could be a better medium for establishing relationships between thinking and feelings or between mind and body than creative movement?

To Learn More

My book *Experiences in Movement & Music: Birth to Age 8*, fourth edition (Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), covers the topics of creative development and movement exploration. For more on creativity in early childhood, read Mary Mayesky's *How to Foster Creativity in All Children* (Thomson Delmar Learning, 2003), and *Creativity and the Arts with Young Children,* second edition, by Rebecca T. Isbell and Shirley C. Raines (Thomson Delmar Learning, 2006). Also excellent is *Creativity in Early Childhood Classrooms,* by Deborah Tegano, James Moran III, and Janet Sawyers, a 1991 National Education Association publication (available from various sellers at amazon.com).

References

Goleman, D., P. Kaufman, & M. Ray. 1992. *The creative spirit.* New York: Penguin.

Mayesky, M. 2006. *Creative activities for young children.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Schirrmacher, R. 2005. *Art and creative development for young children.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.