

# Hope for Challenging Children

## Volume Two Educational Issues

Second Edition

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### Preview

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## Sample Chapter

### Chapter One

# Learning, Creativity, and Failure: The Road to Achievement



“The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge  
but imagination.”  
Albert Einstein

#### **Learning and Creativity**

Creativity is a tremendously important concept in learning, education, achievement, vocational aptitude, progress, and success in life. It starts developing early in childhood and becomes fairly stable during adolescence, but its benefits span the lifetime. When most people think of creativity, they think of outstanding accomplishment in the arts or of ingenious inventions. Many of us were taught at a young age that we are not creative by a misguided adult who held us to inappropriate standards. We can also acquire this belief from the inhibiting, too often demeaning, success- or perfection-oriented evaluation system we are subjected to (and subject ourselves to) from an early age.

Creativity can be defined as the process of generating something new or novel from existing knowledge or information. It is what stimulates progress in all areas of our lives and all aspects and levels of society. It does not have to be stunning art, captivating music, heartwarming poetry, or a new device to solve the world’s problems. It can be anything new of any value (a judgment call that is often misleading or inaccurate) or of any magnitude. Even the smallest can become the greatest. If nothing else, it can promote further creativity.

Creativity can be a new idea, a different perspective, or a novel way of perceiving, interpreting, integrating, and applying pre-existing knowledge or events. These

applications can be directed at solving a problem or achieving a different or improved outcome, an imaginative product, and more. Everyone has the potential for creativity – it is one of the most important universal human traits that has allowed us to achieve so much as a species – but it might not be what we expect. Most of us would be surprised if we truly realized how creative we can be or if we recognized all the creative things we do in our daily lives.

The foundation for creativity is comprised of curiosity, imagination, learning, reasoning, divergent thinking (generating multiple different ideas about a single topic), and critical thinking (analyzing and evaluating an idea or issue). It is fostered by:

- symbolic, constructive, and pretend play in early childhood
- developing working memory, cognitive flexibility, planning, divergent thinking, critical thinking, and hypothetical thinking abilities
- acquiring a broad range of general knowledge, and a variety of academic, artistic, technological, and applied skills
- exploring and learning about our world, our history, different cultures, the creative endeavors and accomplishments of others, and how things work
- learning how to recognize, define, and analyze problems, brainstorm and evaluate ideas, and access and use a wide variety of resources in seeking information and solutions
- learning to see things from a variety of perspectives
- exploring and developing interests
- being willing to ask questions and take appropriate risks (risk meaning being wrong or making mistakes)
- understanding that making mistakes is how we learn and is what creates opportunity for growth and progress

Creative processes are facilitated by open-minded questioning; brain-storming alternative ideas and solutions; evaluating potential outcomes; exploring ideas, events, and knowledge; analyzing mistakes; problem-solving; and practice. They are completely destroyed by assuming and being taught that there is only one right answer for every problem; that “learning” is just a matter of acquiring existing information and memorizing facts, procedures, and answers; that mistakes or failures are bad; or that only success or perfection is of value.

Children, for whom all of life is new, are so often amazingly creative in their wonderment with each novel situation and experience and in their uninhibited expressiveness. This can be encouraged and gradually developed through the years into more mature, productive creativity by starting at a young age with activities such as:

- enhancing development of their imagination through reading to them; providing a language- and literacy-rich home environment; encouraging and facilitating constructive and pretend play; engaging in exploratory art and music, story-telling, and creative writing activities
- reading a variety of fun and interesting literature of their choice (reading to them starting around age 18 to 24 months, and then having them read as they develop skills – make reading a shared family activity)
- taking the time to really pay attention when they share their thoughts, ideas, and creations without making value judgments (no matter how silly, trivial, ridiculous they might seem), validate their effort and progress, and provide positive and constructive feedback consistent with their developmental and ability levels
- encouraging them to ask questions and generate multiple ideas about possible answers
- helping them find answers to their questions from a variety of resources
- talking with them about their experiences, world, concerns, and problems in a nonjudgmental, supportive, encouraging manner
- asking them open-ended questions that require expansion of thought and ideas instead of simple yes/no questions
- exploring the “gray areas” and the pros and cons of alternative solutions when faced with dilemmas and when problems are multi-faceted or murky
- teaching and guiding them in setting goals and establishing and following specific plans for accomplishing their goals
- emphasizing and reinforcing effort and progress more than success
- identifying and exploring the differing understandings and perspectives of other people for events and experiences
- helping them learn to think through problems, brainstorm solutions, identify and evaluate potential consequences, and create plans for resolution
- guiding them in exploring and understanding what went right, what went wrong, what could be done differently, and what they gained or learned in the process when things do not go as planned
- helping them find different ways to apply what they learned in school in other parts of their lives
- providing opportunities for them to explore, identify, and develop interests, special skills, and hobbies
- providing extracurricular enrichment experiences such as nature activities; visiting museums and centers that provide discovery or exploratory science and technology activities for children; enrolling them in art, music, or dance lessons; taking them to plays and concerts; engaging them in other community art, education, special interest, and recreation activities; facilitating cross-cultural experiences, etc.

## The Opportunity of Failure

“A person who never made a mistake  
never tried anything new.”  
Albert Einstein

Take a good look at the word “failure.” In the popular sense, failure is most often conceived as “an individual not meeting standards or expectations.” It is frequently assumed to be because of lack of ability or inadequate effort, and is seen by many as a negative reflection on the individual, a sign of weakness. A more appropriate definition of failure would be “an endeavor that did not accomplish what was intended.” It can be for any of a large number of reasons, most of which have nothing to do with lack of ability, inadequate effort, or weakness, and it can and should be very positive and productive.

When we teach children that mistakes and failure are bad, when we dismiss or establish negative consequences for mistakes or reprimand or punish what is too often considered “under-performance,” we risk instilling a fear of failure. We also do not create an appreciation for and openness to the learning and growth opportunities inherent in mistakes and in not accomplishing what was planned or expected.

Not accomplishing what was planned with any endeavor is disappointment, but not failure, at least not yet. Instead, it is an opportunity for learning, growth, and progress. Fulfilling this opportunity requires three things:

1. Evaluating what caused the disappointment and what could have been done differently to improve outcomes.
2. Looking carefully for what was actually accomplished in the process, even if it was not what was expected. With almost any endeavor, something is accomplished, whether it was successful or not. It may have been something on a smaller scale than expected, it may have been something completely unexpected, or it may have been learning something new to improve outcomes with the next effort. Something important is almost inevitably there.
3. Using creativity and problem-solving to figure out how to use this new understanding in taking a different approach to achieve the same or improved goals or redirecting the effort to achieve new goals.

Doing these three things and moving forward with renewed effort is using learning and creativity to achieve real progress. Not doing so is true negative failure. This is what education and achievement are all about.

“I think and think for months and years.  
Ninety-nine times the conclusion is false.  
The hundredth time I am right.”  
Albert Einstein

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