

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGINATION

Do children today use their imaginations as much as we did when we were kids? Do you see your children spinning incredible tales and stories in their fantasy play like we used to when we played “cops and robbers” or “house”? Or does your child’s fantasy play seem to consist only of repetitive movements like karate chops or ballerina spins that have no story to them? Why do you suppose this is and is it something we should be concerned about?

If someone grabs your toy away from you when you are four, you need to be able to imagine different ways to handle the situation, like sharing or using your words. If you can’t imagine these possibilities, you will probably just clobber the other kid to get what you want or retreat into a crying jag. If you need to figure out the answer to a high school geometry test question, you need to have the ability to imagine the possible solutions. If you can’t, you will undoubtedly fail, cheat or decide not to care. If terrorists threaten our way of life, we adults need to be able to imagine new ways of creating a peaceful world or we are sure to annihilate each other.

In the world of child development you may hear phrases like “critical thinking skills” and “creative problem-solving abilities” when referring to goals for your child’s cognitive development. What they are really talking about is ... imagination. The way to create human beings with imagination is to provide them with opportunities to develop it for themselves when they are very young. These opportunities are found in one place and one place only... play – playing with paints, playing with play dough, with costumes, with glue and with crayons. Making a mess. Exploring the woods. Splashing in a puddle. Wondering at a caterpillar you notice inching by. Pretending to be a bird, gliding through the sky.

Are you providing your children enough opportunities for this type of play? If they are spending hours sitting at a computer, watching television or playing video games, they are passive participants being fed someone else’s stories instead of having the time and space to dream up their own. If they are enrolled in soccer, ballet, T-ball, karate and gymnastics all in the same week, they are receiving wonderful opportunities to develop their skills. But they have little to no opportunity to use their creativity and imagination to decide how to use their free time, what fantasy to explore or what part of their world they’d like to discover more about at their own pace, in their own way.

Often parents today think that if they give their children too much free time they are wasting opportunities for learning and preparing children for their futures. But these types of parental choices, though done with love and the best of intentions, are not a gift to children, according to current child development theory and research. Children today desperately need time and space to develop their creative imaginations free from adult agendas. Even if your children complain, “I’m bored! There’s nothing to do!” please, please, please trust that if you force them to figure out for themselves how to fill their time, their innate creativity will kick in and their imaginations will soar!