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Encouraging Creativity in Early Childhood Classrooms

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO?

Given what is known about young children's learning and about their amazing competence to express their visions of themselves and their world, how can the classroom be modified to best support children's emerging creativity?

TIME. Creativity does not follow the clock. Children need extended, unhurried time to explore and do their best work. They should not be artificially rotated, that is, asked to move to a different learning center or activity when they are still productively engaged and motivated by a piece of creative work.

SPACE. Children need a place to leave unfinished work to continue the next day, and a space that inspires them to do their best work. A barren, drab environment is not conducive to creative work. Rather, children's work is fostered by a space that has natural light, harmonious colors, comfortable and child-sized areas, examples of their own and others' work (not only their classmates, but as appropriate, also their teachers' and selected adult artists), and inviting materials.

MATERIALS. Without spending great amounts of money, teachers can organize wonderful collections of resource materials that might be bought, found, or recycled. These materials can include paper goods of all kinds; writing and drawing tools; materials for constructions and collages, such as buttons, stones, shells, beads, and seeds; and sculpting materials, such as play dough, goop, clay, and shaving cream. These materials are used most productively and imaginatively by children when they themselves have helped select, organize, sort, and arrange them.

CLIMATE. The classroom atmosphere should reflect the adults' encouragement and acceptance of mistakes, risk-taking, innovation, and uniqueness, along with a certain amount of mess, noise, and freedom. This is not a matter of chaos, or of tight control, but instead something in between. In order to create such a climate, teachers must give themselves permission to try artistic activity themselves, even when they have not been so fortunate as to have had formal art training or to feel they are naturally "good at art." Through workshops, adult education classes, or teamwork with an art teacher or parent, classroom teachers can gain the confidence for, and experience the pleasure of, venturing some distance down the road of self-expression in a medium in which they did not know they could be successful. Their skill will then translate into the work with the children.

OCCASIONS. Children's best and most exciting work involves an intense or arousing encounter between themselves and their inner or outer world. Teachers provide the occasions for these

adventures. Children find it hard to be creative without any concrete inspiration. Instead, they prefer to draw on the direct evidence of their senses or memories. These memories can become more vivid and accessible through the teacher's provocations and preparations. For example, teachers can encourage children to represent their knowledge and ideas before and after they have watched an absorbing show, taken a field trip, or observed and discussed an interesting plant or animal brought into class. Teachers can put up a mirror or photos of the children in the art area, so children can study their faces as they draw their self-portrait. Teachers can offer children the opportunity to check what they have drawn against an original model and then let them revise and improve upon their first representation.