

SAND BETWEEN THE TOES: KEEPING CREATIVITY ALIVE IN YOUR CHILDREN

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*We had sand in the eyes and the ears and the nose,
And sand in the hair, and sand-between-the-toes.
-- -- A.A. Milne*

Sand. Doesn't sound creative to me. It works its way into carpets, beds, corners. What's so great about sand-between-the-toes? It itches. Causes blisters when you put on shoes.

Christopher Robin doesn't live in my house, and I don't have a nanny or a maid to pick up after him. But if I think hard enough, I do remember when I was very young how I loved to dig my toes into warm sand and wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.

Sound familiar? Do you ask yourself if your job is to be a good housekeeper, or to be an open-minded parent? Parents are always asking this question. In my years as a poet, a mother of two creative children, and as a family therapist I have assembled a list of things parents can do to encourage creativity.

1. Encourage a sense of wonder. Don't call dandelions and Queen Anne's lace "weeds." Get a wild flower book from the library and look up their names. Do the same with butterflies, rocks, trees, nuts, clouds. Teach children to ask, "What if, Why, Where did this come from?" You may ask, "But this sounds like analytical thinking, and I thought I was

supposed to encourage free thinking!” What this activity encourages is getting children out in nature, and getting them to really look at things, specific details. It develops a passion for nature’s surprises.

2. Encourage the five senses. Feel the roughness of a shed snakeskin. Listen to the sound of a cardinal bird. How is it different from the mourning dove? Smell bread baking in the oven. Does it taste better when it comes from the oven or when you buy it at a store? How many colors can you count in the sunset? Again, this type of activity develops an ability for detail, an ability to sense and really live in the present moment.

3. Encourage imagination. Don't call it lying: Storytelling is a gift which must be nurtured. Yes, children need to know when storytelling is appropriate and when it is not. If they consistently use imaginary circumstances to cover up inappropriate behavior, ask them to tell you (or write) two different stories, one clearly labeled as "imaginary" and one as "truthful."

4. Carefully manage television watching, computer and video games. Limit time spent in front of a monitor or a TV screen. Some computer time may be creative, but it also keeps children indoors and inactive, I suggest only one television, accessible to children, which is kept in a common room, so that parents know what is being watched. Turn off the radio in your car and use this time to talk with your child.

5. STOP hurrying! Shel Silverstein, A wonderful children's poet, says. "It takes a lot of

slow to grow," Since 1981 young people spend 4 hours less per week in free play. They have also doubled their time in organized sports and have more than doubled their time in home chores (University of Michigan Institute for Social Research). When does a kid have time to be a kid? We know that we learn about who we are through our play. Let's think about the kind of children we want to produce; hard workers who follow rules, or creative individuals who can follow, write, revise, or challenge rules in a thoughtful way?

6. Encourage talking about feelings. ALL feelings., Creativity comes, not through choked up or frozen emotions, but from a free flow of feelings and understanding. Do not hide everything bad from your child. He/she needs to learn to handle adversity while still under the loving, supportive atmosphere of the family.

7. Encourage exploration of all the arts. Let children know that singing is as important as math, that carving a soap sculpture is as important as physics. Do not judge their work. Say, "Tell me about this." Let them improvise on the piano, doodle on the church bulletin, whistle in the bathtub.

8. Limit rules. Children need limits in order to learn inner discipline, but too much imposed discipline will kill creativity. If your child is always getting dirty, then put a sand pile in your backyard and set rules about its use.

Maybe the sand between your child's toes will help him/her walk a little slower, sing a little louder, a little free-er, and maybe it will also awaken in you, the parent, that little child who went to sleep years ago and is waiting to hold your hand.