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young families



Children and Creativity

A father and his four-year-old daughter were enjoying a visit to a quiet park. She asked: "Daddy, do you know why the wind stops once in a while? It's so the birds can get on it. That's how they fly. Shhh . . . you can hear their wings if you're quiet."

The little girl's original observation is a good example of creativity. Other children exhibit their creativity in different ways. Consider Michael, a tinkerer, who's always taking things apart to see how they work; Mary, an explorer, looking under, behind, inside, and on top of everything; or Billy, the collector of stones, bottle caps, insects, etc.

These children, and most young children, have a high degree of creativity, but their promise may be only partially realized. Unfortunately, it is likely to be dulled, ignored, discouraged, or even punished out of them before they reach high school.

Creativity means far more than talent in art or music. Salesmen, machinists, lawyers, secretaries, homemakers . . . and parents . . . can and should be creative. As the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow said: "A first rate soup is more creative than a second rate painting." Creative people are original, flexible, adventurous, innovative, and spontaneous—certainly characteristics needed for life in our complex, changing, unpredictable world.

What are some of the signs of creativity that you can watch for in your young child? Creative people are perceptive. They see and experience things others miss. Creative people are original thinkers and have novel ideas. Children's ideas may be offbeat or silly, but a few are surprisingly good in relation to their age. For example, the four-year-old who used cocoa puffed cereal as baked potatoes in her doll house dining room.

Creative people follow through on their ideas by trying them out, working long and hard. Creative children have longer attention spans than usual for their age. Creative people are also self-confident, believing in themselves and their abilities. Creative children are often very independent, preferring to do things on their own. It may take longer, but this is the beginning of encouragement for them to develop the self-confidence that will allow them freedom in self-expression and creativity.

Creative youngsters are typically very curious. They are full of wonder. They will ask more questions than the average child. "Why doesn't it rain up sometimes?" "Where was I before you had me?"

Encouraging Children's Creativity

There are ways that parents and other adults can help children find satisfaction in expressing their feelings and experience the joy of creation without squelching any child's natural creativity.

A child needs to feel free to express ideas in new and spontaneous ways without the danger of being laughed at or put down. A parent who laughs at a youngster's ideas, even in an indulgent way, usually convinces the child quite quickly that his or her thoughts couldn't possibly be worth developing.

Children must be permitted to learn by trial and error. They must try, fail, try another method, and if necessary, even try again. Of course, they need guidance, but they also need to find success by their own efforts. Remember when he or she learned to walk. How many times did that toddler fall and fail? How much was done without active help from you?

To encourage creativity you can play games while riding in the car or waiting in the dentist's office. Ask mindstretching questions: "How many ways can you use a pencil?" "If you had to be the kindergarten teacher tomorrow, what would you do?" Be encouraging and happy about the responses—never critical.

One important way to contribute to a child's creative development is to provide plenty of good art, craft, and project (junk) materials. Select materials (and toys) that they can use, rather than something they can only watch. Their creative efforts are often messy. Paints spill. Collections add clutter and collect dust. But a preschooler who fears being scolded or spanked for making a mess isn't going to feel much of the excitement of being creative. It's much safer and easier to watch television. Of course you will need rules about cleaning up and where things may be used or displayed.

It is urgently important that your child's creative abilities be firmly established before he or she starts school. Perhaps your youngster will be fortunate to have a teacher who stimulates and values creativity; but even so, that teacher must deal with 25 or 30 other children and cannot give your child what you can.

Sugar and Salt Sense

Sucrose and sodium, more commonly referred to as sugar and salt, have been the subject of debate and controversy in recent years. The Dietary Goals for the United States proposed by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, recommend the reduction of the amount of salt and sugar we eat. As parents you can influence your child's eating habits and help them to develop "tastes" for food, including sugar and salt. Let's review some sugar and salt sense.

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SUGAR

The debate concerning sugar is whether our increased sugar consumption is a causing factor in the rising incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. At the present time there is no firm evidence proving this relationship. However, we need to be concerned whether high sugar content foods are replacing other foods that provide nutrients, in addition to the calories sugar provides. Evidence does exist that sugar is a contributor to tooth decay, particularly when teeth are exposed to sugar frequently during the day.

Sugar in normal household usage appears in various forms: white table sugar, brown sugar, honey, molasses, or sugar which is used as an ingredient in jelly and jam, cakes, cookies, candy, pop, and alcoholic beverages. As you may remember from your high school science class, other sugars such as glucose, fructose, and lactose occur naturally in many foods. Therefore these forms are not an added ingredient to food products.

Sugar is known as a high energy food. The Dietary Goals recommendation is that we get more of our energy from other carbohydrate foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grain bread and cereal products, than from products made from sugar. In many cases these food products contain only energy or calories and no other nutrients. Twelve ounces of skim milk provides about 135 calories, 12.5 grams of protein, and significant quantities of riboflavin, calcium, and Vitamins A and D. A 12-ounce can of pop provides 170 calories and no nutrients.

It is particularly important to note whether high sugar foods are replacing foods containing essential nutrients needed every day, such as pop replacing milk at lunch, doughnuts replacing whole grain bread or cereal at breakfast, candy replacing fruit as a snack.

If you are concerned about your family's consumption of sugar, read the labels of food products before buying them. If sugar is listed as one of the first ingredients, it means that sugar is a major ingredient in that product.

SALT

The concern about the amount of salt we eat comes from evidence showing an excessive sodium (salt) intake as the cause of high blood pressure (hypertension) in some individuals. Table salt contains about 40 percent sodium and is the major source of sodium in our diets. Sodium is an essential nutrient needed for body growth and functions. Sodium is needed in greater amounts if a person is doing heavy work or exercise and in hot temperatures when sodium is lost through sweating. Sodium should not be cut out of diets, however if your family has a history of high blood pressure you'll want to pay attention to the amount of sodium consumed by both the adults and children in your family.

Examine your family's eating habits (both meals and snacks) to see if salt is added excessively or is a hidden ingredient in purchased prepared foods. These include canned soups and vegetables, processed and cured meats, frozen entrees, pizza, and baked goods. Snack foods such as chips, puffs, pretzels, pickles, and olives are highly salted. Of course the salt shaker on your table, if used a lot, will raise your family's intake of sodium. Moderation is a good practice to follow.

Fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat contain insignificant or moderate amounts of sodium. If your family has a "taste" for salt and wants to reduce the amount of salt consumed, try substituting herbs or vinegar in the preparation of foods. In doing your own food preparation you can control the amount of salt.

If you make your own baby food do not add salt. Commercial baby foods do not contain salt, so do not add salt to them either.

In view of concerns about the amount of sugar and salt consumed, eat a variety of foods every day that include:

- meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dry peas, dry beans, or nuts
- milk and milk products
- fruits and vegetables
- enriched and whole grain bread and cereal products

Do not rely heavily on purchased prepared foods for your family's diet and check out any specific dietary needs with your family doctor.

"International Year of the Child"

The United Nations has declared 1979 as "International Year of the Child." This is a worldwide attempt to promote the well-being of children and to focus on their needs. It is a time for parents to look closely at their children and the time they spend together as a family.

Legal and Economic Guide

A guide to women's legal and economic rights in Minnesota, A Woman's Place is available from the Council on the Economic Status of Women. The booklet contains information on consumer law, education, employment, family law, and finances. It is a good resource for all—women, men, families. To obtain a copy write to the Council on the Economic Status of Women, Room 400 SW, State Office Building, St. Paul, MN 55155.

The Council also has a Women's Information Line which provides information on legal and economic matters related to women in Minnesota. The state-wide toll free number is (800) 652-9744. Metro area residents can call the Council office at 296-8590.

This Issue

This newsletter is published by the Agricultural Extension Service of your University of Minnesota for young families in the Twin Cities area. I would appreciate your suggestions for its content. Call me at 823-5241.



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