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Creative Development in 3-5 Year Olds

Support your child's creativity now and set the stage to foster continued creative development in the future.

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Learning Benefits

Hover over each Learning Benefit below for a detailed explanation.

Creativity

Technology Skills

The world of the preschooler is one of imagination and magic. For many children, their creativity will reach its peak before the age of six, after which it will begin to decline with the onset of formal schooling and the developmental drive towards conformity. However, supporting your child's creativity in preschool sets the stage to foster its continued development in the years beyond.

By the age of three, children have officially entered Piaget's preoperational period, the hallmark of which is the ability to use symbols and representational thought (e.g., have one thing — like a word, drawing, or item) to represent something else (e.g., like the letters "horse," or picture of a horse, or even a stick with a sock on it, all representing an actual horse). The three year old discovers that he can place blocks in an arrangement, or scribble lines on a paper in way that represents an object or action. His fine motor skills are developed enough that he can control writing utensils or manipulate objects with more precision, which develops further over the preschool years. Children this age begin to create with intention — purposefully drawing a monster or a flower. By the time they are 5, many children add details and annotate with words and narrated stories.

With these newfound representational abilities, children's imaginations become boundless! They love pretend games and have a natural tendency to fantasize, experiment, and explore. They are fascinated with magic and struggle to distinguish between fantasy and reality. However, their creative drive ignites a desire to learn and supports intellectual development across all subjects. Thus, it is the perfect time to support the development of divergent thinking—where children generate unique solutions and make new connections without being tied to "the" one right answer or way of doing things (convergent thinking). Supporting divergent thinking means providing activities that allow for child appropriate inquiry, reflection, wondering, curiosity, and even supported confusion. Divergent thinking, and hence creativity and creative problem solving, are more than art — it is thinking, predicting, imagining, and creating. Try out some of these [less standard ways](#) to foster creativity in your child.

Ways to foster Creativity:

- **Encourage creative problem solving:** Ask your child open-ended questions that have no right or wrong. Encourage her to tell you why she thinks as she does (fostering creativity, cognition, and language development). For example, "What could happen if dogs could talk?" or "Would you rather have no nose, or no eyes, and why?" Accept any answer as "enough," but invite your child to go further with more questions or curiosities that her answers inspire. You can stimulate problem solving without words with this fun app: Cut the Rope Lite: figure out how to feed your blob-guy candy.
- **Provide an array of experiences** to build your child's foundation of knowledge (e.g., go to museums, visit libraries, and explore different neighborhoods in your town).
- **Invite your child to create:** Give her a list of things to find (e.g., something that has color, 2 smooth objects, 4 things that smells nice) then use them in a creation. Have recyclable materials (e.g., egg cartons, cardboard boxes, etc.) available to make projects with. Worried about the mess? How about an [online project](#) where your child can use virtual foil, pasta, buttons, etc. "Paint" with glue, "sprinkle" glitter, add virtual leaves or "crumple" paper — click on the utensils CAP and you will see an incredible array of options!
- **Break the rules:** Invite your child to do things differently. Some ideas to think about:
 - Instead of playing a board game by the rules, see if your child can make up her own!
 - Have a picnic in swimsuits in the winter.
 - See how many different uses your child can come up with for a paper clip or a paper towel roll.
 - Instead of regular paints, mix (safe) spices with vegetable oil. Try turmeric (reacts with black light!), paprika (color), and dill (smell) on watercolor paper (its thicker, but put down newspaper).
 - Add salt to paint or beans to playdough.
 - Have your child create an alphabet with licorice strings, spaghetti noodles, or letter pasta.
 - Reignite interest in a forgotten passion: Add cotton balls atop abandoned train tracks and declare an avalanche! Challenge your child to help put out the "fire" (red, orange, and yellow tissue paper) on the roof of the dollhouse. Engaging her thinking and problem solving in this way will not only ignite her creativity, but also stimulate familiar play in new directions.
- Provide a wide variety of **open-ended tools:**
 - puppets
 - animal figures
 - tool sets or doctor kits
 - vehicles
 - people
 - blocks

- dress up clothes (can be a towel that becomes a skirt!)
- clay, play dough, pipe cleaners, paints, chalk, a variety of writing utensils,
- **Allow for messiness**, allow for time! Creativity is by definition messy. The more permission your child has, and the more free time they are given to do this, the more room they have to explore, experiment, and create.
- For more **virtual options**, check out:
 - My Oats: [A virtual spyrograph!](#) For a more kid-friendly version, check out [this site](#).
 - [Simple "painting" interface](#). Click "animate" when your child is done, and let him see a movie of how he created his work of art!
 - GlowFree or Doodle Buddy or Paint Sparkles Draw apps: easy to navigate, and fun to create...yes!
 - Squiggles app: Simple playful app that encourages your child's doodles to become something more.
- **Encourage inventive storytelling**: Invite your child to make drawings to go with the stories she tells or satires to go with the art she creates. For a favorite tale, switch something around. Make the main character a bear instead of Goldilocks, or have the story take place on a ship instead of the forest.
- **Art Maker app**: make simple slide shows, sticker books, movies, and books!
 - Invite your child to narrate her process, or what she creates!
- **Support "real"** in a playful way: many children this age will ask you to draw or write for them, so it can look "right." Honor this desire without setting a standard they are not capable of reaching. For example, get creative rubber stamps and have your child stamp out a story and then add details or words as she is able to independently.
- **Make movement creative**: Especially if you have a wiggly one, try out these creative moves:
 - Have her be the leader in Follow the Leader.
 - Have her show you how she'd move if she were sad, angry, or joyful. What about frigid or blistering? You'll be fostering vocabulary and social development as well!
 - Have her choose an animal to move like. How can she get over the hill or across the river as that animal?
- **Think about how you respond**: Emphasize process and not the product. Ask your child to tell you about her creation, Notice what she discovered (e.g., I notice that when you layered the green, you got a darker color).

Topics

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Book Lists

- [Chapter Books for Preschoolers](#)
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