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Freedom to Learn

Unsolicited Evaluation Is the Enemy of Creativity

Creativity blossoms in a non-controlling, non-judgmental environment.

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In my [last post](#) I wrote of evidence that children's [creativity](#) has declined over the past two or three decades, a period during which children's lives, both in and out of school, have become increasingly controlled and regulated by adult authorities. Here, now, is some further evidence that freedom—including freedom from unasked-for evaluation—is an essential element to the blooming of creativity.

Non-directive, Non-Judgmental Parenting Predicts Subsequent Creativity in Children Longitudinal research has shown that children raised by parents who are relatively non-directive and non-judgmental exhibit more creativity later on than do those raised by relatively directive, judgmental parents. In a classic study, conducted in the 1970s and '80s, David Harrington, Jeanne Block, and Jack Block assessed the child-rearing beliefs and practices of the parents of 106 preschool children (3.5 to 4.5 years old), and then, when the children were in 6th grade and again in 9th grade, asked the children's school teachers to rate them on a number of characteristics pertaining to creativity. [1]

When the children were preschoolers, the researchers evaluated the parents for degree of control during parent-child interactions in the laboratory, and they also asked the parents to describe their own parenting style using a Q-sort method. Statements such as the following were taken to represent a non-controlling, non-judgmental style:

- I respect my child's opinions and encourage him to express them.
- I feel a child should have time to think, daydream, and even loaf.
- I let my child make many decisions for himself.

In contrast, statements such as the following were taken to represent a controlling, judgmental style:

- I do not allow my child to get angry with me.
- I try to keep my child away from children or families who have different ideas or values from ours.
- I do not allow my child to question my decisions.

The teachers' assessments of the children's creative potential, years later, involved items such as the following:

- Is an interesting, arresting child.
- Becomes strongly involved in what s/he does.
- Seeks to be independent and autonomous.
- Is self-reliant, confident.

The results were highly significant. The children who had been raised by non-controlling, non-judgmental parents exhibited far more creative potential as teenagers, according to the teachers' rankings, than did those who had been raised by more controlling, judgmental parents.

Expectation of Evaluation Inhibits Creativity

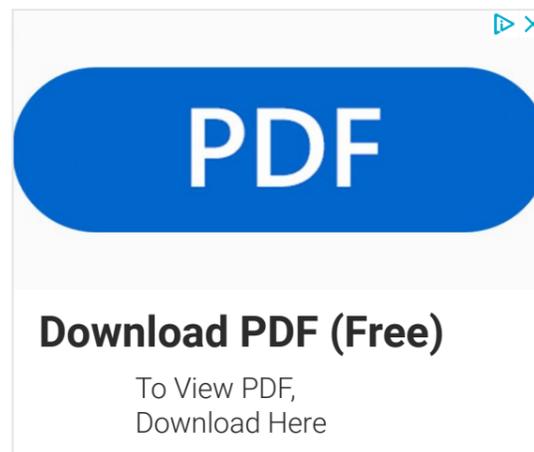
In numerous experiments, conducted mostly at Brandeis University, psychologist Theresa Amabile sought the conditions that might increase or decrease creativity. In a typical experiment she would ask the participants—sometimes children, sometimes adults—to produce some creative product.[2] Depending on the experiment, the product might be a collage, or a haiku poem, or a short story. Then she would have the products evaluated for creativity by a panel of experts. Although creativity is hard to define, it is apparently not too hard to recognize. The judges were quite consistent, from one to another, in their evaluations, even though they performed their evaluations completely independently. In general, the judges saw as creative those products that were original and surprising, yet were also somehow satisfying, meaningful, and coherent. Original and random was not scored as creative.

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In some of these experiments, Amabile would tell some of the participants that their products were going to be evaluated for creativity by a panel of experts. On top of that, for some, she said that their product would be entered into a contest and prizes would be given to those judged most creative. Other participants were told nothing about evaluation or about any consequences for creative or uncreative performance.

The results of these experiments were quite consistent. In experiment after experiment, the participants who made the most creative products were those who did not know that their products would be evaluated. They were the ones just playing, not concerned about judgments or rewards.

In physically demanding tasks, like lifting heavy weights, and in tedious tasks, like counting beans, we do better when we are being evaluated than when we are not. But in tasks that require creativity, or new insights, or new learning, we do better when we are not being evaluated—when we are just playing, not stressed, not afraid of failure. Evaluation generally promotes effort—because we want to impress the evaluator—but effort is insufficient for creativity. You can't be more creative just by trying harder. To be creative, you have to back off of yourself in a way that permits the full engagement of certain unconscious mental processes—processes that generate unusual associations and new ideas. Those unconscious processes work best when you are playing, not when you are striving for praise or some other reward.



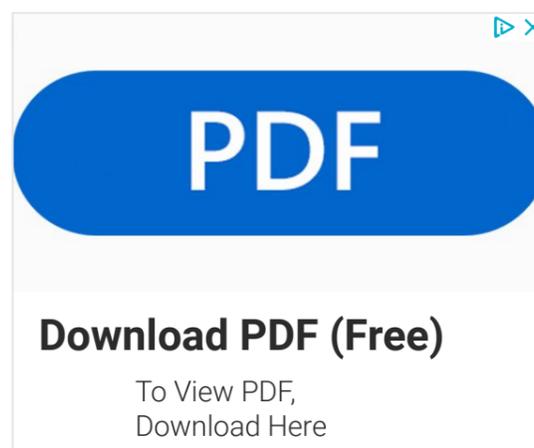
On the basis of a great deal of research on the effects of emotions on task performance, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson developed what she calls the “broaden and build theory of positive emotions.”[3] According to her theory, positive emotions broaden our perception and thought, allowing us to see what we didn’t see before and to put ideas and information together in new, creative, useful ways. In contrast, according to Fredrickson, negative emotions narrow our perceptions and thought, primarily to focus on the stimulus that initiated the emotion—the fearsome tiger, the hated enemy, the evaluator, or the negative consequences of failure.

Both of these ways of perceiving and thinking are useful; both are products of natural selection. When we are not faced with immediate threats to our survival, we use our minds to build ourselves and our community up—to learn, create, find new ways of doing things, help one another. In contrast, when we are faced with immediate threats, we use our minds, quite naturally, to deal with the threat. If a tiger is chasing you, your best bet is to use well-learned or habitual ways of escaping from the tiger, not to dream up new creative ways of doing so. Creative ways always run the risk of failure, so we are biologically constructed to cut creativity off when failure has serious consequences.

Evaluation, when it is not asked for, and when it has consequences as it does in school, is a threat. It narrows the mind and inhibits the processes of “building up.” It inhibits new learning, new insights, and creative thought—the very processes that some people think school is supposed to promote.

I like Fredrickson’s theory, but I prefer to call it “the broaden and build theory of *play*.” My reading of the research suggests that the positive states of mind that broaden and build are playful states. Playfulness, by its very nature, is a condition in which we do not fear failure and we feel free to try out new, creative moves. In play, we allow our imagination to blend with our logic.

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And so, it is no wonder that children have become ever less creative as our schools have become ever more centered on testing and evaluation. For those who take school seriously, continuous testing and evaluation create continuous threat. Students’ minds are focused on the threat: How do I deal with this test? How do I please this teacher? It’s hard to be creative in these conditions.

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References

[1] Harrington, D. M., Block, J. H., & Block, J. (1987). Testing aspects of Carl Rogers's theory of creative environments: Child-rearing antecedents of creative potential in young adolescents. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 851-856.

[2] Amabile, T. (1996). *Creativity in context: update to the social psychology of creativity*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. Also, Hennessey, B., & Amabile, T. (2010). Creativity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 61, 569-598.

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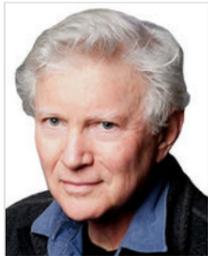
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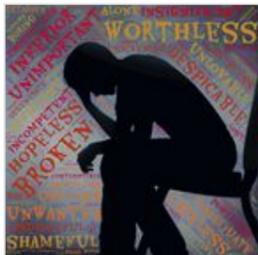
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Peter Gray, Ph.D., is a research professor at Boston College and author of the newly published book *Free to Learn* (Basic Books) and *Psychology*.

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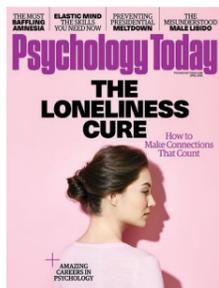
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