

Building practitioners' confidence in their creative practice can have lasting benefits for your setting and the children in your care, says **Clare Halstead...**



A CULTURE OF *creativity*



Creativity is at the heart of the EYFS – and rightly so, as children's natural curiosity, willingness to try things out and sense of adventure are creative qualities that will flourish given the right support. But how often do the adults working with children feel equally at ease with their creative abilities? How often do our own anxieties – “I can't draw”, “I'm no good at singing”, “I'm too self-conscious to dance” – lead to creative activities that are limited in scope, or to letting other people take the lead without challenging our own inhibitions?

When we speak about creativity we are describing imaginative activity that produces outcomes that are purposeful, original and of value. It occurs across all areas of life, but we often don't recognise it. For example, when we adapt a used container to make a bird feeder – that's creative; or when we spontaneously make up a song to help a child brush their teeth – that's creative too. Creativity is not just about being the next Mozart or Picasso, it is an ability we all

possess to some degree and use every day, whether we realise it or not.

The anxieties we, as practitioners, may have, have often arisen from our own childhood – perhaps an adult has told us that we can't do something and our confidence has been knocked. This is certainly not something we want to repeat with the children in our care: a child who is able to follow their creative ideas and investigate and experiment freely is more likely to become a competent and confident individual with a love of learning that will continue through their lives. But equally, it is important that practitioners feel confident in experimenting, taking risks and developing their own ideas rather than anxious and uncertain, as they are the adults who will support children's creative development most effectively.

Creativity in practice

Encouraging practitioners to embrace their own creativity for the benefit of their young charges has been the goal of two Sussex-



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based projects in recent times, both of which paired early years staff with local artists. The Open Sesame project in West Sussex saw collaboration over the course of six months, with members of staff also taking part in a series of creative sessions with leading theatre practitioners. Nearby, in East Sussex, a Creative Partnerships-funded project took place over three years, and by its third year had stretched to include 10 artists and 20 settings in Hastings and St Leonards.

For the practitioners in West Sussex, the Open Sesame project provided opportunities to take a step back from their day-to-day experience and think about their approach in a new light. Creative sessions saw both artists and practitioners experimenting with art forms and techniques they were not familiar with, be it story-making, working with clay or den-building. The insight gained into developing stories and dramatic play through seeing the way that theatre practitioners devise their work – for example, through the use of Vivian Gussin Paley’s ‘Story Square’ (see panel), and the playful warm-up exercises and games employed in rehearsal – proved particularly useful. As well as being of use with the children on a day-to-day basis, these ideas were also helpful in building staff’s confidence in working creatively.

The project in Hastings was equally effective

in expanding practitioners’ creative horizons, and incorporated time for the artists and practitioners to reflect on what happened in the sessions, which in turn led to a fuller understanding of what was being achieved. One aspect of the project highlighted was how much both artists and practitioners could learn from children’s creativity too – one artist noted that whilst, as adults, we may think we know what should or will happen with certain resources, seeing them in the hands of a child using them for the first time can offer a new perspective.

Both projects demonstrated that with support, encouragement and permission, practitioners were keen to understand and use their creativity in their work with the children in their care – and, importantly, most felt that after working alongside artists and gaining a better understanding of their approach to creativity, their confidence in their creative abilities had improved.

Finding inspiration

Some of the activities that were explored in the Sussex projects have been written up as a practical guide for settings and artists which is available free at playnedesign.co.uk/books/early-years. Each example is presented as a printable double page spread that could be put up on the wall to give inspiration for creative activities. In each case, there is a starting point, ideas about how the starting point can be developed, including examples of how it was developed in that project, plus a list of resources. There is also a quick guide to documenting activities with a digital camera, and ‘top tips’ for success.

Of course, you might like to invite a local artist into your own setting, to nurture your team’s own creativity, so that you can in turn support that of your children. Judging by the success of the Sussex projects, it’s certainly something all creative settings should consider!

TRY: The Story Square

The ‘Story Square’ has developed from the work of Vivian Paley and her book *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter* (1991). The idea is to give children the opportunity to tell their own stories, because it is through stories that children come to understand the world.

To collect stories, an adult asks the children if they have a story to tell. If a child says yes, the adult listens and writes down the story exactly as the child tells it. If the child is happy to share the story, a square is marked out on the floor using masking tape and children are invited to sit around the edge of the square. The adult tells the story and asks children who want to be ‘in’ the story to take up the different characters (the child whose story it is doesn’t have to do this).

There are many ways to adapt and develop this process – a useful guide from Glasgow’s Citizens Theatre is available at tinyurl.com/7wq1t5k.

Working with children in this way validates their experiences, helps them to develop language skills by articulating their ideas, and supports collaboration in the acting out of the story in the square. The stories can be compiled in a book, with drawings or photographs added and used as a reading book in the setting.

find out more

Clare Halstead has 30 years’ experience working with children, artists and cultural organisations. Find out more about her work at clarehalstead.co.uk. For more information about working creatively with under-fives, and to get in touch with artists and arts organisations in your area, try the national Earlyarts network – visit earlyarts.co.uk