Chapter 1

Creativity: A Childhood Essential

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the relationship between creativity and human development from birth to eighteen years of age. The chapter begins by describing several fundamental developmental theories, including Sigmund Freud’s psychosexual stages of development, Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory, and Jean Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development. Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development Theory is also explored. The use of creativity in these theories and the relationship between these theories and creativity is also explored. After these theories are discussed, the importance of creativity will be highlighted by examining how creativity is developed, impacts cognitive, and social-emotional development in childhood. Creativity development is linked to pretend play, and it is important for parents to help nurture their child in an appropriate manner. Finally, this chapter explores how stimulating a child’s divergent thinking in early life will have a host of benefits in later life.

INTRODUCTION

Why is creativity important?

It’s a question that has been subject to endless debate among philosophers, psychologists, school teachers and performers alike. Creativity has undoubtedly influenced cultural institutions throughout the world from the beginning of time. For instance, consider the power of the muses on ancient Greek religion and God-worship, the impact of the belief that art and musical talent was bestowed upon an individual by God, Ancient Rome’s emphasis on the beautification of public spaces by artists and the creative inspiration Charles Darwin gleaned from his children’s play that fueled his research into evolution (Simonton, 2012, p. 4). While history has solidified the importance of creativity, the impact creativity
has on development throughout the lifespan and its importance in the psychological construction of the individual remains a hotly debated topic. Research thus far has yielded inconsistent findings and does not provide overwhelming evidence that activities associated with the use of creativity (such as pretend play, divergent thinking, and the use of art activities) significantly impact psychological development (Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013). Still, perhaps the effectiveness of creativity throughout the lifespan, especially in childhood when creative play and divergent thinking are most encouraged and practiced, cannot be completely measured by empirical research. However, the richness and importance of creativity in cognitive and social development can be examined in a psychological context through an analysis of the role creativity plays in various developmental theories. In order to understand how creativity plays a role in development, these theories must be thoroughly studied and understood. Although there are myriads of developmental theories, creativity is mostly reflected in the renowned developmental theories of Urie Bronfenbrenner, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. While these theories have been difficult to test through empirical study, they have earned their place in psychological history by being both widely believed and serving as the basis for a variety of more contemporary theories related to human development. Creativity arguably plays an important role in the daily application of each stage of these developmental theories, creating a plausible answer to the difficult question of the importance of creativity.

**What Is Creativity?**

Before creativity can be thoroughly discussed and examined, it is necessary to provide a definition of creativity. While creativity may be defined casually in a relatively simple fashion, the operational definition of creativity has been subject to much debate, especially in the scientific research community. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (as cited in Milbrandt & Milbrandt, 2011) defined creativity as “Any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain or that transforms an existing domain into a new one” (p. 27). While seemingly all inclusive, this explanation has been subject to criticism since it does not apply to the principal area where creativity is most commonly experienced: childhood. For example, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1966) definition may appear less relevant to children, since a child playing house rarely transforms the domain of family life; a child who is finger-painting rarely transforms the domain of fine art. In a different opinion, Ellen Dissanayake’s “What is Art for?” (as cited in Milbrandt et al., 2011) defined creativity simply as a survival mechanism used by ancestors to further the human race, asserting that humans would not have preserved the act of creative endeavors if these behaviors did not somehow further their survival (p. 1). However, many individuals would argue that creativity does much more than aid survival; it can be used as a tool to promote social change, express emotion and celebrate the trials and triumphs of life. Dissanayake (as cited in Milbrandt et al., 2011) argues that creativity cannot be operationally defined, since an individual’s creative capacity and cognition is influenced solely by his or her unique experiences (p. 1). To this day, the universal definition of creativity is still unclear; it can be used as a tool to promote social change, express emotion and celebrate the trials and triumphs of life. Dissanayake (as cited in Milbrandt et al., 2011) argues that creativity cannot be operationally defined, since an individual’s creative capacity and cognition is influenced solely by his or her unique experiences (p. 1). To this day, the universal definition of creativity is still unclear; however, in this chapter, creativity will be defined as any action or thought that encourages an individual to reach beyond the given objects or situations physically available. In addition, play may be used interchangeably with creativity while discussing the use of creativity in children before adolescence (under the age of ten) throughout the chapter. This is because play is one of the most widely used expressions of creativity in children and can be found in almost every culture (Milbrandt et al., 2011, p. 3).