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## **Teaching the 3Cs: Creativity, Curiosity & Courtesy**

**By Patricia Dischler**

In the world of early childhood there has been an increase in the pressure to teach the traditional 3 Rs: Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic. What was once the curriculum for first grade has become the standard for kindergarten classrooms, and what was once a kindergarten lesson is expected at the preschool level. Parents feel they should expect more, research shows kids are capable of more, and so standards get tighter and the pressure is on for early childhood teachers to deliver. The unfortunate result of this has been programs that focus on getting the academic results and that leave the basics for all learning behind. It is no surprise then that many programs are struggling, and that children in higher grades are being found to have little or no problem solving techniques and additional problems with social interactions. The missing link? Teaching the 3 Cs. Instilling in children a love for learning and a process for making decisions and solving problems while working with others begins with encouraging in them a sense of creativity, curiosity and courtesy.

The days for simple play and exploration in childhood seems to be gone. But for the new programs of advanced learning to be effective in any way children must be allowed the opportunity to build a basis for all learning, to get excited about what the possibilities are and what their part in it will be.

Teaching creativity to children is not only fun for the children and teachers, it opens doors to other learning. By letting children explore new possibilities with materials, activities and discussions, they can become masters of their own learning. Children have a natural curiosity but all too often it is quieted by a pre-disposed lesson plan or a busy personal schedule. Teachers that follow a child's natural curiosity and provide them the avenues to obtain the information they crave will find that more learning takes place in those moments than in a week's worth of planned activities. As children interact with each other and adults, modeling and requiring a standard of courtesy creates a sense of respect among all. Children who show respect and feel it will have a strong self-esteem and build successful relationships with peers and adults.

## CREATIVITY

Sparkling creativity in children opens the door to learning in every developmental area. When children think creatively they look beyond what is in front of them to see what could be. They explore from many different angles and engage all of their senses. This creative exploration can lead to successful problem solving, a broader understanding of topics taught, and a sense of appreciation for the world they live in.

To “teach” creativity is to embed a child’s day with options. To provide the physical environment to support creative action as well as provide the psychological

environment to support the quest for creative action. For teachers, this means not only providing appropriate materials, but creating an atmosphere that encourages the exploration of new ideas.

Without this basis of thinking creatively children are prone to merely *acquire* information – rather than have the skill to *do* something with this information. When children are supported in their creativity they are able to actively engage in the learning process. For example, it is more than learning there *are* numbers, but about learning what those numbers are capable of *doing*. How they interact, what they can represent, how they can be used to organize or represent objects and information.

In *More Help! For Teachers of Young Children*, author Gwen Snyder encourages teachers to look beyond the art project as their avenue for supporting creativity in children. She states, “The outstanding musician, writer, teacher, engineer, architect, scientist, athlete, inventor, business leader, and chef all have at least one thing in common. They are willing to look at the world with fresh eyes, to step beyond the way things have always been done and dare to imagine how they can be done differently. This is the very core of creativity.” (Snyder, 2006)

The ability to find new and exciting answers is often described as, “thinking outside of the box.” It is used to describe creative people or to encourage a group of adults to think creatively. But what exactly does it take to think outside of the box? There are several factors that affect creative thinking. They are:

- ⊘ Functional Freedom: Seeing items as having multiple uses.
- ⊘ Stimulus Freedom: Not being confined by rules.
- ⊘ Delay of Gratification: Knowing that time can change an outcome.

- ⇒ Balanced Brain: Using the right brain to discover possibilities, and the left brain to sort through these to find a solution.

Teachers can support creative thinkers by providing activities that support these four factors. Together, they give children the tools they need to explore their world with a creative eye and come to their own conclusions regarding their place in the world and their abilities to change it.

## CURIOSITY

Creativity and curiosity are intrinsically linked. One leads to the other, and vice versa. They are both important elements of problem solving. We begin by trying something new (creativity) then testing it to see what happens (curiosity). But also, the opposite can occur, where we begin by looking to discover all the possibilities (curiosity) then using this information in a new way (creativity) to solve our problem. It is this give and take between the two that can lead to many exciting and new revelations and possibilities. They are the keys for many an inventor, engineer, or philosopher in making new discoveries, inventions and solutions. Children who are given the freedom to stretch these abilities and explore their capabilities within them to the fullest will find their play to have a richer, deeper meaning and a higher sense of accomplishment. Ginger Carlson, author of *Child of Wonder* ties together curiosity and learning in this way: “Exploration is the foundation for developing a creative thinker.” (Carlson, 2008)

Given the importance of curiosity to the evolution of our society through new inventions and ideas, one would think it would hold a higher level of importance in our educational system. Unfortunately, we have moved to such results-oriented educational

experiences that instead of being provided an open field of exploration, our children are being lead down specific paths (both figuratively and literally!)

All too often, curriculums are filled with experiences for children that lead to specific results, rather than an open end. In an attempt to meet state early learning standards, activities are designed to lead children step by step through specific learning goals. Even the science experiments are meant to lead children to a predisposed conclusion, leaving curiosity far behind.

Children are learning to follow directions, to make the connections that have been laid out for them, but to think no further than that. An agenda has been set and, for many teachers, time is of the essence in teaching specific results to children. In my own daughter's middle school, the parent's were told that the previously taught English class was being completely changed in order to teach only what would be offered on the state tests they were expected to complete at the end of the year. The result was that free exploration of many topics was completely eliminated from the curriculum.

As the grade schools deal with the problem of creating curriculum to produce specific test results it becomes increasingly necessary for early childhood educators to avoid these pitfalls and work to establish a solid base of curiosity in children that can sustain their learning for years to come! In early childhood we feel these pressures to move into results based learning. But lucky for us, hidden deep under "Cognitive Development" in many of our state standards lay the opportunities to foster curiosity in children. Standards such as "Notices new things and people." "Investigates items closely." Or, "Asks questions and provides answers," all give us that window of opportunity to include curiosity activities into our program. For those states that have not

included such openings, it is still possible to bring curiosity back into our classrooms and back into childhood!

Joan Beck, who pioneered coverage of new research on brain development in the 1990's, and author of *How to Raise a Brighter Child*, reports that “a child has a built-in drive to explore, to investigate, to seek excitement and novelty, to learn by using every one of his senses, to satisfy his boundless curiosity. And this drive is just as innate as hunger, thirst, the avoidance of pain, and other drives previously identified by psychologists as primary.”

As with creativity, modeling curiosity becomes an important element in bringing it back into our children's lives. In *More Help! For Teachers of Young Children*, author Gwen Synder writes, “we live in a wonderfully fascinating world, and if we present it with a joyful spirit of exploration, we can help children keep their natural curiosity.” She shares with us just how simple this can be to do, simply by saying to our children, “Wow, this is exciting, I want to know more.” She calls this curiosity, “Food for the brain.” Children naturally feed off their curiosity to learn new things and accomplish new feats. (Synder, 2006)

We can support our children's natural ability to be curious, and to link this curiosity into creativity and problem solving, by supporting the following factors:

- ⊃ EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES: Wonder, experiment, tell stories.
- ⊃ EXPLORE THE WORLD: Fieldtrips and dress up.
- ⊃ ASK QUESTIONS: Who, what, why, when, where and how.

When we bring these factors into our classrooms and homes, we give our children the opportunities to cultivate their natural sense of curiosity, to build on their creativity and to become a problem solver.

## COURTESY

Courtesy is a dying attribute in today's society. Evidence of this is the fact that there are very few books that even discuss it. With the exception of the books by Emily Post, and her daughter Peggy, I found very few resources on this topic. I also found it interesting that there was a time many years ago that these books were found plentiful, yet over time the number diminished to the point of almost non-existence. I believe we've seen a direct correlation to this in our society, and specifically in our approach to teaching and caring for young children.

Sheryl Eberly, author of *365 Manners Kids Should Know*, shares her concerns, "For at least a generation, manners training in many homes seems to have been neglected." (Eberly, 2001)

But this cost is too high. Families are being torn apart by distance in our new world, and without some of the fundamental values encased in courtesy they begin to see no reason to put effort into maintaining these relationships and often let them die. Businesses are floundering with no sense among employees of responsibility as a group or from employers of loyalty to those who have served them for years.

Bringing a sense of responsibility and dependability between people begins with courtesy. Teaching our children to be kind and helpful to each other has a tremendous impact on society, yet it is missing in most curriculums in our nation.

Teaching courtesy has become such a novelty that you can even find one week lesson plans on “Good Manners” or “Friendship.” The risk in creating these units is that teachers see the topic as one to only give their attention to for a short period of time. Courtesy should be an integrated part of our everyday lives, in the way we teach, in the way we model relationships to each other, and in what we expect from children. Yet it has slipped away.

Opportunity for positive social interactions paired with strong adult modeling is a recipe for success that is an integral part of a specific movement towards keeping courtesy skills on the table lead by the Search Institute, a non-profit organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that specializes in research on children and youth.

In 1990, the Search Institute conducted a study of 47,000 children (grades 6-12), they discovered a list of attributes and experiences that indicate a child’s likeliness to succeed later in life, or “resources upon which a child can draw again and again” (Benson, Galbraith, Espeland, 1998).

The 40 Assets ® for Early Childhood are broken into two main categories: External and Internal. Among the 20 Assets that are designated as Internal Assets, courtesy plays a major role. Positive Values is an entire subsection of this category that addresses issues of courtesy including: #26 Caring; #27 Equality and Social Justice; #28 Integrity and #29 Honesty.

Much of the focus of the initiatives is to improve adult/child interactions, build strong role models, and create support systems for children. “The development of these values is a long process that entails many interactions between children and adults.” (Leffert, Benson, Roehlkepartain, 1997)

Teachers have long recognized the importance of these values, but have felt constrained by the Early Learning Standards adopted by their states. The 40 Assets ® Initiative allows them the opportunity to bring these values back into the classroom. Assets building is an approach, not a program. It provides a framework for action that encourages all individuals to make a difference. While this is good news for our elementary schools, these types of initiatives are a fairly new concept to early childhood programs. (For more information on the Search Institute visit: [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).)

Deborah McNelis, brain development expert, author, educator and creator of **braininsights**™ materials, points out that character education is essential in the early years, “A very critical time for emotional development to take place is from birth to 18 months. A child’s brain makes connections based on the experiences in their environment. The experiences that are repeated often are the connections that become the strongest.”

With these early brain connections being made so long before they reach us in an early childhood program, is it too late to change the child’s outcome? Not at all. According to McNelis, “The good news is that repetition can change the brain, so early care settings can provide the positive experiences all children need. The child that has had positive experiences early is going to get the reinforcement to continue a healthy emotional development that will lead to the aspects of courtesy. For the child that did not have positive opportunities early in life, the daily repetition of positive caring interactions in an early care setting can make changes to the early brain wiring. It takes a lot of consistency but the earlier it occurs, the better chance for making a change.”

Our role as models of courtesy and kindness is more important than ever. The children can't wait until grade school to experience character education, it needs to begin as early as possible.

Teaching courtesy to children is a process of modeling and encouraging four elements that support this behavior:

- ⊃ Dependability: Children can depend on you and can be dependable to others.
- ⊃ Kindness: Being nice never should go out of style.
- ⊃ Honesty: Create an environment where is okay to tell the truth, and they will.
- ⊃ Respect: Build an understanding of others, and respect will grow.

Teachers can help children to practice these values and provide a model for children to learn from.

I ask every reader to spend a few moments thinking back to their own childhood. Do you remember raiding your Dad's tools and scrap lumber to build a fort? Do you remember taking long hikes in the woods just hoping for an adventure? Do you remember just what family meant? It's time to get back to teaching these basics before they disappear altogether, but in a better way.

Teaching the 3Cs empowers teachers to bring back the basics and rebuild our children's future for the better. To give them a strong base to stand on: a desire to learn because learning is fun again, the ability to problem solve through creativity and curiosity, and a caring attitude as they reach for the sky.