GROWING UP CREATIVE
GROWING UP CREATIVE
Nurturing a Lifetime of Creativity

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C. E. F. Press
The Creative Education Foundation
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To Christene, my Petunia Patch

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BEAUTY is all about us, but how many are blind to it! They look at the wonder of this earth—and seem to see nothing. Each second we live in a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and will never be again. And what do we teach our children in school? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are?

You should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been a child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.

PABLO CASALS
All children are marvels. All children can be creative, and they can remain creative as adults. That is the basic philosophy of this book.

Growing up creative is not easy. I know from personal experience that we all must find our own ways to best use our creative energies. As a child I loved science. I studied chemistry in college and, though I graduated with top honors, I felt that something was missing. When the other research assistants and I would go to lunch with the professors, I noticed that our mentors could barely stop talking about their work. They exchanged ideas constantly, laughed about small setbacks or celebrated triumphs, and generally seemed consumed with interest in the subject. When we left the lunch table, it was always strewn with napkins showing hastily sketched diagrams and equations. That’s what was missing in me: an all-consuming love of chemistry.

I did feel that kind of love, however, when I began to study psychology and particularly the psychology of creativity. This, too, was science—but a fascinating science of people and how they create. The lesson I learned from my experience is the main point of this book: creativity is impossible without that inner spark.

As long as they have that spark, everyone can be creative. Creativity is not the sole province of “gifted” and “talented” people, although they may have greater potential that
can be used in creative ways. Creativity can and should be a part of the daily life of all children and adults.

Traditionally, writing and research on children’s creativity have emphasized talent, personality, and the training of special creativity skills. I believe that such an emphasis is misguided. The most crucial factor in creativity is the motivation to do something creative. Talent, personality, and skill tell us what a child can do; motivation tells us what that child will do.

Children’s social environment (at home and in school) can have a significant impact on their motivation. Practically speaking, focusing on the motivation to be creative can be much more useful than focusing on talent. It is much easier for parents and teachers to improve the child’s home and school environment than to change that child’s personality or drastically increase his store of talent.

In this book, you’ll learn:

- What children’s creativity is, and how you can recognize it
- The basic components of children’s creativity and stages of the creative process
- The importance of motivation in creativity
- How home and school environments can destroy children’s creativity
- Several specific techniques that parents and teachers can use to keep children’s creativity alive

The information and advice in this book comes from several sources:

First, my own thirteen years of research on creativity, as well as the work of dozens of other creativity researchers. My research has consisted of both laboratory experiments on creativity and field observations, with preschool children, el-
lementary school children, college students, creative writers, and other working adults.

Second, in-depth interviews I conducted with the novelist John Irving (author of *The World According to Garp* and several other books), the child-playwright Jason Brown (author of *Tender Places*), and Jason’s mother, Carol. In the interview with John Irving, I probed his memory of the environment in which he grew up, and the development of his own motivation for creativity. In the interviews with Jason Brown and his mother, I examined the actual ongoing childhood environment that nurtures this young boy’s creativity.

Third, talks I have had with dozens of parents and teachers. Some of these were formal interviews, some were informal discussions, some came during the course of work on my book *Psychological Research in the Classroom*, with Peggy Stubbs, and some occurred during question-and-answer periods after my speeches to parent and teacher groups (where the speaker often learns more than the audience).

Fourth, the autobiographies, biographies, journals, and letters of several famous creative people in a variety of fields.

Fifth, my postcollege experience teaching at St. Louis Elementary School in Pittsford, New York.

Sixth, my own life. My childhood home was highly conducive to creativity. My brother, my five sisters, and I were given a wide range of interesting, challenging experiences by our parents. As a result, our adulthoods show a rather high level of creativity. Among the seven siblings, there is an artist, a high school English teacher, a junior high school French teacher, an advertising copywriter, a psychology professor, an English professor, the director of a hospital’s cardiac rehabilitation unit, a lawyer, a doctor, a handicrafts expert, a journalist, two small-business owners, an accomplished cook, and two published writers. (I know that’s more than seven professions, but a number of us lead multiple lives.)
Finally, I have learned about children’s creativity by living and growing for seven years with my daughter, Christene.

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VISION AND PASSION

Get a clear, consistent vision of your child as an adult, and make sure the vision fits your child’s unique individuality.

True creativity is impossible without some measure of passion.
THE VISIONS THAT WE PRESENT TO OUR CHILDREN SHAPE THE FUTURE. THEY BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES. DREAMS ARE MAPS.

*Carl Sagan*

Imagine that it is a warm spring evening twenty years from now. You sit in your living room, listening to music, thinking about your children. You smile with relief at the realization that they have made it safely into adulthood. You think back on their growing-up years, glancing at the childhood photographs on the mantel. Then, to feed both your memory and your pride, you walk to the bookshelf and take down their college yearbooks. You open to the appropriate pages and find your grown children smiling out at you.

Can you see them? Can you picture these adult children of yours? Try to visualize the shape of your daughter’s face, the tilt of her head, the size of her hands. Try to imagine how tall your son will be, or what shape his mouth will have. Try to see your grown-up children looking at you, talking, laughing; try to project your college yearbook photographs onto your mental screen.

I have often tried this exercise with the face of my daughter, who is now seven—and I have always failed. The image goes in and out of focus, changing with the play of possibilities across it. Most people have trouble forming a picture of what a child will look like as an adult—even if that child is their own. And yet, when we look at the baby pictures of adults that we know, the resemblance is usually so close as
to be laughable. Of course this is what that baby face should have grown into! But we can’t do the same in reverse. We can’t develop a clear future picture of any child with that same sense of certainty.

Now try to imagine what kind of people your children will grow into. What is printed in those yearbooks about personality, hobbies, activities? What fields of study have your children chosen? Have they done anything creative in writing, art, business, science, drama?

You’ll probably find this exercise a bit easier than imagining your child’s grown face. You may already have drawn some conclusions about your son’s adult personality from the way he hides in his room with his gerbils and science books or charms the neighbors into buying candy from his Boy Scout troop. You may have some information about your future daughter from having watched her take out the paint box every day after school or challenge her classmates to footraces. By watching carefully, you can develop a clear image of what your child will be—in terms of personality, values, attitudes, interests, accomplishments.

This is your vision for your child—the image you have of where that child is going, what that child will be. You may think that it doesn’t matter very much what you imagine for your son or daughter, that they will turn out in some predetermined way regardless of what vision you have in your mind. But it does matter, a great deal. Your vision can shape how happy, productive, and creative your child will be.

Why should you care about your child’s creativity? Because all of human progress requires adult creativity, and people are more likely to do creative work as adults if they develop the skill and the motivation for creativity as children.

But there are other good reasons to care about creativity in children. One of my favorite cartoons shows a wizened old man with his finger raised. The caption: “‘It was hell,’ recalls former child.” Childhood isn’t easy. Creativity can make it more fun and easier to cope with. Contrary to some popular
views, doing creative work does not mean living a neurotic, unhappy life. Highly creative people tend to be quite strong and flexible emotionally. In fact, some psychologists say that creativity and psychological health go hand in hand.

**VISION:**
**THE PABLO CASALS STORY**

You may have heard the word *vision* from successful corporate executives. Researchers who have looked for differences between creative corporations and stagnant ones have found a consistent pattern: The creative winners are headed by leaders who have a clear vision for their corporation, a vision that goes beyond next quarter’s earnings or this month’s production schedule. These leaders have a vision of where the organization is going, what it will be in five or ten years, and what it will have accomplished. Their visions are bold and optimistic, and are clearly communicated to every single member of the organization.

You, as parent and as teacher, are a leader. Probably more than any single thing you will do or say to your children, the vision you have for each of them will be crucial in the development of their motivation, creativity, and ultimate achievement. You communicate that vision in what you say about them and their future, in your reactions to their achievements large and small, in your approval or disapproval of choices they make, and even in your comments about children, adults, and life in general.

What kind of parental vision can inspire your children to creative achievement, give them confidence and self-esteem, lead them to develop a firm guiding vision of their own lives?

First, your vision should be clear with respect to basic life principles. You, yourself, should have a firm notion of the values, standards, and principles you would like your children to follow throughout life.
Second, your vision for each child should be shaped by the temperament, personality, needs, and interests of that particular child. It does no good (and a great deal of harm) to develop a vision of your son as a physician if his interests lie in the arts rather than the sciences, and if he would rather work by himself than with others. Pushing children into activities that do not fit them as individuals can cause them a great deal of anger and frustration and can lead to a sorry waste of their real talents. This is perhaps the simplest and most straightforward principle of child guidance, yet a disturbingly large number of people seem unaware of it.

Third, whatever the other specifics of your vision, you should imagine your adult children as independent and passionately interested in whatever work they choose. Of all the characteristics of well-known creative people, independence and passion are the ones that appear most consistently across different fields and through different generations.

The story of Pablo Casals, the world-renowned cellist, composer, and conductor, gives us an inspiring example of parental vision. Pablo’s mother, Pilar, though not a musician herself, recognized in her son both a high level of musical talent and a great interest in all aspects of music. While Pablo’s father failed to envision any future for his son in music (though he was a musician himself), Pablo’s mother developed a firm and clear vision of the contribution her son might make to the world through his music. That vision helped Pablo develop one of his own, one that carried him through an astonishingly successful career of more than eighty years. In his autobiography, he says:

It was a truly remarkable thing. My mother had had some musical training, but she was not of course a musician in the sense my father was. Yet she knew what my future was to be. She knew; and she always acted
on the knowledge with a firmness and certainty and calmness that has never ceased to amaze me.

This mother’s vision was built on a keen understanding of her child’s special qualities. After hearing a cello for the first time, Pablo was filled with a fervor to learn the instrument. Pablo’s father was not moved by his son’s pleas, but his mother’s reaction was quite different:

My mother understood what had happened. She told my father, “Pablo shows such enthusiasm for the cello that he must have the chance really to study it. There is no teacher here in Vendrell who is qualified to teach him properly. We must arrange for him to go to the School of Music in Barcelona.”

Casals describes the impact of his mother’s vision:

If it had not been for my mother’s conviction and determination that music was my destiny, it is quite conceivable that I would have become a carpenter.

Notice two important features of Pilar Casals’s vision for her young Pablo. First, it was quite clear. She saw her son as a musician, as someone whose life focused on giving great music to the world. Second, that well-defined vision did not develop from some fantasy the mother had, some wish that had nothing to do with reality. Rather, it developed from her close and loving observation of her son as an individual with his own particular skills and interests.

Pablo Casals was, of course, quite precocious, in both the development of his skill and the development of his interest.
Few very young children display such definite passion for a given pursuit. And *passion* is the word for it:

Music was inside me and all about me; it was the air I breathed from the time I could walk. To hear my father play the piano was an ecstasy for me. When I was two or three, I would sit on the floor beside him as he played, and I would press my head against the piano in order to absorb the sound more completely.

This early rapture with music would develop into a specific passion for the cello while Pablo was still a boy:

When I was eleven years old, I heard the cello played for the first time. From the moment I heard the first notes, I was overwhelmed. I felt as if I could not breathe. There was something so tender, beautiful, and human—yes, so very human—about the sound. I had never heard such a beautiful sound before. A radiance filled me. When the first composition was ended, I told my father, “Father, that is the most wonderful instrument I have ever heard. That is what I want to play.”

This kind of passionate interest is the hallmark of true adult creativity. It is described again and again by researchers who have worked with outstandingly creative people. It is what leads some people to do creative work even when they are living in dire circumstances. People sometimes think such incidents mean that suffering contributes to creativity, that insecurity, hunger, and cold somehow strengthen the
soul or sharpen the senses. Not at all. Researchers have no evidence that genius will flourish under conditions of physical deprivation. But we do have evidence that extremely creative people are possessed; they are possessed with a constant desire to do their work, to say something through it, to leave some lasting contribution. If a starving artist does a series of masterpieces, it is not because of the starvation, but in spite of it.

PASSION FOR LEARNING: THE ISAAC ASIMOV STORY

If they will one day be creative, must all children show the kind of passion demonstrated by young Pablo Casals—sharp, burning, and focused on a specific field? No. Most creative work in the world is done by people who did not show such extraordinary passion as children. But children can learn to develop that kind of focused interest in doing something for its own sake—because it is intriguing, challenging. Often this kind of passion begins to show up in children as a love of learning. All children are born curious.

Consider the childhood of Isaac Asimov, the famous writer of science and science fiction who now has nearly three hundred books to his credit. Because his family emigrated to the United States when he was three, he had to pick up English on his own, through daily life in Brooklyn. This kind of situation is not terribly unusual. But young Isaac was so strongly curious about everything around him that he soon began to puzzle over newspapers, street signs, and anything else that had words on it. For months, he hounded his older playmates into teaching him the alphabet, demonstrating the sounds that letters made, and telling him if he was correct as he tried to sound out words. He was so consumed with curiosity that he even figured out the role of silent letters. (He and his mother were on a train to Coney
Island, and he soon realized, by listening to people chatting about their destination, that the s in that strange second word was not supposed to be pronounced.

So it was that Isaac Asimov learned to read before the age of five, even though his father could not read English, his mother could not speak English, he had no older siblings, and he had not yet started school. Within a year, he had gotten his first library card and was withdrawing as many books as he was allowed, as frequently as he was allowed.

Obviously, Asimov was different from Casals in terms of how specific his childhood interests were. Casals was playing the cello quite well by the age of twelve. Asimov was not writing science fiction quite well (or at all) by the age of twelve. But, much earlier than that, he was beginning to show a passion of one type—the love of learning, which all children share. It is this that gives parents and teachers the most promising foundation for building in their children a lifelong passion for learning and creating.

**ORDINARY CHILDREN CAN DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS: THE JASON HARMAN STORY**

You may believe that your child has some very special talents, but you may also see a considerable gap between the formidable talents of Casals or Asimov and the skill that your child displays. Certainly, if either of these geniuses were to appear as a student in a good American school system of today, he would be identified as unusually gifted. Most children, perhaps yours included, are not identified as extremely gifted at an early age. But this doesn’t mean that your child cannot do extremely creative work as an adult. Most creative work is done by people who were not called geniuses as children. We would be making a terrible mistake if we
focused all our hopes for creativity on the few young prodigies of the world.

Even people who actually do creative work as children often seem quite ordinary in many respects. Jason Hardman was ten years old in 1980 and seemed much like any other bright, interesting boy when he moved with his family to Elsinore, a tiny town in Utah. There was only one thing about Elsinore that Jason really disliked: the nearest library was in a town six miles away, and they would only let him borrow three books a week. So, simply to feed his own interest and enjoyment in reading, this ordinary boy did an extraordinarily creative thing: he started his own public library.

Jason began by investigating the storeroom that held books from Elsinore’s last public library (which had been closed for several years due to lack of funds). With his parents’ encouragement, he appeared before the town council and asked their permission to use the books and an unfinished room in the town hall basement. He then phoned the mayor daily to ask for a decision. Once permission was granted, he enlisted the help of volunteers to clean the room, wire it for electricity, and build bookshelves. Jason collected books from anyone he could convince to make a donation. And then, just as he had dreamed, Jason opened his library with the four thousand books he had gathered and his homemade cataloging system. He ran the whole operation after school every afternoon.

Before long, people all over the country were reading newspaper and magazine articles about Jason’s achievement. He was asked to testify at a congressional hearing about the needs of rural libraries in America. He appeared on “The Tonight Show” and “Good Morning America,” received a full scholarship to the University of Southern California, addressed the Utah State Legislature, and, finally, was given an award in the White House by President Ronald Reagan.

Yet none of that had been part of Jason’s original vision.
He was not labeled as a genius in school, and he had not previously shown any particular talents for leadership or creative achievement. He simply had a strong interest in reading and a dream. He also had parents who knew how to recognize his interest, nurture his dream, and provide him with an environment where his creativity could blossom.

**SHAPE THE VISION**

The first step for you to take in developing a vision for your child is to find out what the child's own vision is for the future. Here is an exercise designed to help you. It is most appropriate for children over the age of six or so, although you can adapt it for younger children. Ask your child to answer these questions, or answer them as you think your child would.

**FUTURE PERFECT**

1. I am thirty years old, and I've been out of college for eight years. It's the year _____.

2. My occupation is:

3. I live in:

4. The things I like to do best are:

5. At work, I'm really good at:

6. At home, I'm really good at:

7. Here's what I like most about my life:

8. This is the kind of thirty-year-old person I am:
9. The most important thing I learned from my parents was:

10. The thing I like best about myself is:

Now have a go at writing out your vision for your child. The following exercise will help you put together the elements of your vision:

YOUR VISION FOR YOUR CHILD

1. How has this child surprised you?

2. In what ways is this child different from your other children, or other children you know?

3. List the things this child most enjoys doing.

4. List the things this child is best at.

5. In what activities does this child currently show creativity?

6. In what fields and areas of adult life do you think this child might show creativity?

7. List the major values, standards, and principles you would like your child to follow throughout life.

8. What is your vision of this child as an adult? List everything you consider important.
As we look deeper into the issues of children’s creativity and how it can be nurtured, try to keep your vision firmly in mind. And remember: No matter what you give your child in terms of education, skill development, materials, instruments, or interesting experiences, you are missing out on the most important element if you do not help your child develop a deep sense of interest and excitement about learning. Without that sense, your child could end up as one of those promising, talented, advantaged people who somehow drift through life with their promise unfulfilled. But with that sense, your child has a good chance of developing the kind of passion that can carry a person through rigorous training, repeated failure, financial struggle—even a little starvation—to the glory of full-blown adult creativity.