

Creativity, Kids, and One-Eyed Ogres: How to Raise Creative Children

By T.A. Barron
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“Look, Dad. There’s a one-eyed ogre on your pillow!”

“A what?” I asked, still half asleep.

“An ogre,” declared my seven-year-old daughter. “Right there on your pillow.”

That’s a typically atypical wake up call around our house. On that particular morning, my exuberant little girl had woken up early, fashioned a colorful ogre out of clay, and decided to share it with her lucky father. The ogre, she informed me in a matter-of-fact tone, would eat only spiders, wizards, and parking meters: No Atkins diet for this fellow.

The ogre was named Balor (after a character in one of my books). But her behavior that morning also has a name: Creativity.

Just what is creativity? And how can we, as parents and teachers, best encourage it in our children?

After nearly two decades of raising our five children, my wife and I have learned a few things about that spark of creativity. And how to fan it into flames. Flames that will, we hope, continue to warm and inspire for an entire lifetime.

Here is my Creativity Top Ten—the ten most important things anyone can do to encourage a child’s creativity:

1. **BE CREATIVE IN YOUR OWN LIFE.** By setting a good example, you invite children to follow your lead. So honor your own creative impulses: read, sing songs, ask questions, scribble, paint pictures, tell jokes, make up stories, write poems, imitate a howling wolf—whatever you like. By experiencing the freedom, as well as the sheer delight, of creativity, you’ll inspire those around you to do the same.

2. **READ ALOUD.** Believe me, this is one of the most powerful sparks of creativity. When you read a book or short story or poem, with genuine feeling, you are opening the door to your children’s imagination. And you are also encouraging them to explore the wider worlds of literature, language, ethics, and ideas. Worlds that have no limits, no boundaries, and no end of inspiration. On top of all that, reading together is just plain fun—a kind of sharing that is emotional and physical as well as intellectual.

Whatever genre you choose—heroic tales, humor, mystery, imaginary worlds, classics, folklore—by reading aloud, you are also tapping into one of humanity’s most primal experiences. Throughout time, people have shared their ideals, adventures, and dreams through the spoken word. Whether it’s around an ancient campfire or around your modern dining table, sharing stories is one of humanity’s most hallowed traditions. And most creative experiences.

3. SURROUND YOUR KIDS WITH CREATIVITY. Make your home a place that invites creative play and exploration. No need to spend a bunch of money! In fact, just the opposite: Unstructured play materials are no more complicated than old magazines, modeling clay, building blocks, puzzles, spare clothes, marking pens, cardboard, and colored paper. Plus a few books with good ideas on how to make origami, puppets, pinwheels, papier mache, window gardens, homemade fossils—and of course, tasty desserts such as fudge brownies. And, for many creative activities, you need no materials or preparation at all. For example, why not take a virtual vacation to a dream destination that you and your child make up together? Just like your imaginations, the possibilities are limitless.

Computers, too, have an important place. There are some wonderful educational programs available, designed to encourage artistry, problem solving, and creative thinking. But computers can also be easily misused: There are too many passive and repetitive—not to mention excessively violent—games and websites out there. Despite the valuable place that computers have in our homes and schools, they still have limitations—enough that you needn’t hesitate sometimes to log off and reach for the modeling clay.

4. FAN THOSE CREATIVE FLAMES. Whenever you have a chance to support your child’s creativity, do it! Listen, try not to judge, and encourage wild ideas now and then. If an innovative project doesn’t work out, don’t fret: Rather, celebrate the underlying creativity, and help the child try again. After all, Thomas Edison tried hundreds of ways to make incandescent bulbs, which failed miserably, until at last he succeeded—and lit up the world.

5. RECORD IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES. Learning how to translate thoughts into words and pictures is a crucial step on the path to creativity. Writing and drawing are also valuable ways to build self-confidence and communication skills. Whenever our family takes a trip, our children get a journal, some colored pens, and a whole lot of encouragement to record their experiences however they choose. The result is a family trip that is also a creative process—as well as a means to lifelong memories.

6. TURN OFF THE TELEVISION. As entertaining and educational as television can sometimes be, it is too often mind-numbing, demeaning, and a waste of time. Worse, it is perilously easy to become just a passive viewer of other people’s ideas, rather than an active creator of one’s own ideas. It may be hard, at first, to turn the thing off, and keep it off, but the results will be impressive. You’ll have better readers, better thinkers—and yes, better creators.

7. EXPERIENCE NATURE. What is more healing, restorative, and inspirational than time outdoors? Nature beckons us to open up our senses, to observe the world with all its patterns and mysteries, and to stretch ourselves to the fullest. And to expand our awareness—as William Blake said so beautifully, “to see Heaven in a grain of sand.” Most important, when you and your child stand under an ancient, towering tree—or, even better, under the stars—you can feel, at once, both very small and very large. You can feel deeply humbled by the vastness of Creation and yet deeply connected to it all.

8. TALK ABOUT CREATIVE PEOPLE. Call them heroes, if you like. There’s simply no more powerful way to convey the virtues of creativity than to provide some real-life role models. Tell your kids about the extraordinary creativity of Albert Einstein, Anne Frank, Thomas Edison, Marie Curie, Helen Keller, Abraham Lincoln, Confucius, Mohandas Gandhi, Wolfgang Mozart, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Goddard, John Muir, Harriet Tubman, Chief Joseph, Stephen Hawking, Socrates, Claude Monet, Jane Goodall, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—to name but a few.

Or, if you prefer, tell them about creative young people—such as the ones who have won the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, a national award that I founded a few years ago (and named after my mother, one of the most creative people I’ve known). You can find descriptions of the diverse winners at www.barronprize.org.

9. DON’T OVER-SCHEDULE. Being busy isn’t the same things as being creative. In fact, it can sometimes be an obstacle. If every minute of a child’s day is filled with scheduled activities, where is the time needed to play, to dream, and ultimately to create?

10. CREATIVITY IS A WAY OF LIFE. More than just a set of skills, creativity is a value, a fundamental approach to the world. To live creatively is to enhance your own self-concept and your power to affect your surroundings. It means that your ideas and choices matter—just as you yourself matter.

Today, our kids are bombarded with commercial messages that treat them as nothing more than consumers: Wear this, eat that, own these. But our children deserve better! They deserve to see themselves not just as consumers, but as creators. Of their own choices, their own lives—and their own world.

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T.A. Barron’s newest book, *The Great Tree of Avalon*, features three courageous—and creative—young heroes.