

THE INNOVATIVE PARENT

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Preface

The task of parenting is like passing a baton from one generation to the next.

We all inherited a baton from our parents, which they inherited from theirs, and so on. Our parents did the best they could with whatever baton they were dealt. Perhaps they added decorative ribbons. Or made some cracks of their own in it. We were handed that baton—varnish, barbed wire, splinters, colorful paint, and all. We start with this.

When we parent, we pass the baton to our children. What we hand to them, in part, is what we have inherited. But we can improve upon what we pass on to them. We can remove tattered ribbons. Sand down splinters. Polish it. Attach embellishments of our own. It won't be perfect, but it can be better than before. And our children will have the same chance to make it better yet, for their children.

This process of change requires innovation—creative thinking, experimentation, and learning from mistakes for improvement. Innovative parenting is a state of mind. It requires stretching yourself as a person. It means trying something different so that your children will do the same.

Drawing, painting, cutting, taping, tearing, building, destroying, mixing, scraping, attaching, tracing, smearing, pounding, scratching, stamping, sticking, bending, sewing, dripping. Making art not only reflects what is going on inside but also has the capacity to transform it. As such, it holds a wealth of potential for enriching the lives of our children, as well as our own. I see this regularly in my art therapy practice and workshops, and at home with my own children. The experience of making, observing, and talking about art nurtures developing minds, emotional worlds, and relationships.

What's more, research supports this.

This book pulls together anecdotal experience from years of clinical art therapy practice with children, teens, and parents, along with research from the fields of psychology, child development, creativity, anthropology, and neuroscience. It offers insight into children's art as something more than refrigerator decor. We will explore how making and talking about art can help children make sense of emotions, build connections with others, cultivate empathy, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, process and retain information, and more. These are complex

x aspirations for something as seemingly simple as making art, yet therein lies the beauty of art for furthering the goals of parenting. It is wonderfully simple and doable. And fun. Good news for not-so-artsy folks: this book is for you, too.

Far from being an arts and crafts book, *The Innovative Parent* is about breaking the conventional mold of parenting by applying creative thinking and exercises to raising children. At its essence, it's about becoming an innovative parent. It not only offers creative tools for raising connected, happy, and successful kids but also empowers you to find your own creativity to survive tough times during the day and access parenting skills that you possess but lose in the moment—when stressed, tired, or overwhelmed.

While this book is written for parents, it is also for anyone who cares for or works with children or adolescents: grandparents, caregivers, mentors, and professionals in education, mental health, community arts, health care, recreation, social services, spiritual care, and more. It empowers all to nurture kids with art, whether by opening communication, building tolerance for frustration, or teaching limits and responsibility. After all, the skills that children master when making and talking about art will last well beyond the activity itself and apply to other facets of their lives. Likewise, the skills that we adults master, when facilitating projects and commenting on art, will seep into other interactions with our children, helping us become more versatile, attuned, and resourceful as parents.

This book focuses primarily on the use of visual arts to help you achieve your parenting goals. However, you will also find research and techniques involving movement, music, storytelling, theater, and writing. The undeniable benefits and ease with which you can apply these other art forms will provide you with additional tools and inspiration for your parenting adventure. You may even find yourself shifting from surviving to thriving in this creative process called parenting.

Here's to happy, healthy, and successful children, for generations to come. And here's to you, the innovative parent.



Talk Less. Draw, Dance, and Sing More

WHY ART?

I need to get ready for work. My daughter needs my attention. I need a shower. She needs a snack. A cuddle. A book. A round of, “Let’s pretend we’re mermaids running away from the shark.” I need to be out the door in 30 minutes, and I need a plan. Redirecting her to look at a book or play with her toys by herself isn’t working. She wants time with me, and those won’t satisfy. Television would work. No question. It’s tempting. I resist. “I know! How about you draw a picture of us being mermaids running away from the shark, and when I get out of the shower you can show it to me!” She’s elated and runs off to draw.

There are many options for responding to children. Experts generally agree that some approaches are better than others; however, there are still many “best practices” from which to choose. More often than not, parenting is an exercise in trial and error. Because of this, it’s important to be versatile. Parenting with the arts in mind allows you to be that versatile parent.

In the example above, there were many options for getting my needs met: distracting, reasoning, firmness, bribery. But this scenario (as with most all scenarios involving children) was not just about *my* needs. It was also about *hers*. A parenting moment like this is as much about nurturing connection, emotional health, and cognitive development as it is about getting out the door. I was leaving for work. She needed connection (probably *because* I was leaving for work). Neither reasoning,

2 bribery, firmness, or distraction would have addressed her need. Art, on the other hand, could.

Art expresses and addresses internal needs

Inviting my daughter to draw us as mermaids wasn't just about keeping her occupied (as television would). Drawing allowed her to express something about our relationship through drawing us together. It allowed her to symbolically "play" with me on paper, as mermaids. It bonded us in our escape from the shark. It also gave her something to create that she could look forward to sharing with me when I was available again. On these many levels, it addressed her need for connection.

Art has high nutritional value

Art is a nutritionally dense activity that imparts skills leading to greater social, emotional, and cognitive health (Catterall 2005). It involves imagination, creativity, problem solving, self-expression, risk taking, self-worth, and the making of meaning. It can develop fine and gross motor skills. It can promote focus, critical thinking skills, and tolerance of differences (Curva et al. 2005). It can even help us learn and remember information as well as perform better in a variety of academic subjects (Asbury and Rich 2008). Joint creative activities promote skills necessary for cooperation and communication (Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles 2000).

Art is a child's home turf

I entered my daughter's world by inviting her to draw about us instead of trying to explain for the nth time why I couldn't play with her. Art is a language that makes sense to kids and teens. In fact, it has been said that art is our *first* language. Babies scribble and clap or bounce to music before they can talk. They recognize words more readily if paired with a melody than when spoken (Thiessen and Saffran 2009). Children will often create art simply because some stimulus is in their view that provokes interest, whether markers and paper, a drum, or natural objects and string. Kids learn best through hands-on experiences of the world, which the arts provide (UNICEF 1994), and will naturally explore, express, take in, and process more through play and the creative arts than they will through talking. Creative arts therapists and play therapists have been on to this for a while.

Lawrence Cohen (2002), author of *Playful Parenting*, describes play as a magical place where children can truly be themselves. Art is much the same. I've heard children describe their experience of making art as a place where they can feel free to express their own ideas and feel better. The respected anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (1992) asserts that art has supported our survival as a species because it helps us make meaning, self-express, and bond as a community during difficult times. Indeed, art is much more than a pretty picture or a song well played. It is fundamental to who we are.

For our purposes, we will define art as the use of some tool or medium (be it paint in the visual arts, instruments in music, or the body in dance) and a creative or imaginative process. Together, these invite expression of one's internal world, exploration of the external world, or an investigation of the relationship between the two. Art may intend to communicate to another or be entirely self-exploratory. It may be functional or not. Art always involves a process and often, though not always, creates a product. So, rather than thinking about art as an equation where Paint + Canvas = A Painting, or Flute + Breath = Music, we will explore how art is integral to our lives and well-being.

Tool + Creative Expression = Exploration, Making Meaning, and Communication

This is an equation that has everything to do with parenting. And this is why it makes sense that we should all talk a little less, and draw, dance, and sing a little more.

WHEN WORDS AREN'T ENOUGH

"Can we talk, sweetheart?"

"Yeah," grunts my son.

"When you don't like what someone is doing, don't do it back to them . . . [pause] . . . It doesn't solve anything . . . [he nods] . . . If a kid is bothering you, you can say 'Stop' or 'I don't like that' but calling names back just makes the situation worse . . . [pause] . . . Do you understand what I'm saying?" . . . [he nods] . . . Or you can walk away . . . [pause] . . . Come tell us if there's a problem."

"Okay," he says.

"Do you understand?" I double-check.

"Yes," he affirms. "Next time I'll just annoy them back."

Cue: deep breath. Clearly, my words were not enough. Or, perhaps, they were too much. I grab a piece of paper and draw a stop sign. "When someone calls you a name, tell them to 'Stop.' And then stop yourself from saying anything else, and walk away . . . [pause] . . . What will you do next time someone calls you a name?" Now I hold my breath.

"Say 'Stop.' Then stop and walk away."

Bingo!

Talking to children is crucial to their development. Groundbreaking research by Hart and Risley (1995) connects higher IQ and academic performance to greater numbers of words spoken by caregivers to children from birth to age three. As children get older, talk remains important for developing vocabulary, communicating interest, setting limits, teaching problem solving, connecting, and more. But more talk is not always better, as the example above shows. Adults tend to overtalk to children, particularly when it comes to problem solving, addressing uncomfortable

4 feelings, and setting limits. Whether or not we care to admit it, our words of wisdom can be ineffective, if not irritating.



TRY THIS:

In a moment you will read a short sentence. As you read it, pretend that someone is saying it to you. Take a minute to notice any thoughts, emotions, or sensations that arise. Close your eyes if you'd like to do so, and repeat the sentence in your mind. Ready? Here it is:

“Can I talk to you?”

What did you notice?

Now, let's do this exercise again. You will read a different sentence this time. Again, imagine someone saying this to you and notice any thoughts, emotions, or sensations that arise. Here it is:

“Can I show you something?”

What did you notice this time?

Many people experience anxiety or defensiveness in response to the first question, while the second produces curiosity and openness. I see this with couples in my practice. Although intended as an invitation to connect, “Can we talk?” is often met with resistance or defensiveness. Many have learned (starting in childhood) that talking indicates a problem (in other words: “Uh oh. I'm in trouble.”). Even before children learn to tune out talking for self-preservation, they may tune out because it's difficult for them to absorb too much verbal information at once. Kids can also feel emotionally overloaded. A heart-to-heart can feel intense and leave kids feeling vulnerable. When we talk, we're playing on our home turf, not theirs.

Then there are times when we remind our kids to do something, over and over again. When it comes to multiple reminders, children aren't necessarily tuning out because they are overwhelmed. They don't listen because, frankly, it's pointless—more reminders are coming, so why bother now?

Of course, there are ways to talk effectively to kids and break the cycle of non-productive communication. There are many worthwhile books that give practical tips on how to listen and talk to children. Yet even with these talk-based approaches, talking as a means of nurturing children—socially, emotionally, and cognitively—still has inherent limitations. Even in my best therapist-mommy moments when I am entirely present and empathic, if one of my children is upset, my verbal attempts are often met with grunts or with running and hiding.

Words aren't enough to build connection

Talking does not guarantee connection. Just as people have different learning styles, they also have preferred ways of connecting. While some people connect through a chat, others prefer physical proximity, a shared activity, or a symbolic gesture, such

as an offering of food or a gift. For most children, play and art are the primary ways of developing connection with others. Art making buffers the discomfort that can accompany difficult conversations. It offers a language of metaphor and fantasy to which children can relate. It provides for symbolic acts of connection through gift giving. Art making can be a shared activity. Unlike talking, the creative arts provide limitless ways to build connection and communication with children. (Chapter 4: “Connect First” explores building connection and communication through art.)

Words aren’t enough to build emotional health

When it comes to nurturing emotional health, talking also has limits. We’ve all had the experience of not being able to communicate clearly what we are feeling with words alone. Even if we can find the words, we may not feel comfortable sharing them. Other times, we’re not at all aware of how we are feeling. Feelings can elude us. This makes it difficult to communicate them, let alone to understand and work through them.

Words are also limiting in that they can easily lead to misassumptions of someone else’s experience. While we all have a general sense of what feeling “down” means, my feeling “down” and your feeling “down” may in fact feel quite different to each of us. What if my “down” looked like an overcast day, and your “down” looked like a hurricane? As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. The creative arts can allow kids to express much more about their emotional experiences than words alone can. (For more on maximizing emotional health through the creative arts, see chapter 5: “Raise Happy Kids.”)

Words aren’t enough to build a foundation of success

Finally, talking is also a limited tool for educating children, whether we are teaching academics or important lessons of life. The brain is wired more for active engagement than for passive absorption of information (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). When we talk and expect children to listen and learn, we’re missing a big piece of how they absorb information. There are different learning styles to consider when we think about the best way to teach a child (seeing, hearing, or doing). While some have a specific preference, many children benefit from a combination of all three approaches (e.g., Brown et al. 2003; Dunn et al. 2009). The creative arts provide this. Whether it’s the tactile experience of certain art materials, the physical experience of movement, or the auditory experience of making or listening to music, the creative arts engage the senses to sustain attention, build associations for learning and retention, and develop observation and problem-solving skills in a way that talking and listening cannot. (For more on enhancing cognitive and academic performance through art, see chapter 6: “Raise Successful Kids.”)

Before we look more specifically at how the creative arts can address our goals of connection, emotional health, and academic success, let’s first consider your personal short- and long-term parenting goals.

6 KEEP PARENTING GOALS IN MIND

“Who wants to do a special project?” my husband, Mathew, inquires. He is in charge of the kids for the afternoon and is taking stock of his short-term goals: 1) keep the two older kids from killing each other, 2) attend to the youngest, 3) make dinner, and 4) maybe, just maybe, get some work done.

Mathew doesn't like art much. He doesn't understand it and feels that he isn't very good at it. To him, art + kids = mess. And yet, he brings out the markers and paper, on which he has printed each child's name in block letters vertically down the left side of a page. On another sheet of paper are lists of traits and strengths, all starting with letters from their respective names. They are going to make name poems.

“Here's what you get to do. Decorate each letter of your name. Then, choose one word for each letter of your name from this list. Pick words that describe you. We will write that word next to the letter.” The kids rush to the table to begin.

(We'll return to this story in a moment.)

Short-term goals involve shaping behaviors, avoiding problems, or de-escalating situations that have already gotten out of hand. Getting your kids out the door in the morning, resolving sibling conflicts, and avoiding power struggles over bedtime are common short-term goals. Long-term goals, on the other hand, involve nurturing qualities that you believe are important to the development of character, such as self-motivation (getting out the door), thoughtfulness toward others (sibling squabbles), and problem solving and collaboration (conflicts over bedtime). These goals facilitate long-term social, emotional, and cognitive health.

Our methods for achieving our short-term goals need not be out of alignment with our long-term goals—yet often they are. While few, if any of us, would say that our long-term goals are to nurture compliant adults, the fact is that, in the moment, compliance is what we want. As a result, we intervene in ways to achieve quick resolution, order, or agreement. This can put short-term goals of behavior management at odds with long-term goals of character development.

Luckily, the arts can facilitate both short- and long-term parenting goals simultaneously.

Returning to the story above:

Later that evening, I ask my husband, “So, what inspired you to do an art project with the kids?”

“To impress you,” he jokes. “Actually, I thought learning the different words for characteristics would help expand their vocabulary. But more importantly, I hoped it would help them think about their strengths. I thought it would be good for their self-esteem.”

My husband's short-term goals (entertaining the kids) and longer-term values (education and positive sense of self) could be met simultaneously through this creative activity. Here are some other examples: Dancing to the car together (instead of cajoling your child to leave the park, pretending to leave her, or carrying her out kicking and screaming), gets your child to the car (short-term goal) while teaching her that she is capable of positively transitioning from a preferred activity to a less-preferred activity (long-term goal). Making a collage about going to a new school, rather than offering bribes for going or laying down the law, can help decrease morning meltdowns (short-term goal) while providing an opportunity to process difficult feelings about change (long-term goal). It takes some creativity on our part, which can feel time-consuming, but it's far less tiring than fighting the same battles over and over again. And it allows us to parent today in a manner that is consistent with our hopes for tomorrow.

While it may feel foreign at first to use creative arts strategies in parenting, these approaches to parenting will come more readily to mind with practice. Even I forget, at times, to turn to the creative arts to help my children (and myself) work through difficult moments. But one thing is for sure: there *will* be a next time to do a parenting moment better. Make a plan for how to approach a challenging interaction more creatively when it comes around again. This can be easier than finding a creative response in the heat of the moment.



TRY THIS:

Take a moment now to write down three short-term parenting goals:

Now write down three long-term parenting goals:

As you read this book, keep your short- and long-term parenting goals in mind. This will make it easier to apply the tools with your own unique child.

FIND THE FUN

Ping arrives to lend a hand after the birth of her second granddaughter and finds that two-year-old big sister is not a happy camper. Routine activities

like nose wiping, hair washing, and changing clothes now provoke tantrums. Previously effective consequences and rewards for behavior management are backfiring. This is clearly not sustainable for anyone. Ping concocts a creative plan to address each scenario that leads to resistance. The next day the “boogey monster” (a flying tissue) gets a meal from her nose. The bathtub washcloth becomes a soaking wet hat that they take turns wearing. The pop-up tent contains a magic blanket, under which pajamas are removed and play clothes are put on. Big sister changes her clothes gleefully without incident and proudly shows her parents what she can do. Eventually, she dresses her little sister, too. Fun is exchanged for fuss. Laughter replaces tears.

Every moment with our children has the potential for being fun—if not memorable—if we don’t take ourselves too seriously, and if we develop a creative mindset. (See the section entitled “Develop a creative mindset” at the beginning of chapter 7: “Tap Into Your Own Inner Artist”). While it’s important to parent with social, emotional, and cognitive goals in mind, it’s also important to simply have fun with our children. Unfortunately, a hyperfocus on achievement from early ages has become prevalent as a result of increasing competition for admission to schools from pre-K to college and fewer employment opportunities, even for those with bachelor’s degrees. As one Harvard study reveals, kids believe that their parents value achievement much more than happiness and kindness (Weissbourd and Jones 2014). And those same kids, taking a note from their parents, agree that achievement is the most important value. While there are numerous social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of incorporating the creative arts into parenting, one of the most fundamental assets of the creative arts is the opportunity they provide for fun and relaxation.

Like play, the arts can offer both serious rehearsal for life and pure fun. And like play, the creative arts don’t always have to serve a purpose (at least not an obvious one). There’s already so much that consumes the attention and energy of parents that it’s nice to have a creative way to let go. Singing along to the radio, redecorating a room, or bouncing to a beat can simply feel good. As the saying “art for art’s sake” suggests, art sometimes needs no justification. It is enjoyment. It is downtime. It is valuable in and of itself. And because it is valuable for these non-achievement-based reasons, incorporating more creative arts into your home may have some added, unexpected benefits.

We all need time to de-stress and to unconsciously process information or emotions from the day. Engaging in the creative arts can allow us to do that. When we make art, we can lose our sense of self and time, as we focus intently on the present moment while simultaneously being energized and fully engaged. This experience of “flow,” a term coined by positive psychology expert Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2013), is associated with increased long-term happiness. What’s more, engaging in the creative arts can simply put a smile on our faces—an often taken-for-granted act with

enormous positive mental and physical health benefits (Beres et al. 2011; Kraft and Pressman 2012). Oh, and fun time is also bonding time. We all need more of that, especially in this digital age.

Specific parenting goals aside, simply introducing, encouraging, and modeling engagement in the creative arts at home fosters happier, healthier, and better-connected kids. I've prescribed snapping pictures of eye-catching scenes to shift a teen's focus from the negative to the positive. I've encouraged knitting breaks during homework to curtail anxiety-driven meltdowns. I've invited a mother and child to scribble together in order to disrupt their roles as the punisher and the punished. All experienced positive results.

Simple creative activities that result in laughter (whether scribbling together or dancing around the living room in last-year's Halloween costumes) can not only bring more joy to family life—they may even boost immunity (Bennett et al. 2003; Christie and Moore 2005). Art that invites judgment-free self-expression, connection, and discovery naturally reduces stress and anxiety and improves vital signs (Stuckey and Nobel 2010). An analysis of 146 studies concluded that expressive writing improves not only immune function but also self-reported health, psychological health, and general functioning (Frattaroli 2006). Art for the sake of fun, relaxation, and leisure is actually art for the sake of health and well-being—for kids *and* parents.

THE NOT-SO-ARTSY PARENT

When I invite adult clients to make art in therapy sessions, it's not uncommon for them to feel ambivalent or even negative about it. They may approach art with skepticism or discomfort. They decided long ago that they're not artistic. They haven't made art since childhood. They had a negative experience with it in school and didn't learn how to enjoy it. It's unfamiliar territory for them.

At home, plenty of parents encourage their kids to color independently, but if it becomes more involved or requires parent participation, they divert the activity to something else. It's not necessarily because they don't want to help their children or spend time with them. It's because they don't feel comfortable in the realm of the creative arts, they find other activities "easier" or less messy, they don't see the point, or they simply don't enjoy arts activities.

The most highly regarded theory of typical artistic development in children, created by academic Viktor Lowenfeld in the late 1940s but still widely referenced today, identifies the last stage of development as ages thirteen to sixteen. He called this stage the "Period of Decision/Crisis." In this stage, teens decide whether art is worth pursuing. They decide (or are often told) whether they are good at it or not. At this stage, many people stop making art. How, then, can the not-so-artsy folks among us begin to access the arts to enrich our children and further our parenting goals?

Using the creative arts to further your parenting goals *isn't* about becoming a skilled artist or devoted scrapbooker. It doesn't matter if you're good at it or not. It doesn't matter if you sing off-key or can't draw a straight line. It really doesn't even matter if you like it. After all, there are plenty of parts of parenting that we don't like but do anyway because it works or it's good for our kids. I don't particularly like to read the same book over and over again to my preschooler, but I do it because I know that 1) she enjoys it, 2) research supports that repetition helps with mastery of language and vocabulary (Horst, Parsons, and Bryan 2011), and 3) repetition is comforting to a child. So I do it and find enjoyment, instead, in watching her delight in her favorite book of the moment (even for the hundredth time).

If you are a not-so-artsy parent, congratulate yourself for picking up this book (and turn to chapter 2: “Why We Love to Hate Glitter Glue (and Other Struggles with Art)”). This is an opportunity for you to challenge preconceived ideas that you may have about art making and to stretch yourself as a parent. Kids challenge us daily, and approaching those challenges with creativity will help us become more skillful and versatile as parents—and people.