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**Family Creativity entry**

*Encyclopedia of giftedness, creativity and talent*

The link between family and creativity has longstanding, mythic origins. In Greek mythology, the Nine Muses were seen as the sources of inspiration and the creative spark in the arts and sciences. The Muses were sisters, and the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the Titan goddess of memory, who received her own gifts of innovation, creativity, and imagination from her parents, Uranus, the sky god, and Gaia, the earth goddess.

Just as children's creativity differs from adult creativity, so does family creativity differ from other creative joint performances. But what is the "product" of family creativity? Virginia Satir (1988) characterized the family as the place of "people making". Therefore, the focus of family creativity is twofold: the creation and organization of the family system and the self-actualization of its individual members. Both are valid locales for everyday creativity, that is, creativity expressed in the natural environment that focuses on tackling the issues and solving the problems of everyday life. Family creativity is concerned with the expression of change, development, and evolution in the subjective life of the family and its members. It is a response adaptation to the need for new ways of being, relating, and organizing. This creativity could be intrapsychic (the adaptation of feelings and insights or the establishment of meaning and purpose through the formulation of goals) as well as extrapsychic (creative altruism, for example, that leads to new forms of cooperation and reciprocity between people). In other words, the co-creation of a shared family life is a creative endeavor. As well, the family can be an "organizer" which focuses and mobilizes its energy and the surrounding social environment to develop the creativity, giftedness, or talent of its members.

## **The Family as a Creative System**

Using the lens of systems theory, the creative family can be seen as having unique dynamics that contribute to the nurturing of creativity as a property of the system. Creativity, then, is a product of the relationships and interactions within the family system, and between the system and its milieu. In creative families, individual members have a hand in shaping their family environment through curiosity, passion, perseverance, exploration, and the acquisition of complex skills. A mutually influencing dynamic emerges: parents influence children (exposing them to varied experiences, the arts and sciences, or by valuing original thinking) and children influence parents (a child may have a special interest and parents then seek out additional experiences to support these interests). This mutually influencing dynamic may include the extended family (grandparents or other significant family members).

Creative families provide increased opportunities for learning; high, but realistic expectations coupled with high support; and a richness of resources and stimulation. Day-to-day interactions between parents and children, and the transactional patterns between the adults, are characterized by responsiveness, spontaneity, authenticity, and sensitivity. The family's structure and organization are such that it enhances the creative expression of the members and the family as a whole. The family provides environmental and emotional supports for its members that are appropriate to their individual, and possibly variable, maturity levels. Conflict and problems are approached as opportunities for learning and applying problem-solving skills in order to generate innovative solutions. Metacognitive strategies are revealed when adults talk out loud about their problem-solving strategies. Members of the family are encouraged to master challenges autonomously, yet as a family, they maintain common areas of interest that instill the values of achievement, self-discipline, the importance of doing one's best, and satisfaction in

accomplishment. Family rituals are created in order to enhance affective responsiveness and involvement between members; family traditions are created to allow the family to renew itself and strengthen emotional connections. By attending regularly and consistently to family relationships, members become closer to each other, creating healthy patterns of interaction. This increases their capacity to develop close, intimate relationships with others outside of the family system. Creative well-functioning families tend to demonstrate high levels of adaptability when dealing with change or stress, which can include modifications to power structures and role relationships.

Since the creative family is an open, dynamic, interactive system, it impacts the development of its members, and is, in turn, influenced by the outside environment. For example, family communication can be improved when there are positive family-environment exchanges, since activities and topics of conversation can be imported into the family system from the surrounding milieu. Creativity, therefore, is critical to family development since it creates an assortment of potential structures and processes that will meet the developmental needs of its unique members. Creativity allows a family to discover who they are as individuals and as a family system, reveals members' capacities, and allows for a distinctive family trajectory to evolve.

### **The Family as Cultivator for Creativity and Giftedness**

The family, as a primary socializing force, shapes the development of the creative individual. Family background has long been seen as an important variable linked to creativity and giftedness. However, its influence has been difficult to determine. Families affect the potentialities of its members by limiting or enriching the informal learning opportunities that are open to them. But the family's influence is also moderated by the individual's reactions to these factors.

## **Family Composition and Structure**

Many studies of creative eminent individuals found that between one third and one half of the people sampled had lost a parent before the age of twenty-one. This has been termed the "orphanhood effect." Theorists posit that the loss of a parent at such an emotionally sensitive time causes an individual to compensate later on in life with higher levels of achievement. Another premise is that the loss leads a child to live a more unusual life, thereby setting unconventionality as a life-long norm. Some believe that if one grows up in a stable, happy household, an individual may have it "too good" to be driven to greatness. There is some research to support the idea that creative individuals grow up on the margins of society or have some early trauma. However, this represents only a portion of the early family life experiences of some individuals. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) interviewed ninety-one exceptional people in the arts and humanities, sciences, business, and politics, and found that more than half of them grew up in stable happy families.

Birth rank order effects are also controversial. The early works of Galton and Ellis found an overrepresentation of first-born children in the sciences and other domains. However, more recent investigations have noted that first-born children are less likely to be innovative revolutionaries; the creative iconoclast is more likely to have a middle position in the family.

Generally, though, in families with a gifted or talented member, creativity becomes the organizing principle for the family structure. Role allocation, responsibility, and the maintenance and management of the family system will be focused on supporting the gifted member.

## **Family Environment**

Parents want to create an optimum environment to foster the full development of the creative members of the family. They do this by: creating and providing stimulating experiences that appropriately encourage creativity and talent; promoting imaginative play and self-expression;

and eliminating gender scripts from opportunities to play with and manipulate toys or building materials. Creative family environments tend to be child-centered. Silverman (1986) reported that gifted teens described their family environment as: characterized by warmth, affection, respect and honesty; supportive of their interests; and stimulating. Their home lives were composed of an enriching variety of activities and opportunities to develop their talents and interests. Parents set aside time to work and play together, yet still created opportunities for the adolescents to develop independence. However, good intentions can create pitfalls: feelings of unceasing pressure to not waste time that might be devoted to more "productive" pursuits or the need for constant praise. These psychological drawbacks can become the source of later difficulty: anxiety, a diminished sense of capacity, skepticism, or the sense of being an imposter.

### **Family Processes and Relationships**

One of the primary functions of the family is to provide a place of balance for the creative individual: experimentation with feedback, freedom with structure, setting goals and striving for high achievement with the delight in meeting a challenge regardless of the outcome. This family balancing act may be linked to the creative adult's ability to manage the dialectical tensions within a paradoxical personality that generates creative energy. This ability to effectively move from one end of a polarity to another is described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996). For example, in the creative family, discipline may be viewed as somewhat lax, since creative children are given more freedom and autonomy than is generally deemed acceptable. However, this approach still gives children a sense of security and safety. It allows them to play, explore, and experiment within a structure that is appropriate to their precocity.

In terms of family relationships, gifted children tend to be products of stable well-adjusted systems. This may mean a stable marriage or, in the context of low-income lone parent families,

a stable extended family network. These families have developed empowering family cultures, which are characterized by relationships that are flexible and resilient, with high levels of hardiness and cohesion. Relationships exhibit the appropriate degrees of emotional separateness and connection. Parents give talented children space without controlling them, balanced with close, caring, warm relationships.

### **Use of Family Resources**

Giftedness can be a non-normative stressor for the family, calling upon adaptive responses, family reorganization, and the use of family resources to support the nurturance of the member's talent. Family support and assistance is crucial to this process. Though children provide energy, enthusiasm, and determination, they cannot secure the resources and opportunities to foster their creativity. The responsibility for mobilizing and monitoring these resources falls to the adults in the family. Parents do this by allocating extra time to the gifted child. They may foster strong alliances with outside organizations or individuals; this may involve relocating the family to be closer to an institution that is key in supporting a child's talent. This process entails high family commitment, availability, and support—all key family resources.

### **Family Values**

Transformation of early giftedness into a set of appropriate values, drives, and abilities begins in the family. This permits the gifted individual to engage in highly creative work later in life. Family values are tacit rules that govern the social interactions within the family. Does a family's values reflect an emphasis on practicality or encourage creativity? Does the family reject innovation because they value traditional ideals? Does the family see creative activity as low status or not financially rewarding? The lived values within the family system play a key role in determining whether an individual chooses a creative path or not.

Creative families instill the value of engaging in productive work for its own pleasure and satisfaction. Creativity and risk taking go hand-in-hand, resulting in family systems whose motto is, "Each attempt leads to another," rather than focusing solely on the output. In comparing effective creative families with those who experience conflicts, the difference is on the degree of emphasis placed on the child's performance: performance at all costs versus being loved regardless of performance. For high IQ, high achieving members, values that enhance development are supportive close relationships, high standards for education and achievement, and valuing stimulating intellectual and cultural activities. For the creatively gifted, values that enhance development are independence, support for goal achievement, unconventionality, and openness to varied modes of expressing thoughts and feelings.

***See also:*** Creativity throughout the Lifespan, Everyday creativity, Parenting

### **Further Readings**

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