

CREATING CREATIVE KIDS

We gathered five experts in creative thinking (they're all parents, too!) to share their **best ideas and activities** for sparking your child's imagination.



If the word *creativity* makes you think only of painting clouds, daydreaming, or writing experimental poetry, think again. "Creativity is one of the most important economic resources of the twenty-first century," argues Gary Gute, associate professor of family studies at the University of Northern Iowa, and director of the Creative Life Research Center there. "The call from business, industry, and education is for people to think more creatively, not only to solve problems but also to identify problems that need to be solved. A lot of people have this notion that creativity is just a frill: puppet shows and finger paints. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but it's much bigger." Plus, according to James C. Kaufman, professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut, "Creative people are more likely to start their own companies, to be happy in their jobs, to be successful in business." And if that's not enough, they also tend to be, says Kaufman, "resilient, happier, in better moods. It's such a positive thing."



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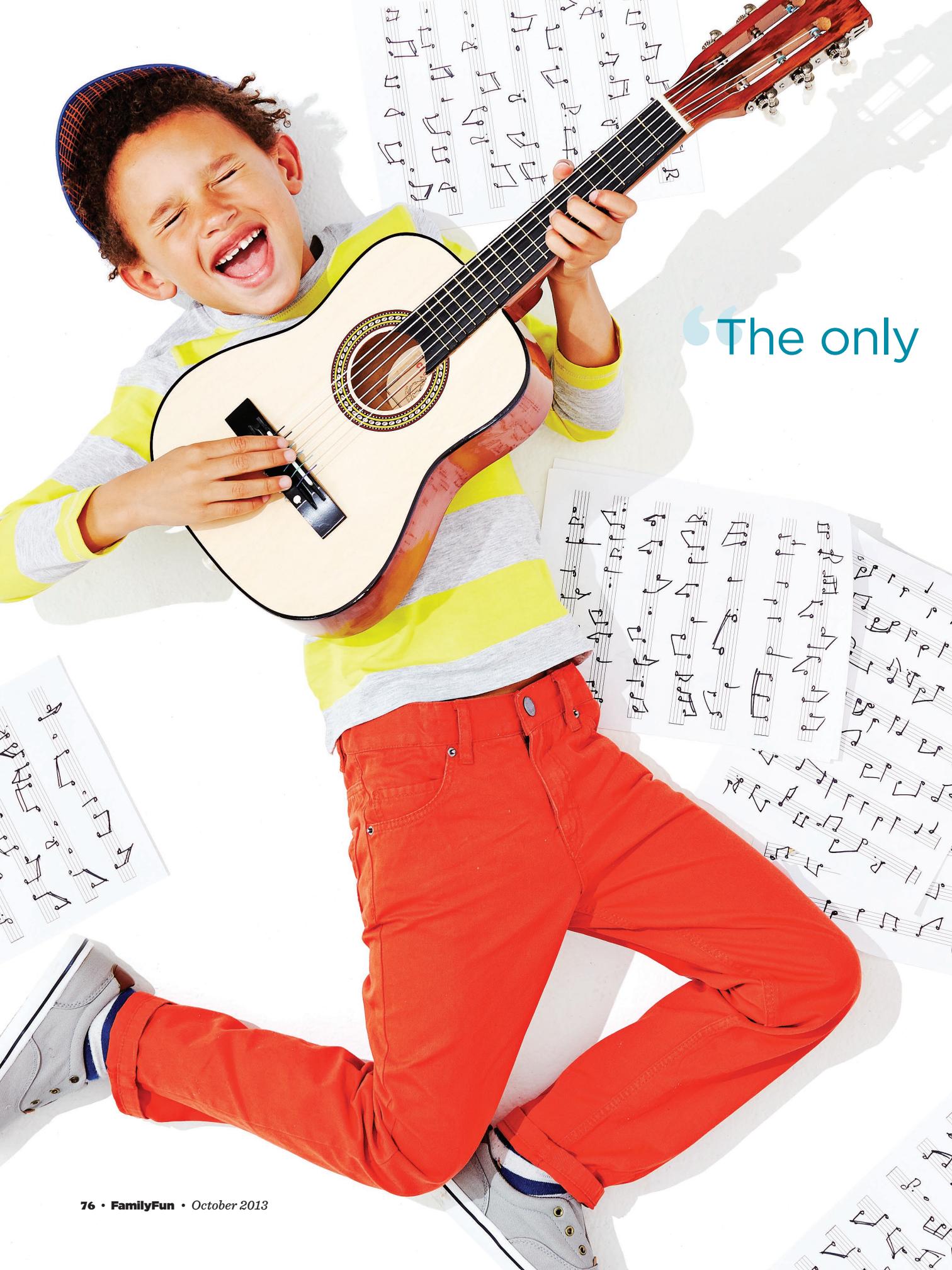




Artist

Story

Friends



The only

Luckily, cultivating creativity in our kids can be easy. It's a matter of what Joshua Glenn, coauthor of *Unbored: The Essential Field Guide to Serious Fun* (and profiled on page 78), describes as a kind of parental one-two: present kids with an opportunity, then get out of their way. Because, in its broadest sense, creativity is fostered by what kids naturally do anyway: ask questions, explore, invent, daydream, improvise, make believe, make music, and even (or especially) make mistakes. "As long as you're encouraging them to do something creative, encouraging the process rather than just the final product, it's kind of hard to go wrong," Kaufman explains.

way to be successful is to **make mistakes.**

RACHELLE DOORLEY

On the following pages, we introduce you to a handful of our favorite creative people. Mind you, these aren't reclusive artists retreating to a clean studio every day; they're in the trenches with us, with children of their own, figuring out what nurtures and excites kids (and, sure, also gives us parents half an hour to get dinner on the table). We hope you find their ideas, tips, and projects as inspiring as we do. After all, as Gute says, "Creativity is what brings meaning and joy to life." He laughs. "I mean, not the only thing! But it's a big one."



TURN ERRORS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Rachelle Doorley is the creator of Tinkerlab.com, a website of art and science activities for kids.

HER PHILOSOPHY

"The only way to be successful is to make mistakes. I believe in the expression 'fail forward,' which means that success comes from a willingness to view failures as opportunities to grow—that creative risk-taking is more important than doing nothing at all."

HER CREATIVITY TIPS

- 1** Call projects *invitations* and simply arrange a few different materials, such as colored tape, markers, and paper, in an inviting way on a cleared-off table. Kids will use them however they want.
- 2** A designated self-serve, **hands-on area**, offering easy access to paper and pens, scissors and tape, glue and string, lets kids start creating instantly, without having to ask an adult for help.
- 3** Rachelle doesn't make erasers readily available in her house. If one of her kids is drawing something and makes a mistake, Rachelle says, "Would you like another piece of paper, or do you want to **turn it into something else?**"

INSPIRING IDEAS

Start with an under-the-bed-style plastic storage bin (Rachelle's is 28 by 17 by 6 inches) with a clear, latching lid. Then use it for one of these:

Concoction Lab Assemble supplies and ingredients in the bin and let your child mix, measure, and discover to her heart's content. Rachelle puts in baking soda, flour, white rice, water, vinegar, salt, ice, food coloring, and expired spices, along with funnels, corked bottles, bowls, eye droppers, and spoons. In different seasons, you can add leaves, flower petals, and snow—or whatever your kids think of. "They'll ask, 'Can we use your coffee grounds?' And I'll say, 'Sure! And maybe I can interest you in some eggshells and apple cores?'"

DIY Light Box Line the box lid with white tissue paper or waxed paper,



using clear tape to secure it. Place a string of holiday lights in your box with the cord dangling out so that you can plug it in. Do what Rachele calls seeding the project by setting a few bowls of transparent materials (beads, colored cellophane, glass pebbles) nearby, then invite your child to play. The glowing materials can be arranged to make inspiring collages.



INVENT FUN

Joshua Glenn coauthored *Unbored: The Essential Field Guide to Serious Fun* with Elizabeth Foy Larsen.

HIS PHILOSOPHY

“You don’t want to be the over-involved parent on the one hand or the slacker parent on the other. Creativity is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. If you’re a little helicopter-y and do the prep work but then leave your kids alone, creativity will happen.”

HIS CREATIVITY TIPS

1 Set it up. Keep a mental list of things the kids need for their pursuits. Have we got enough paper? Are there batteries in the flashlight? Are the bike tires pumped up? Monitor those needs—but that’s all you have to do. **“The kids will gravitate toward the things you’ve prepared,”** says Joshua.

2 Put limits on TV and screen time to **force kids into the opportunity zone.** Joshua doesn’t ban his kids from having games on their iPad, but he makes them ask him—every time—if they can play. The point is to be thoughtful about it, so they’re using the tool instead of the tool using them.

“Kids are

EXPLORE YOUR WORLD

Keri Smith is the author of *The Pocket Scavenger*, *Wreck This Journal*, and ten other books.

HER PHILOSOPHY

“Small children are naturally creative. It’s all there, there’s no need to try and find it!”

HER CREATIVITY TIPS

- 1** Kids are interested in how things work. Assemble a little **inventor’s kit** with broken devices (an old calculator, say) for kids to take apart and try to put back together.
- 2** Dress the part. One of Keri’s favorite things is simply putting on some kind of **costume or uniform**. Take a cap and say, “Let’s put on our scavenger hat!” Or how about an inventor’s vest? It transforms the experience.
- 3** Get excited. Try to **incorporate your interests**. As Keri says, “Kids really respond to your passion. If you get excited about something, they get excited, too, and that’s invaluable.”

INSPIRING IDEA

Game Hacking Joshua’s family plays a lot of board games, but they refuse to be constrained by the rules. Or the board. Or the pieces included. “You can buy old board games and draw on them, make new rules, revamp the old,” he says. Consider adding Sorry! pieces to Candy Land, or assigning special powers to character cards such as Queen Frostine and Gramma Nut. Make a Risk-Monopoly mash-up where you can use your real-estate earnings to fund your armies. Or simply make up games from scratch: bring plastic figures to the beach and play on squares drawn in the sand, adding dice and rules. Start with a game you have or know, and identify the problem. What parts of it are boring, and why? If it’s good, what could make it even better? What if you added dice or other game pieces? What if you dealt the cards out instead of drawing them?

Examples:

- **Chinese Checkers.** Invent other legal marble moves.
- **Candy Land.** Deal out the cards and add a trading element—or, to hack this preschool game for older kids, include a marauding horde of plastic zombies.
- **Yahtzee.** If you don’t use all three rolls, take a penny for each forsaken roll and redeem them for extra rolls during another turn.



interested in **how things work,**

KERI SMITH

“Creativity is what happens when

INSPIRING IDEA

Anywhere Scavenger Hunt “We approach life as a scavenger hunt,” Keri says. “We go out and see what we can find. But it’s also about developing a story about each object, whether it’s real or imaginary. Sometimes scavenging will turn into a mystery: where did that come from and who left it here and why? This week we discovered a bunch of holes in the ground, and we created fantastic stories to explain them.”

- Go for a walk around your neighborhood. Find five trees. Give each of them a name. (Keri’s son Tilden named some trees Henry, Fergus, Moses, and the Secret Pine, which is hidden, of course.)
- Collect three of the smallest things you can find.
- Find something that is shaped like an animal.
- Find a smell you’ve never smelled before (a flower, a spice).
- Find four things that are in the shape of a circle.

WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING

Karen Benke is the creator of *Rip the Page!* and *Leap Write In!*

HER PHILOSOPHY

“I see that as kids get older, they stop trusting the dreaming, doodling part of their brain and start looking for the ‘right’ answer. It takes a lot of courage to look at the world and experience things with our own eyes and ears and tastebuds and fingertips and not just go along with the crowd.”

HER CREATIVITY TIPS

- 1 Karen’s found that if you jump in and write, the kids are going to write, too. Try a family writing group where you sit and **write side by side**.
- 2 Lined paper reminds kids of school. Get **different kinds of pens, pencils, and paper**. Give kids a big piece of paper so they can be sloppy.
- 3 **Change your scenery**. Go outside and sit on a big blanket to write. Write in the tub, in the pantry, or behind the couch.

INSPIRING IDEAS

Snatched From the Radio Turn up the radio volume for a couple of seconds, then down again. Write down the words you hear. Whatever you snatch, that’s what you have to work with. “Like skeletons on fire we ...” Write a story from those words. Or if you’re in a group, pass the phrase around and everyone can add a sentence or two.

Haiku Hike Go out in the dark with a headlamp and a notebook and look for haiku in the garden—or on your street, in your backyard. Haiku is simply a moment observed, in three short lines (for this activity, there’s no need to count syllables). Look, and listen, for something happening right now and just describe this one moment. An example: “My cat at the window/ watches clouds/move over the roof.”

Seven-Line Chain of Time Cover a table with butcher paper. Think of seven words—any words—and write them on the table, spacing them however you like. Write a story or poem to connect them.

MAKE ART

Jean Van’t Hul is the creator of the book and website *The Artful Parent*.

HER PHILOSOPHY

“We need outside-the-box thinking. If children are allowed, even encouraged, to experiment (and to fail), they are more likely to grow creatively. If they hear that there is just one right way to do something, they’re less likely to try other things.”

HER CREATIVITY TIPS

- 1 Don’t be afraid to **make a mess**. You can do really messy projects outside or confine them to the kitchen, garage, or even the bathtub. Jean thinks, “OK, my house is going to be a bit of a mess for the next ten years,” and tries not to worry. “I just won’t get a white couch!”
- 2 **Have patience** for children’s slower pace. Give them the chance to appreciate the magical in the everyday: Rocks! Seashells! Ladybugs!

preparation meets opportunity.

JOSHUA GLENN



3 Upcycle art. “I frame our kids’ art and store some of it in bins, but we really can’t keep it all,” Jean says. She uses paintings as wrapping paper, or she and her kids cut them up into banners, bunting, cards, and decorations.

Repurposing art keeps kids focused on the process of making it, rather than on the idea of keeping it forever.

INSPIRING IDEAS

Body Tracing and Painting This open-ended project allows kids to reimagine their identity. They can embellish their outlines with fanciful clothing, draw imaginary internal-organ systems, or capture their metamorphosis into wild creatures. Simply trace around your child on a big piece of butcher paper you’ve taped to the floor, then give her oil pastels, paints, and whatever else she needs to re-create herself.

Paint Without a Brush Make a painting using anything but a brush, such as plastic dinosaur feet, toy tractors, spoons, and pinecones. Or try printing with things like sponges, fruits, and vegetables. ✳



30 DAYS OF CREATIVE FUN

Turn to page 109 for a month’s worth of mind-expanding activities.