

Teaching creativity to children from a galaxy away

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Playing make-believe is more than a childhood pasttime. According to psychologists, it's also crucial to building creativity, giving a child the ability to consider alternative realities and perspectives. And this type of thinking is essential to future development, aiding interpersonal and problem-solving skills and the ability to invent new theories and concepts. That has been shown to be a component of future professional success in fields from the arts to the sciences and business.

But can [creativity](#) be taught? Prof. Nira Liberman of Tel Aviv University's School of [Psychological Sciences](#), with her students Maayan Blumenfeld, Boaz Hameiri and Orli Polack, has demonstrated that children can be "primed" for creativity by how they are persuaded to think about and see the world around them. According to their study, one catalyst of creativity is "expansive" thought — encouraging children to think about distant objects and perspectives like the galaxies in the skies above, as opposed to local objects and perspectives in their immediate surroundings.

Thinking "outwards" rather than "inwards" allows children to consider different points of view and think beyond their "here and now" reality, says Prof. Liberman, whose research has been published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*. She says that relatively simple exercises can get children in the right frame of mind.

Thinking from the inside out

For their study, the researchers worked with 55 children ages six to nine. Half were shown a series of photographs that started with nearby objects and gradually progressed to more distant ones — from a close-up of the pencil sitting on their desk progressing to a picture of the Milky Way galaxy. The other half was shown exactly the same photographs but in reverse order, to induce a "contractive" frame of mind.

After viewing the series of photographs, the children completed creativity tests, including the Tel Aviv Creativity Test (TACT), in which the participant is given an object and asked to name the different uses they can think of for it. Points are given for the number of uses mentioned and the creativity of the use. The children in the expansive mind-set group scored significantly better on all of the creativity measures, coming up with a greater number of uses and more creative uses for the objects.

Spatial distance, as opposed to spatial proximity, was clearly shown to enhance creative performance, says Prof. Liberman. Increased creativity was a direct result of priming the [children](#) in the first group to think expansively rather than contractively.

This study was the first to focus on child rather than adult creativity in this type of research. In the past, Prof. Liberman and her fellow researchers investigated how creativity in adults may be enhanced by encouraging them to consider the distant future and unlikely events. Overall, "psychological distance can help to foster creativity because it encourages us to think abstractly," says Prof. Liberman of her findings.

Flexing creative muscles

This study adds to recent research by social [psychologists](#) that shows creativity is a trainable skill, not only an innate talent. Though some people are undeniably more creative than others, there are benefits from

"priming" your mind to think more creatively by investigating new perspectives and thinking abstractly.

"Creativity is basically about the flexibility of thought of your mental system," explains Prof. Liberman. Like the physical stretching that makes your body more flexible, mental exercises such as problem solving can train the mind to improve its creative thinking.

"The flexibility of your mental operations is important because it underlies many human qualities, such as empathy, self regulation, problem-solving, and the ability to make new discoveries," she adds.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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