


THE CREATIVITY PROJECT

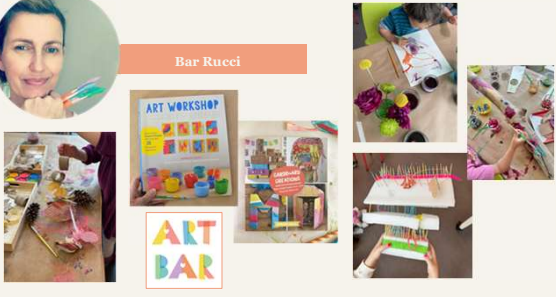
The Early Learning Sweet Spot
Where Creative Play &
Social Emotional Development Connect

Shannon Merenstein and Bar Rucci
Wednesday, April 23, 2025

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Bar Rucci




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Shannon Merenstein



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What is The Creativity Project?

The *Creativity Project* is a movement at the forefront of transforming education.

Our *Materials Matter* course, *Professional Development Series*, and *Art & Play Guides* offer teachers and caregivers the tools, skills, and mindsets needed to honor each child's way of thinking and working, and help transform classrooms into hubs of creativity and innovation.

We believe that process art and play **bring a sense of agency, belonging and joy** that all children deeply need and deserve.

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What we will explore today

1. What is creative play?
2. Differences between directed crafts and open-ended art & play
3. Our approach: Art is play and play is learning!
4. Four SEL skills that can be learned through creative play
5. Invitations and inspiration for developing these skills in context
6. How creative play supports children and teachers
7. We can help you, let's start today

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“Every day, in a 100 small ways, our children ask, ‘Do you hear me? Do you see me? Do I matter?’ Their behavior often reflects our response.”

L.R. Knost


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What is creative play?

Creative play is *open-ended art and play*.

Voice and Choice



"How" not "What"



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Differences between *directed* and *open-ended* art & play

Adult-directed product

Step by step instructions

One right way

Directed



Child-directed product

Exploratory

Expansive solutions

Open-ended



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Open-ended art and play is so much more joyful (*and easier*) for teachers



Materials are:
low prep
easy to source
inexpensive or free








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Our Approach


Art is play and play is learning.


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When art is play, it is...




experimental



collaborative



joyful



in flow

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Four SEL skills that can be learned through creative play:

1. **Relationship skills:** Listening to other points of view, collaborating, sharing, taking turns

1. **Social awareness:** Showing understanding and empathy towards others, prosocial behaviors

1. **Self-regulation:** Managing emotions, self-aware, impulse-control, choice-making

1. **Creative confidence:** Expressing yourself, how you feel, who you are, what you care about



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1. Build relationship skills through art and play

- Create a **culture** that supports community building and collaboration.
- Help children build the **language** they need to collaborate productively.
- Create collaborative spaces and other smaller, autonomous spaces so children can move around the room and **have a choice** to work alone.
- Prepare for teachable moments. Expect that collaboration can be hard and **takes practice**.



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Easy collaboration stations that build relationship skills



Big box play



Community drawing table

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Easy collaboration stations that build relationship skills



Restaurant play



Loose parts with blocks

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2. Develop empathy and understanding through art & play

- **Learn social rules:** cooperate with others, engage in prosocial behavior, better self-control, sharing, patience, builds frustration tolerance
- **Funds of knowledge:** learn about different traditions, cultures, families; builds understanding and tolerance for other points of view
- Unlike some curriculums that try to isolate and teach SEL through worksheets and hypotheticals, create the conditions to **practice empathy in context** - in real time - through open-ended creative experiences.



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Invitations that foster empathy and understanding



Mannequin costumes



Animal hospital

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Invitations that foster empathy and understanding



Box city



Cozy space drawing

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3. Self-regulation through art and play

- Audit the child's environment, making sure to offer sensory experiences to **regulate nervous system** (playdough, kinetic sand, water, different textural blocks, etc.)
- What else can you add to the space to **increase sensory opportunities**, like soft fabrics, new mark making tools, natural materials?
- **Autonomy in the space.** Design space to have bigger collaborative experiences and also quieter spaces for children to work alone.
- **Movement and freedom.** Less of a need for children to self-regulate if they have the opportunity to move!
- **Safety and security.** Offer invitations and access to materials more than once.



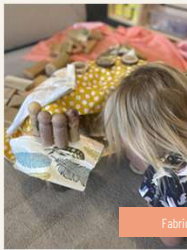
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Invitations that strengthen self-regulation skills



Washing station



Fabric play

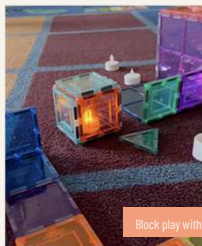
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Invitations that strengthen self-regulation skills



Clay and tools



Block play with tea lights

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4. Build creative confidence through art and play

- Shift grown up mindset from making a product to **working like an artist**: inventive, playful, iterate, experiment. Worry less about effort.
- Get comfortable with children throwing work away, **it's not about the product**.
- **No limit on materials**. Work with scrap paper, cardboard, materials that are not precious so they can try, iterate over and over again.
- Offer same invitations again and again so children can practice, find new ways of using materials and **expressing their ideas**.
- Adult plans and prepares, then **steps back**. Avoid judgement - there is more than one way to use a material.



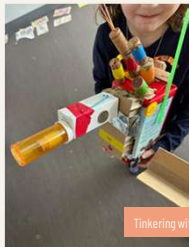
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Invitations that nurture creative confidence



Open painting table



Tinkering with recyclables

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Invitations that nurture creative confidence



Scrap paper table



Loose parts cooking

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How creative play supports *children*:

- Contextualizes **social emotional learning** in real time
- Thought provoking experiences that form a **connected classroom community**
- Boosts **creative confidence** and sense of self
- Deep engagement** and joy
- Nurtures curiosity**, risk-taking, and innovation
- Learn to self-express, advocate, and **communicate ideas** through art and play
- Educates the **whole child**



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How creative play supports *teachers*:

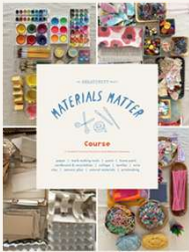
- Makes **educating and nurturing the whole child** possible
- Open-ended invitations** reach all types of learners
- Materials are **low prep, easy to source, inexpensive**
- Easy to integrate** literacy, math, and other **academic skills** in meaningful ways
- Develops a connected classroom where children feel a **sense of belonging**

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The Creativity Project Approach


Transform your teaching practice!



Course



Workshops




Guides


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The Creativity Project Approach

NEW!



Reimagine creative experiences at your Summer Camp program. April 30th



How do you teach creativity?

The answer might surprise you!

by Susan M. Smith

One of the most common questions we hear is, "How do you teach creativity?" Our answer? You don't.

You just have to make space for it - and then get it up and see what happens.

This program has become a model for us. It's the way we approach creativity, whether we're designing explorations of materials for children, leading a professional learning session, or working with our own studio practices. Instead of controlling the outcome, we focus on playfully setting the conditions for possibility.

And here's the magic - when you step back, creativity takes forward.

Move from a craft or coloring page to an authentic art-making experience!

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Thank you!



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