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5 Ways To Encourage Kids To Grow Up To Be Innovators

In a world where children are discouraged from being innovative and taking risks, how do we raise the next Steve Jobs?



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BY GWEN MORAN

3 MINUTE READ

It's not easy being a kid today. They face shifting curricula requirements, a strong focus on standardized test results, piles of homework, and a seemingly never-ending quest for achievement in everything from academics to sports. A recent documentary, *Race to Nowhere* delves into the rigors and risks of growing up in the 2010s.

Former elementary and high school teacher Tony Wagner says he is worried this concern with business and benchmarking is stripping children of their creative nature.

Wagner is an innovation education fellow at the Technology and Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard University, and founding executive director of *Engaging Schools*, a Cambridge, Massachusetts, nonprofit that helps schools inspire enthusiasm for learning in students. He says a narrow definition of what it means to be a successful student—including too much emphasis on teaching for standardized tests—is creating a situation where children will have difficulty being innovators later in life.

By the time a child is 10 or 12, he or she has figured out that it's much more important to get right answers than to keep asking thoughtful questions.

The research for Wagner's bestselling book, *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who will Change the World*, has revealed some troubling dynamics.

"The average child asks 100 questions a day," he says. "But by the time a child is 10 or 12, he or she has figured out that it's much more important to get right answers than to keep asking thoughtful questions."

How do we support these creative finger painters in ways that will help them succeed as innovators later in life? Cultivating these five key principles is an excellent place to start.

1. PLAY

Wagner says a child's innovative framework is strengthened when teachers bring a sense of play to the curriculum: taking offbeat approaches and making whimsical connections to the course material. he

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2. CURIOSITY

Five years ago, kindergarten teacher Melissa Butler and Carnegie Mellon University resident artist Jeremy Boyle began working together to find out whether it was possible for young children to innovate. The two founded the [Children's Innovation Project](#), a nonprofit that fosters innovation and creative thinking for students in the Pittsburgh public school system.

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The program allows children time for play with various technology-related materials, and engage in a variety of individual and team projects. Observational drawings develops awareness and attention to detail, so these exercises create greater understanding and a desire to learn more, Boyle says.

"Whenever we can help children find connections between multiple things, they become more curious about how they all work together," he says.

3. PASSION

In conducting interviews with hundreds of innovative people for his book, Wagner also found innovative people were shown how to connect their passion to success. The best teachers and parents always supported what the students' passions and natural curiosities were, and made an effort to connect what needed to be learned to satisfy that curiosity.

They let children choose the subject matter they wished to study or design their own investigations to learn more. This connected success leads to a larger purpose—children's individual motivations and interests, he says.

4. FEARLESSNESS

Among the key outcomes at the Children's Innovation Project so far have been increased fearlessness, especially when it came to taking risks and trying new ways of doing things, Butler says. Children also became better at creative problem solving. Butler says she thinks it's important to shift the focus when praising children if we want to foster more innovation.

Successful teachers make learning fun.

"I think parents and communities and schools do a disservice to children when they say 'You're

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Having a greater sense of purpose makes finding solutions more urgent. This gives innovators greater incentive to take risks, and look for new methods of solving challenging issues.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gwen Moran is a writer, editor, and creator of [Bloom Anywhere](#), a website for people who want to move up or move on. She writes about business, leadership, money, and assorted other topics for leading publications and websites [More](#)

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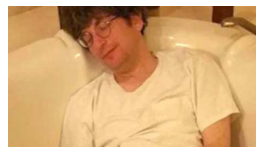
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