

## Time, Trust, and Tools: Opening Doors to Imagination for All Children

by Kirsten Haugen

*Two young boys play with a set of colored wooden blocks and a few small cars. As they arrange a road with the blocks, five-year-old Ben suggests, "Let's do something else. I want to play a game!" "No," says three-year-old Sam, "I want to play with cars." This gets Ben's mind going, and soon the cars and blocks evolve into a living board game. Ben searches out a couple dice, and Sam suggests there should be prizes. Before long, a complex set of rules emerges. "Okay," says Ben, "You start with two prizes from the prize box. If you land on green, you get to roll again. If you land on red, you lose a turn. If you land on blue, you have to give back a prize, but if you land on yellow, you get to take a new one." As they play, Ben begins to rearrange the board. "It's too short — the game will be over too soon!" He adds blocks, and — as he's ahead in the game — he makes sure there are lots of green blocks toward the end.*

What do we mean when we say someone has a good imagination? We readily see it not only in daydreamers and liars(!), but also in artists, storytellers, musicians, scientists, explorers, and entrepreneurs who create, invent, explore, and challenge the status quo.

Literally, imagination means the ability to form mental images beyond our concrete, immediate reality. But, from a developmental perspective, there's more to imagination than mental pictures. Children leverage imagination for growth and learning when they bring images out of their minds and into the physical and social world through dramatic play, construction, sensory play, storytelling, music, and more.

It takes time to conjure new ideas, and it takes a welcoming and accessible environment for children of all abilities to explore and express the content of their imaginations. This article focuses on ways to offer sacred time, a trusting relationship, and practical tools to open the door to imagination for every child — including those with disabilities.

**Six-year-old Ben says, "Jazz is when one note bounces off the other!"**

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



### TIME FOR IMAGINATION

In our fast-paced, tightly scheduled, data-driven, media-filled culture, both families and caregivers face a mounting struggle to find the time and place for imagination in the lives of our children and ourselves. For children with disabilities, therapy sessions, doctor visits, time-consuming care routines, and a host of measurable IEP goals and objectives — all justifiably important in their own right — further curtail time for delving into an imaginative scheme or creative endeavor.



Kirsten Haugen is a consultant for educational and assistive technology, promoting inclusive strategies for early learning, literacy, and play. She has contributed to previous Beginnings Workshops and has participated in three World Forums. (See you in Acapulco!) She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with her husband and two sons.

Without an *imagination quotient* to measure or prove our success, it can be hard to justify setting aside time to promote that intangible goal of fostering a child's imagination. However, when children know they have an uninterrupted stretch of time, they are more likely to try new roles, take emotional risks, negotiate rich worlds and stories, build tall towers, and learn about the properties and possibilities of materials and objects in their environment. The emphasis shifts from *finishing* to exploring. The confidence, skills, and persistence gained will — eventually — serve children well in other, more applied endeavors.

*Tips:*

- Consider setting aside time at least one day a week for extended project work.
- Be prepared to work through cries of resistance or boredom, especially from older children or anyone used to highly structured, rule-oriented routines.
- Give children plenty of warning before stopping time so they can wrap up and wind down.
- Set aside a separate time to involve children in cleaning up the inevitable mess.
- Consider offering a “save it for later” sign for children to post on materials or projects that they would like to return to.

**Two-year-old Nick sits in an adult chair, his chin level with the table, and says, “I need a book!” Rejecting the board book handed to him, he exclaims, “NO! I need a book for Nicky’s bottom!”**

## IMAGINATION AND TRUST

Trust is a critical foundation for sharing and testing one's imagination in the *real world*. Before children can truly explore, they need to have a sense that they can count on their physical environment, the adults around them, and their daily routine. Cutting loose from all structure will not *free* children to be imaginative. Providing suggestions, materials, and feedback can help give form to a child's raw creative energy.

There's an important distinction between trust and comfort. Discomfort can, in fact, push the imagination envelope by engaging children's problem-solving skills. For example, rather than intervening when an activity fails or children disagree, give children time to interpret the situation and devise their own solutions.

*Tips:*

- Avoid empty praise. Doing well, rather than feeling good, is the basis for developing an optimistic self concept (Seligman, 1998).
- Be sensitive to some children's aversion to messes, textures, noises, or change, and allow them alternatives, as appropriate.
- Be thoughtful in what you tell, say, or ask. It may be appropriate to say nothing at all for a time.
- Keep a camera, note pad, or tape recorder on hand to quietly record a unique creation or magical moment. Not only can these become treasured mementos for families, they allow you to document an otherwise elusive or impermanent experience.
- Gather the adults on your team to brainstorm a list of imagination-inspiring phrases to draw on in open-ended play. “I wonder . . .”, “What might happen . . .”, etc. Share the list with the families in your program.
- Consider your role during “imagination time” — step back to be the supporting actor, the stage hand, or even the fly on the wall.
- Overtly welcome problems and mistakes as opportunities for children to see something in a new way.
- Above all, if nothing *magical* seems to happen during the time you set aside for imagination, don't worry and don't give up!

## TOOLS FOR IMAGINATION

Children often clamor for the toys they see in the media. However, toys that arrive “complete” with names, detailed features, and predetermined personalities, missions, and allegiances, as well as video games with a set pathway to “success,” deny open-ended, active exploration.

Even arts and crafts are increasingly subject to commercial kits for modeling, beading, sticker-making, weaving, and the like. The covert message is “you've got to buy it before you can create it,” and anything *homemade* won't be nearly as fluorescent or flashy. In contrast, open-ended materials and found objects draw the script or the sculpture from the child's own head.

**A few days after a visit to a raptor center, four-year-old Sam listens to a soaring piece of classical music, and declares, “This is bald eagle music!”**

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## Tips:

- *Rotate your stock* to limit the toys and materials available at any given time. Limiting the materials children can work with — or even see — gives them the opportunity to explore something in several ways before moving on to something different.
- Recycled materials give children a chance to think about old things in new ways.
- Consider the motor and sensory abilities of your children when you select new materials — some level of frustration is okay.
- Invite children to explore new materials without a pre-conceived objective or activity.
- Change the scene occasionally. Put all the chairs away. Bring in large moving boxes. Hang sheets like a stage curtain, a maze, or a tent. Change rooms with another class.
- Go to a park without a playground. When you do something different to the environment you invite children to do something different, too.
- Create discovery kits to take along when you explore new environments. Include a magnifying glass, collecting bags, cameras, and so on.

**Five-year-old Stella paints colorful swirls on paper, cuts the paper into angular and curvy shapes with scrapbooking scissors, glues the shapes together, and adds spidery swirls of clay as a finishing touch. “There! I finished the controls for our space ship!” she declares.**

## OPENING DOORS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Children with disabilities require us to think differently about fostering imagination. While a rag tag collection of shoe boxes, spools, twine, and paint might set some children on their way, children with disabilities may need more carefully chosen tools and a little extra help. Many accommodations take time and patience on everyone’s part. The opportunities to play may seem somewhat contrived at first, but they are the building blocks for both independence and imagination.

## PHYSICAL ACCESS

Imagination can be a critical tool for a child whose physical disabilities limit his ability to interact directly with the world. At the same time, you can turn to an almost endless range of

**Three-year-old Alex sings, “The itsy bitsy black spider climbs up the black water spout! Down came the black rain and washes the black spider out! Out comes the black sun and dries up all the black rain . . . .”**

adaptive tools and alternative strategies to give children with physical disabilities the chance to exercise and express their imaginations.

## Tips:

- Stabilize materials on a work surface using magnets, non-skid mats, straps, tape, clamps, or Velcro®.
- Build up or adapt items to pick up — paint brushes, shovels, crayons, tools, utensils, dolls — using foam, tape, etc.
- Adapt mittens or gloves as paintbrushes, puppets, or let the child take a turn being the “foreman” and work with a partner who’s willing to follow her directions.
- Foster dramatic play with vest- or smock-style costumes that have easy Velcro® fasteners and little bulk.
- Find toys and tools the child can handle. Blocks will stack more easily with self-adhesive magnetic strips attached.
- Paintbrushes and shovels come with all styles of grips, or you can add a PVC T-joint with a Velcro® strap. Alternatively, a child can roll a paint-soaked foam ball around a paper-lined box or spatter paper using a Koosh® ball as a brush.
- Even a child who cannot grip a crayon or hold his head upright can still actively engage his environment, given some special equipment. An occupational therapist can help the child find a reliable way to activate a switch to play with battery operated toys, take photographs, speak a pre-recorded set of messages, or even use a computer to create music, designs, or stories.

## COMMUNICATION

As with physical abilities, a child’s communication skills do not necessarily reflect her cognition or imagination. In fact, children who are unable to talk due to severe cerebral palsy have made significant gains in literacy by being told to “say the words aloud in your head.” Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome report that they think in elaborate networks of linked pictures and “movies” — rather than just thinking with words the way most of us do. Just as young toddlers who are not yet speaking in sentences can follow our verbal directions, many children with physical or communication challenges understand much more than they are able to show or communicate.

*Tips:*

- Speak about all children as if they understand your every word.
- Read a wide variety of stories, books, and magazines with children. Share both facts and fairytales.
- Support children who are learning English with simple, illustrated scripts and stories that give them a few key words and phrases for common play activities in the room and on the playground. Consider sharing audio- or video-tapes of songs, routines, and activities with the family, along with printed lyrics, key vocabulary, and stories.
- Invite a nonverbal child to “say it in your head.”
- Give children with communication delays ways to share what they’re thinking, using pictures, gestures, voice output devices, art, musical instruments, etc.
- Expand a child’s opportunity for storytelling by using props, puppets, costumes, and even child-friendly instant or digital cameras, audio cassette recorders, and video cameras.
- If a child relies on pictures, sign language, or symbols to communicate, be sure she has opportunities to learn and use signs for playing, joking, and interacting, in addition to *functional* signs for eating, toileting, and the like.
- Whenever children are learning or struggling with language, s-l-o-w d-o-w-n . . .

## SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

Children whose disabilities primarily impact the social domain need special consideration for fostering imagination. Whether a child cowers on the fringes of the playground, or hits another child in an angry outburst, it’s critical to take

**After staring out the window for some time, five-year-old Kjerstin jumps up excitedly, runs downstairs, outside, and across the lawn, “Grandma! I just saw a blue bird – almost ALL blue, with black on its shoulders and a white and black pointy head!”**

the time and effort to understand the child’s perceptions, intentions, and skills in social settings.

Children with behavior problems may have difficulty interpreting what others do or imagining what others think. Many children with autism or other developmental disorders have a surprisingly rich imaginative life, but may have expressive language challenges, as well as a limited awareness that others think differently. These children often have a very physical, logical, and literal connection to the outside world.

*Tips:*

- Provide a balance of time with peers and *alone time*.
- Changes in routines or expectations can be upsetting for some children. When you free up time for imaginative experiences, let children know rules about safety and respect still apply; but that it’s okay to do things differently.
- Work closely with a child’s family to address challenging behaviors and teach alternative skills.
- Some children may need concrete or visual reminders of appropriate behavior or limits. Outdoors, use chalk liberally!
- Teach social skills and expectations explicitly, using tools such as Carol Gray’s social stories.
- While a child is still learning social skills, he may not

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Tips for Time, Trust, and Tools:** Haugen offers a wonderful collection of tips to offer children time, trust, and the tools they need to have many imaginative play experiences. Share this treasure trove with your teachers during your next staff meeting (or at the imaginative staff meeting suggested in the “Imaginary Friends” training ideas). Write each tip on a 3x5 index card, making one copy for each teacher. Ask teachers to sort the cards into ideas they think they can use, ideas they need a little help understanding, and ideas that don’t fit their classrooms or situations. After teachers complete the sort, pair them up to discuss the way they divided the cards. Then ask each group to pick an idea they think will work to share with the larger group. After teachers have shared the tips they think will work, ask each group to share one that they think won’t work. Share their choices with the larger group, asking for ways the tip might work. Conclude the training by requesting that teachers post three tips that they plan to use in their classrooms to support trust, time, and tools in the next few weeks.

**Supporting Further Exploration of Inclusion:** Add one or more of the resources suggested in this article to your resource library to help teachers understand inclusion.

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experience the intrinsic rewards of appropriate behavior. A concrete incentive and reward system, such as a simple point chart, may help keep the child on track, especially during less structured activities.

## CONCLUSION

Imagination does not end with mental imagery. We need to exercise our own imaginations to meet the two-fold challenge: first, recognizing the imaginative capacity in all children and then providing the time, trust, and tools they need to explore and express their imaginative schemes. In doing so, we can foster learning environments where all children actively participate, communicate, and create.

## RESOURCES

### Books:

Caney, S. (1972). *Steve Caney's Toy Book: Fifty classic toys to make from things you already have around the house*. New York: Workman's Press. This classic guide is a must-have for inspiring imagination and a can-do attitude in all kids, especially elementary ages.

**Four-year-old Jordan holds a small construction toy aloft and makes up his own advertisement, singing (to no one in particular), "TON-ka! Ton-KA! It's the best, the biggest, the strongest in all the world! TON-ka! Ton-KA! Ton-ton-ton-ton-KA!"**

Gould, P., & Sullivan, J. (1999). *The Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom: Easy ways to adapt learning centers for all children*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House. Extensive practical suggestions for accommodating children with a variety of special needs, with helpful planning charts and checklists.

Gray, C. (1994). *Taming the Recess Jungle*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons. Practical ways to "socially simplify" recess for children with autism and similar difficulties.

Haugen, K., & Wershing, A. (2001). *We Can Play*. San Rafael, CA: Alliance for Technology Access. A series of accessible play ideas in English and Spanish, on costumes, painting, puppetry, and more. Available from the ATA, (415) 455-4575 or [www.ataccess.org](http://www.ataccess.org).

Kuffner, T. (1998). *The Preschooler's Busy Book: 365 Creative games and activities to keep your 3- to 6-year-old busy*. New York: Meadow-

**Eight-year-old David plays in a small swimming pool, leaping from side to side, proclaiming loudly, "I'm under-water-skateboarding!"**

brook Press. Easy, fun, open-ended ideas using common materials in the home or classroom.

Schwartz, S., & Heller Miller, J. E. (1996). *The New Language of Toys: Teaching communication skills to children with special needs*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, 1996.

### Web Sites:

*10 Easy Ways to Fire Your Child's Imagination* by J. Schlosberg. [www.parenting.com/parenting/article/article\\_general/0,8266,2430,00.htm](http://www.parenting.com/parenting/article/article_general/0,8266,2430,00.htm)

*The cognitive tools of children's imagination*. San Francisco University researcher Kieran Egan shares his perspectives and findings on imagination, learning and teaching. [www.educ.sfu.ca/people/faculty/kegan/Cognitive\\_tools\\_and\\_imagin.html](http://www.educ.sfu.ca/people/faculty/kegan/Cognitive_tools_and_imagin.html)

*The Gray Center*. An excellent resource for teaching social skills to children with autism and related challenges. [www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)

*Imagination, Mental Imagery, Consciousness, Cognition: Science, Philosophy & History*. [www.calstatela.edu/faculty/nthomas/home.htm](http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/nthomas/home.htm)

*Sparking the Imagination*. "Spark a child's imagination? That seems about as necessary as watering a lawn during a rain shower. Yet rain eventually dwindles to a halt and sparks are easily distinguished." [www.farmpreschool.com/imagine.htm](http://www.farmpreschool.com/imagine.htm)

*We Can Play*. Browse or download 20 free pages of accessible play ideas for your parent resource area or your next staff development meeting. In English and Spanish. [www.ataccess.org/resources/endpoint.html](http://www.ataccess.org/resources/endpoint.html)

**"Look! Look! I found a book I can read all by myself!" proclaims four-year-old Sam, as he holds up *Freight Train* by Donald Crews. "What does this page say?" asks Sam. "It says, 'purple boxcar.'" "I reply. "Purr...ple...box...car!" Sam reads, touching each word. We turn the page, proudly repeating the process on every page of the book.**