

# Skill-Building Opportunities

## Marching to a Different Drummer + School Problems

**Question:** My son often gets answers wrong in school because he seems to be marching to a different drummer. He has a creative way of looking at things, especially things that are not yes or no questions. When we discuss what he's thinking, his answers are often deep, but this way of thinking isn't helping him in school. How can I help him succeed in school without harming his creativity?

Everyone learns in a different way and at a different pace. This can be hard to remember when traditional schooling can expect one right answer from all of the children in a class. Your child's creative thinking can be an advantage or a difficulty, depending on the situation. By promoting the life skill of Making Connections, you can help your child make the connections in learning that he needs to do better in school while still supporting the unique connections he makes.

**Making Connections** is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different—and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can “Google” information, people who can see connections are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

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### Support your child's unique thought process.

Mitch Resnick of MIT, thinks that the ability to make unusual connections—to think creatively—is central not just to children's success, but also to our society's success. He says:

*“It's not just about access to information, but our ability to build on knowledge based on the information we have access to. As I look ahead, I think the key to success in the future (and the key to satisfaction in the future) is not just going to be how much we know or what we know. I think that the ability to think and act creatively will be the key distinguishing quality that will allow people to succeed and be satisfied in their lives.”*

The typical school setting often expects one right answer, and your child's creative way of looking at things—especially things that are not yes or no questions—can be frustrating in these situations. Let him know that his way of thinking is unusual, valuable and something that you want him to keep.

- Explain to him that there are some answers his teacher is looking for, and that you will work together to learn the “school way” for finding those answers.
- Encourage him to go to the library or to look online for biographies of famous thinkers like Albert Einstein who challenged traditional ways of thinking.

As you walk your son through the “school way” of solving a problem, make sure he knows you are helping him become “a bilingual learner” of sorts—to learn the school way while retaining his creative approach. When YOU have this mindset— that you are helping your son be a “bilingual learner” of sorts—it helps you handle the situations in more positive ways.

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit  
[mindinthemaking.org](http://mindinthemaking.org) and [vroom.org](http://vroom.org)

**MIND** in the Making  
 The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

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## Ask your child to explain his thinking.

Bethany Rittle-Johnson of Vanderbilt University and her colleagues conducted a study to investigate whether explaining what you've learned to someone else can improve your use of that knowledge in a new situation. Rittle-Johnson and her colleagues found that children did better in solving problems when they had to explain the thinking process to their mothers. (Mothers were the subjects of the studies, but it could have been fathers or other important people as well.) The children who explained their thinking did better than those who did not explain their thinking at all. The researchers concluded that having a listener matters:

*The general lesson might be that if you are having difficulty in understanding something, you should try explaining it to your mom.*

Rittle-Johnson's research indicates that having an audience motivates children. It seems to help them focus on the meaning behind what they are learning so they can put that knowledge into words and then use it.

- **Ask him if he can explain how he came up with an incorrect answer.** Does it seem like he doesn't understand the question? Is he coming at the problem in an unexpected way? This will help you understand your child's thought process while encouraging him to reflect on how he makes connections.
- **Provide feedback on his and the "school way" of thinking.** You can say something like: "You really thought about that question in an interesting way. Let's think about how your teacher or another classmate could come up with a different answer."

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## Recognize that making mistakes is part of learning

It's important for children to know that making mistakes is not only okay, it's necessary for learning. It often takes trial and error to get something right. Support your child to keep trying, even when he doesn't get the answer right the first time.

- **Recognize how hard your child is working.** Carol Dweck of Stanford University has found that when parents praise their children's efforts and strategies—instead of their intelligence or talent—children see abilities as something they can improve. Be specific and supportive with your praise: "That math problem is confusing, but you are really working at it."
- **Share your own mistakes and how you learned from them.** Say something like: "I remember a time in school where I failed a test because I didn't read the directions clearly. I was upset, but it motivated me to read the directions carefully before I answered a question."
- **Encourage your child to ask questions if he needs an explanation.** Asking questions is a sign strength. It shows that he knows when he needs help and that he's taking an active part in his learning.

## 4

**Brainstorm with your child for ideas on how to help him make connections in ways that are effective in school.**

Address the dilemma with him directly: “You have such an interesting way of looking at things, but sometimes that doesn’t seem to work at school. What ideas do you have to help you be more successful at school?”

- Help him learn which subjects are difficult for him and talk about why. What frustrates him? What comes easily? Where and how can he use his ability to make unusual connections in his schoolwork? Which subjects expect one kind of answer?
- Brainstorm possible ways to address this with him. For example, does he think he would benefit from a study group with children his own age or a one-on-one tutor? Your child is more likely to follow through with a plan when he’s involved in the problem-solving process.
- If you feel like he is struggling in school, talk to his teacher. Explain that you value his creative way of thinking, but also understand that he needs to learn the “school way.” Brainstorm ideas together to support your son at school and at home.
- If you expect there’s a learning problem that goes deeper than just his creative thinking, consult a professional who can identify the problem and develop strategies for addressing it.

In 2008, the Dana Foundation organized a group to investigate learning, arts and the brain. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara describes their findings:

*“There is growing evidence that learning of the arts—whether it be music, dance, drama, painting—has a positive impact on cognitive life.”*

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## 5

**Make sure your child has lots of chances to express his creativity.**

Art experiences are perfect opportunities for your child to explore different ways of thinking without needing to arrive at the “right” answer. Creative expression offers the freedom for your child to explore his thoughts.

- Does he like to take in information visually? For example: maps or pictures. Encourage your child to explore the visual arts like drawing, painting or photography. Is he more of a hands-on type of learner? He can play a musical instrument or work with clay.

## 6

**Play games that encourage your child to make connections, in both expected and unexpected ways.**

Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that parents promote learning on the deepest level when they tap into children's passion and enthusiasm and build on it. Provide your child with fun and playful opportunities to make familiar and unfamiliar connections.

- Card games like “Go Fish,” “War,” “Old Maid” and “UNO” are all great games that ask your child to use his ability to sort and categorize according to color, number and symbol. Switch up the rules and do the opposite, or ask your child to come up with new ways of playing to encourage his creativity and flexible thinking.
- Optical illusions provide practice in making new connections and understanding different ways of thinking. Visit the website: <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/illusion/illusions.htm> for some fun ideas.