



How To Be an Imagination Coach

— A GUIDE FOR SPARKING WONDER AND CREATIVE THINKING —



We can ignite our children's imagination!

Developing imagination, like developing that perfect swing, learning to speak a foreign language, or building any real skill, needs continual practice in order to become muscle memory. Because our go-go-go culture doesn't naturally lend itself to the kind of unstructured downtime that's necessary for kids to imagine, create, explore, think, and connect, it's up to us grown-ups to build it in. **Here, you'll find strategies for doing just that.**

It's Time to Take Back Childhood!





Believe in Boredom

It's when we're bored and have to find ways to fill our time that imagination is born. There's power in boredom:

It Reveals Passions

Try swapping out one adult-led activity a week for more downtime, which may give kids the freedom to follow their curiosity and discover what they love.

It Builds Skills

Free, unstructured play has been shown to boost confidence, problem-solving skills, resilience, social-emotional connections, and more.



Schedule Screen-Free Time

Set aside small periods of time that are truly screen-free and stick to them. Start simply:

Meaningful Meals

Designate a container at the corner of the table where everyone places their devices before meals. Your dinner conversation will improve dramatically!

Car Ride Connections

Set a rule that phones cannot be used in the car. Make it a time for sing-alongs, games, and observations about the world around you!



Build in Play

It's easy to incorporate pockets of playful time throughout the day. Start with one idea, and make it a routine:

Before bedtime, tell jokes and riddles.



Before school, play spelling or math games to warm up for learning.



Get outside to visit the garden or a park, or go on a “spy” mission around the block.



Provide a Spark

For many children, finding a screen-free way to entertain themselves can be a challenge. Give them a boost by creating **Inspiration Baskets**.*

- **Craft Basket** Fill with paper and basic craft supplies.
- **Dress-Up Basket** Round up interesting clothing and accessories that can be used for pretend play.
- **Outdoor Play Basket** Collect different sized balls, bubbles, chalk, and water balloons.
- **Game Basket** Include classic favorites like playing cards, checkers, chess, and other family games.



*More ideas on page 14

Challenge Them

It's fun to find ways to inject challenges into everyday life. Just about any activity can be turned into a game:

- How quickly can we set the table or get ready for school or bedtime? (Time kids to see if they improve over time.)
- How many times can we catch a ball?
- ★ How many red cars or different license plates will we see between here and there?
- Who can fly this paper airplane the farthest?

Let Kids Lead

Although kids may occasionally need an adult to be their “spark,” the goal must be to let them build the fire as soon as it is kindled. As long as they are safe, follow the maxim, “Kids should be left to their own devices” (just not the ones with screens, of course!).





———— COACHING TIP #7 ————

Nurture a Balanced Play Diet

It's important to facilitate different kinds of play (pretend, dramatic, creative, experimental, physical, competitive) with different group configurations (solo, parent/child, peer-to-peer, small groups, mixed ages) and in varied settings (indoor, outdoor, parks, museums, in the car, at restaurants, at a sibling's event).

Equip Them for Success

Not only are you the imagination coach, you're also the equipment manager. Edit your child's toy box to keep only playthings that promote open-ended, imaginative play, and that can grow with children through multiple stages of development.





———— COACHING TIP #9 ————

“Work” Can Be Play

Activities you view as chores are often fun for children! Cleaning is always a family favorite, both inside (dusting, vacuuming, washing dishes) and outside (raking, weeding, watering plants). Cooking is a close second – kids enjoy finding ingredients, measuring them out, and mixing them up!

— COACHING TIP #10 —

Be Patient

With overscheduling and technology overuse rampant in today's society, little time is spent on imagination-building. We need to fight for our kids' freedom to unplug and spend time exploring and discovering who they are.

It may feel like a battle at times— instant entertainment at one's fingertips is a powerful force. Be gentle and patient with your kids and with yourself.

Take small steps forward each and every day. Once you and your children experience the magical moments they bring, you'll feel inspired to continue the mission!

≡ You Can Do This! ≡



Imagination Challenges!

Using the **Inspiration Baskets** from page 7, have kids pull five (or more) items out of the baskets and challenge them to:



Act out or tell a story using the items as props.



Make a craft using the art supply items.



Create a character using the role play items.



Invent a game using a combination of items from the baskets.



Helpful Hint:

Add items to your Inspiration Baskets regularly to keep kids coming back.

7 Imagination Drills

Every coach has some favorite drills. Encourage children to think deeply and creatively by weaving these types of conversations throughout your day.

1. Make a Case

Regularly pose “Would you rather” questions and encourage kids to support their choices.

- Would you rather play professional sports or be a rock star? Why?
- Would you rather visit the mountains or the beach? Why?
- Would you rather eat broccoli or French fries? Why?
- ★ Would you rather travel to space or to the very bottom of the ocean? Why?
- Would you rather be a dolphin or a cheetah? Why?

2. Consider the Possibilities

Ask kids “What if” questions that get them to imagine a world with different scenarios.

- ★ What if kids ruled the world? What would happen or change?
- ◆ What if there were no running water? What would you do?
- ▲ What if there were no electricity? What would change?
- ◆ What if you were suddenly in a place where no one spoke your language? What would you do to get by?

3. Compare and Contrast

Challenge children to notice similarities and differences.

- ◆ What objects are similar in color/shape/texture to this flower/rock/other item?
- What are differences between multiple songs/movies/sports teams/restaurants/stores?

4. Ask Open-Ended Questions

Rather than asking only factual questions (“How many legs does a spider have?”), get in the habit of asking broader questions that promote an understanding of oneself and more complex thinking.

- What would you do if you had eight legs and could spin webs?
- ▲ How did you make/draw/create that?
- ◆ If you could be any character in a movie, who would it be? Why?
- What do you love to do and why?

5. Think Ahead

Extend kids’ critical thinking by asking them to think ahead as they play and create. Ask:

- What are all the possible outcomes?
- ▲ What do you predict will happen?
- ◆ Why were you correct or incorrect?

6. Stimulate Their Senses

As kids play, draw attention to their senses.

- What colors do you see? Where else do you see those colors?
- Have you ever heard a sound like that?
- ◆ What does that sight/smell/taste/experience remind you of?
- ◆ Which smells/tastes/looks better, this or that?
- Why does that taste or smell so good?
- ★ Which senses are ignited when you see/hear/smell/touch/taste that?

7. Find Countless Ways to Play

Challenge kids to come up with new ways to play with their toys. And be sure to share any new twists on our toys at [#CountlessWaysToPlay](#). Here are some ideas to kick-start your kids' thinking:

- What toys can you mix and match to make up new play experiences?
- ▲ What's a game you could make up to play with a particular toy? How do you win?
- ◆ Come up with a new "use" for the toy: "It's not just a toy broom, it's a rock star's guitar!"
- Make up a story starring the toy: "What happened? Then what? What's next?"





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—Melissa,
co-founder of Melissa & Doug



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