

UNDERSTANDING AND NURTURING IMAGINATION AND WONDER



“The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.”

~Einstein, 1949

In today's fast-moving world, where productivity, certainty, and facts are prioritized, people have become less capable of, or less inclined to, wonder and imagine. Many adults have ceased to wonder, question, and seek meaning in their life experiences because they feel there is no time for wondering, or because they have concluded that it is simply unprofitable and unproductive to reflect on things that cannot be changed anyway. This may in part be due to a focus on learning outcomes, emphasizing performance and efficiency, and constantly speeding things up. As a result, wonder and imagination get pushed aside because they are slow and offer no obvious utilitarian value. But in reality, these qualities require time and space to grow.



WHAT IS IMAGINATION AND WONDER?

Imagination is the ability to think beyond what is immediately present. Wonder is the state of mind that shows we've reached the limits of our current understanding, suggesting that things may not be as they appear. Both imagination and wonder are central to the development of thinking skills. They spark inquiry and questioning, which in turn help us rethink our values, beliefs, and habits. Albert Camus argued that a lack of wonder can lead to passively accepting the world as it is. We may become so accustomed to our conditions that we stop questioning and imagining new ways of living and being. Having a sense of wonder and imagination encourages us to reflect, ask questions, explore new possibilities, and broaden our perspectives.



WHY IS NURTURING IMAGINATION AND WONDER IMPORTANT?

Children are most engaged in their thinking when their imagination and sense of wonder are active. In an environment focused on quick results and efficiency, these qualities are often pushed aside. Wonder is considered 'slow', and time and space to wonder come under pressure. However, imagination and wonder are critical in fostering self-reflection, empathy, and a broader worldview. When students are allowed to explore "what ifs" or "what could bes," they are motivated to learn, enjoy discovering new things, and apply their knowledge to real-world issues. This is especially important when discussing complex topics such as drugs and gambling, where critical thinking and emotional awareness are essential for understanding.



IMAGINATION AND WONDER IN RELATION TO DRUGS AND GAMBLING

Imagination and wonder are not just abstract ideas—they are critical tools for deep learning, personal development, and engaging with complex societal issues like drugs and gambling. Often, young people are simply told to avoid drugs and gambling without allowing them to express their curiosity and ideas, having an opportunity for dialogue and asking questions or thinking about why people might engage in these behaviors. Rather than just telling students what to avoid, nurturing their ability to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living can help them critically engage with these behaviors. Imagination and wonder help young people understand and navigate the world, which is especially important in a society where drugs and gambling are common and often promoted.



HOW TO NURTURE IMAGINATION AND WONDER IN THE CLASSROOM

Here are some practical strategies to nurture imagination and wonder in a classroom:

- 1. Encourage curiosity:** Show genuine curiosity and ask students to think beyond the usual answers. Use questions like “What if?” or “What could be?” to encourage them to imagine new possibilities.

- 2. Ask open-ended questions:** Encourage students to ask open-ended questions about their own lives and the world, including topics like drugs and gambling. Create a space where not having all the answers is okay.
- 3. Create a safe, open environment:** Students should feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and questions, especially about sensitive topics like drugs or gambling. Open dialogue allows students to think critically and challenge mainstream ideas.
- 4. Use creative projects:** Art, music, poetry, and play can stimulate imagination and allow students to engage with ideas in ways that traditional methods may not.
- 5. Engage in play-based learning and outdoor activities:** Games and activities—especially those in nature—can help stimulate new ways of thinking. Play encourages students to engage with the world in an open, non-judgmental way, and it promotes collaboration and imaginative thinking.
- 6. Encourage speculation:**
 - Use experimental thinking by discussing case studies from science fiction or fantasy stories.
 - Encourage figurative thinking, where students explore metaphors, images, and their meanings.
 - Promote reflective thinking through writing short essays, keeping journals, or drawing, allowing students to explore their thoughts.
 - Introduce meditative thinking, using sounds, silence, or meditation, to help students think in new ways.



University
of Victoria

Canadian Institute for
Substance Use Research

