Arnold Gesell, the influential mid-century pediatrician and child development psychologist, believed “by nature,” the child was “a creative artist of sorts. … we may well be amazed at his resourcefulness, his extraordinary capacity for original activity, inventions, and discovery.” Gesell’s awe at the child’s apparently innate creativity has its roots in the Romantic era, and has not only persisted but also expanded in our own age. Indeed, spontaneous creativity has become an unquestioned “truth” about children and childhood and a major force of consumption. Why then do we view children as having unusual insight or creative ability? Why do parents believe that taking classes, purchasing special toys, books, or furniture might help to stimulate this cherished talent? Furthermore, why has creativity become so important to a sense of national pride and positive future gains?

This paper explores how a perception of children as spontaneous, imaginative, and naturally creative was constructed and consumed in the United States in the years after World War II. I argue that educational toys, the plan and decoration of the smaller middle-class house, postwar schools, along with special museums developed across the country, were designed to cultivate imagination in the Baby Boom generation. Furthermore, I explore how these things were consumed in relation to new psychological research on creativity during a crucial period of educational reform, material expansion, and Cold War anxiety.

My argument builds on existing frameworks about children and consumption but takes a different position on the results. By looking at the material and visual evidence, I explore how the educational discourses of the abstract notion of creativity were naturalized and made available in goods, objects, and spaces at a time when consumer expectations were dramatically transformed. I suggest that consumption mediated the growth and acceptance of the concept of childhood creativity. The image of the creative child and its material representations therefore suggests a new dimension to the conventional critique of postwar childhood. In addition to the popular material culture of coonskin caps and Barbie dolls, a more abstract and powerful ideal of creativity was also packaged as a readily available commodity. In thinking of creativity historically, rather than in essentialist terms, I hope to show how it not only acquired a particularly material image, but how it became an enduring cultural value.