

Are adolescents more creative than adults?

There is a trade-off between originality and feasibility

by [Claire Stevenson](#)

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Creativity is at the heart of medical breakthroughs, awe-inspiring art, and the newest technology. Creativity will help humanity not only survive, but also thrive, despite current challenges such as climate change.

When you think of creative people who are helping to solve global problems, who comes to mind? Perhaps you think of Swedish teen Greta Thunberg, who organized the “Fridays for Future” school strike for the climate and was named this year’s *Person of the Year* by Time magazine. Or [Boyan Slat](#), who, at the age of 18, launched [The Ocean Cleanup project](#). These are just two examples of creative people making a difference, both of whom happen to be adolescents. Does this suggest that adolescents are more creative than adults?

Creativity is a quality that allows us to produce novel and useful ideas or products, and is often measured using [divergent thinking](#) tasks. One of the most popular tools for measuring creativity is the [Alternative Uses Test](#), designed by J.P. Guilford, in which people are asked to find creative uses for an everyday object, such as a brick. When asked what they might do with a brick, most people think about building or breaking (e.g., a window). Less common, and more creative, responses might be to use a brick as a nail file or as a geisha pillow.

Recent research shows that adolescence is a time of great [exploration and risk-taking](#), which reflects a [brain that is still developing](#), and that adolescence represents a window of [opportunity for learning and creativity](#). In various studies, researchers have sought to determine whether adolescents and adults differ in their responses to the *Alternative Uses Test* and other creativity measures.

They found that adolescents suggested [more original](#) and [unique uses](#) and came up with [more original drawings](#) or [geometric configurations](#) than adults. They also benefited more from practice; over time, their ideas became more original, whether they practiced the specific creativity task they had been given or an unrelated task. However, when the adolescents were asked to assess the causes and consequences of a real-life situation, the ideas of 12-year-olds were [less original than those of adults](#).

Research shows that adolescents have [difficulty considering the consequences](#) of their actions. Perhaps they also have difficulty considering whether their ideas are feasible and useful. As pointed out above, true creativity means proposing ideas that are not only original, but also useful. Past studies [have shown](#) that when they have the necessary background knowledge, adolescents propose more original ideas than adults; however, these studies have not looked at whether their ideas are as useful as those of adults.

In an ongoing research project, my colleagues and I reanalyzed the responses of adolescents and adults when they were assigned the same *Alternative Uses* task that was used [in our previous study](#). We asked two experts to rescore all of the responses on the two dimensions of creativity: originality and usefulness.

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One noteworthy finding was that there is a trade-off between originality and feasibility. In most cases, the more original the idea, the less useful it is. Adolescents suggested more original, albeit outside-the-box responses (such as using a brick as a parachute). But their ideas were less useful than those of adults (who suggested using a brick to measure the depth of a well, for example). So if we look at the whole picture, adolescents may not be more creative than adults.

The bottom line is this: While adolescents’ ideas are perhaps more original, adults’ ideas tend to be more feasible. In the real world, we need people whose ideas are in the sweet spot of creativity that combines originality with usefulness. Perhaps the best approach is to encourage adolescents and adults to take advantage of their respective strengths by thinking together creatively about how to solve local and global challenges, such as climate change.

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