The Creative Studio

Introduction: The Capabilities Phase

Over the past six notes, we tackled heavy topics, from data privacy to the hidden incentives driving AI development. We had to build up our vocabulary and understanding of how AI works, and establish that emotional firewall, first. You now have a rock-solid foundation for setting boundaries to protect your family.

Today, we officially enter the Capabilities Phase of our series. Instead of just discussing what AI is and how it operates, we are going to explore what it can do. Specifically, we will look at how different AI tools can augment our human creativity. I want to be very clear on our perspective: AI itself is not "creative." We are the creative ones. AI is a powerful tool for enhancing productivity and technical execution.

At a Glance: Today's Project

Turn your child's short story into an illustrated picture book with its own theme song.

Tools: one AI chat tool (for images) and Canva for layout, plus an AI music tool for the song.

Time: about 90 minutes, comfortably split across two sessions (story + illustrations in one, music + layout in another).

Goal: your child does the writing and ideas, AI helps with illustrations and music, and you both practice safe, intentional co-use.

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Age Guidelines: Who Drives?

These guidelines apply to any generative AI tool your family uses, whether it creates text, images, or music. They draw on privacy law (COPPA), clinical guidance, and emerging research on how families phase children into AI use over time.

Age Group	Guidelines	Why
Under 13	**Co-use only**. A parent uses their own account, controls the screen, and types the prompts. The child provides the ideas and first attempts the task without AI (pencil sketch, verbal plan, draft sentence).	COPPA requires parental consent before collecting personal information from children under 13, so most services either ban under-13 accounts or require a parent to be in control. Co-use and active mediation are the strategies child mental health groups recommend for this age, not solo chatbot time.
13 to 15	**Active mediation**. The child can drive the tool, but a parent stays nearby, reviews prompts regularly, and keeps the conversation open. You make sure core "learn without AI" tasks are not outsourced.	Studies of families show parents naturally move through phases: first co-use, then guided use with monitoring, with independence coming later. Younger teens are still building judgment and are more prone to over-relying on AI as a shortcut.
16 to 18	**Guided independence**. The teen drives with periodic check-ins. You agree on clear boundaries around emotional use and academic integrity and stay available for help.	Expert bodies like AACAP and UNICEF advise that minors should have clear rules, conversations, and support around AI use, even when they are technically allowed on the platforms. Supervision shifts from constant to periodic, not to zero.

These are guidelines, not hard rules. A developmental approach matters more than a fixed birthday. An eleven-year-old doing supervised co-use with a parent is safer than a fifteen-year-old using AI alone without any literacy foundation.

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The Framework: Three Buckets of Learning

Knowing who should be in the driver's seat at different ages is only half of the picture. The next question is what kind of learning belongs with AI, and what absolutely needs to be protected from it. That is where this simple three-bucket framework comes in.

Harvard educator Teddy Svoronos suggests thinking about student use of AI in three distinct buckets. Building on his framework, we can think about family AI use this way:

1. Learn without AI
These are the foundational skills, such as mental math, handwriting, and formulating an original thesis, that children must build entirely on their own to develop their cognitive muscles. These mental muscles without AI, because they are essential for focus, self-control, and truly independent judgment.

2. Learn with AI
Using AI as an active collaborator. This is AI acting as a tutor that asks your child helpful questions, a brainstorming partner, or, in today's project, a visual and musical co-creator.

3. Learn about AI
Understanding how these systems work, where they can go wrong, and how they handle our data, which is exactly what the first phase of this newsletter series has been about. This is also why it matters that parents provide this guidance first, instead of letting kids jump straight into the 'fun' capabilities of AI tools and explore on their own.

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The Family AI Agreement (Short Version)

Before your child sits down with an AI tool for the first time, a simple written agreement sets clear expectations and gives children ownership of the rules. Three core commitments to start with:

1. **We will not lie about who we are or our age to unlock features.**

2. **We will not share personal information,** such as full name, school, address, or phone number.

3. **We agree to review AI sessions together regularly,** so we can talk about what worked, what felt off, and what we learned.

You can extend this into a fuller one-page “Family AI Agreement” by adding rules like “AI is a tool, not a friend” and “I will not use AI to do work that is mine to do,” and then signing it together.

Before You Start

(so this feels easy, not overwhelming)

For today’s project, assume you drive, your child decides. Especially for younger kids, you control the account and screen, and you type the prompts. Your child provides the story, the descriptions, and the creative decisions. AI is not the author; it is the helper that turns your child’s ideas into pictures and music that you can actually finish and share.

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A Beginner's Guide to Creative AI tools

Most parents are already using large language models like ChatGPT and Gemini by asking questions through text prompts. Those same tools can often generate illustrations from the exact same chat box. You do not need to learn to code or use a design program; you just talk to it normally.

If you type, "Write me a poem about a dog," it gives you text. If you type in the exact same box, "Draw me a picture of a dog," it generates an image.

The default stack for this project

If you do not have anything set up yet, this is a simple starting point:

- Microsoft Copilot for images (free, uses DALL-E 3).
- Suno for music (free tier).
- Canva for layout (free tier).

Other options you might already use

If your family already uses these tools, they work as well:

- **ChatGPT Plus** (DALL-E 3 built in) or Bing Image Creator for illustrations.
- **Google Gemini** for images via its Imagen model.
- **Perplexity Pro** for images, using models like GPT Image 1 and Nano Banana.
- **Udio** as an alternative to Suno for music generation.
- **Book Creator** if you want a more guided book-making interface for younger kids.

Because image and music tools sometimes produce odd or inappropriate results, always preview what they generate yourself before showing it to your child, and regenerate or adjust prompts if needed.

Golden rule of image prompting

The AI cannot read your mind. You have to tell it the style, the subject, and the setting for every picture. Instead of "A dragon baking," try:

"A watercolor illustration of a messy, friendly green dragon covered in flour, standing in a bright medieval bakery."

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The Project: The Ultimate Co-Creator

For today's project, we operate in the Learn with AI bucket. You and your child are the Directors, and the AI tools are the Studio.

We are not going to ask the AI to write a story for us. Instead, we will take a short story your child has already written, or a story idea they dreamed up, and use AI to **illustrate it and compose a theme song.**

This is the perfect introduction to prompt precision. If the AI draws the main character wrong, your child has to figure out which descriptive words they missed. It is secretly an incredible vocabulary and communication exercise disguised as a game.

Step 1: Write the Story

Have your child write out their story first, with pencil and paper, no AI. For a first project, keep it simple: three to five short sentences or paragraphs are perfect. For example: start with an opening line like: 'Once there was a clumsy green dragon named Barnaby who just wanted to be a baker.' Then let your child continue from there, adding two to four more sentences to complete the story.

Step 2: Storyboarding (Planning the Pages)

Before touching the AI, have your child break their story down into distinct "scenes" or "pages." This helps children think visually and structurally about narrative, not just sentence by sentence.

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Step 3: Build a Character Reference Sheet

Before generating story illustrations, create a dedicated character reference image. Prompt the AI with something like:

Generate a character reference sheet of a friendly green dragon wearing a bright yellow chef's hat with a rip in the right side. Show a front view, a side view, and a close-up of the face. Watercolor illustration style.

This gives you one consistent "source of truth" for your character. In every later scene prompt, describe the character directly from this sheet and include that exact defining detail. Some tools, such as ChatGPT Plus, will also let you upload that reference image so the visual model matches it more closely.

Step 4: Generate the Illustrations (One by One)

Open your chosen visual AI tool, such as Copilot, Gemini, or ChatGPT with images enabled, and generate one picture per scene. Use the golden rule every time: style, subject, setting. Example:

Generate an image of a character reference sheet of a friendly green dragon wearing a bright yellow chef's hat with a rip in the right side. Show a front view, a side view, and a close-up of the face. Watercolor illustration style.

Repeat this for each page, updating the scene while keeping the character description the same.

Step 5: Compose the Theme Song

To add a musical element, step over to an AI music generator like Suno or Udio. Both offer free options that are enough for a family project.

Instead of just asking for “a dragon song,” teach your child to specify the genre and the mood:

An upbeat, Broadway-style musical number about a dragon trying to bake a cake.

You can even paste in lyrics your child wrote themselves and have the AI sing them. This shows them that music is a storytelling tool that can change how a scene feels, not just background noise.

Step 6: Publish the Masterpiece

Now it is time to put everything together.

I recommend starting with Canva: it keeps every step visible and separate. Your child uploads the illustrations they created, types the text they wrote, and arranges the pages themselves. Nothing is automated away. They experience the full arc of making a book, from blank page to finished product, which is exactly the point.

Many families already have access to a text and image AI tool such as ChatGPT, Gemini, or Perplexity, and to Canva’s free tier, making this flow easy to start without any new subscriptions. Canva’s children’s book templates handle the formatting so the creative decisions stay with your child.

Once the book is complete, you can export it as a PDF to share digitally with grandparents and friends, or use Canva's print-on-demand options to order a physical copy delivered to your door.

If you want an even simpler publishing experience, platforms such as Book Creator automate more of the layout process, which can be helpful for younger children. For this exercise, though, we are intentionally walking through every step so your child can see how the pieces fit together.

Dinner Table Conversation

Starter: "If we could turn any story you have dreamed up into a movie, what style would the animation be? Would it look like a Pixar movie, an anime, or a watercolor painting? What kind of music would play in the background?"

What this teaches: That style is part of storytelling, not decoration. By choosing the "look" and "sound" of their story, your child practices thinking like a director, deciding how they want their ideas to feel, and seeing AI as a tool to express that vision, not the source of it.

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The Toolkit: Consistent Characters and Music

If you are generating multiple pages for a storybook, the hardest thing is making the character look the same on every single page. The AI tends to draw a slightly different version each time. Two reliable fixes:

Character consistency trick
Give your character one highly specific defining feature and include it in every single prompt.

Instead of just “a green dragon,” use:

A green dragon wearing a bright yellow chef’s hat with a rip in the right side.

That exact phrase, repeated each time and combined with your character reference sheet, keeps the AI locked into a consistent character across the entire book.

Theme song trick

Try generating a short track for each key scene rather than one generic theme:

- A quiet, mysterious tune for the cave discovery.
- An upbeat, triumphant fanfare for the final cupcake moment.

Prompt example: “A soft, mysterious acoustic guitar piece for a young dragon exploring a dark cave.” This helps your child notice how sound shapes the emotion of a scene, not just the visuals.