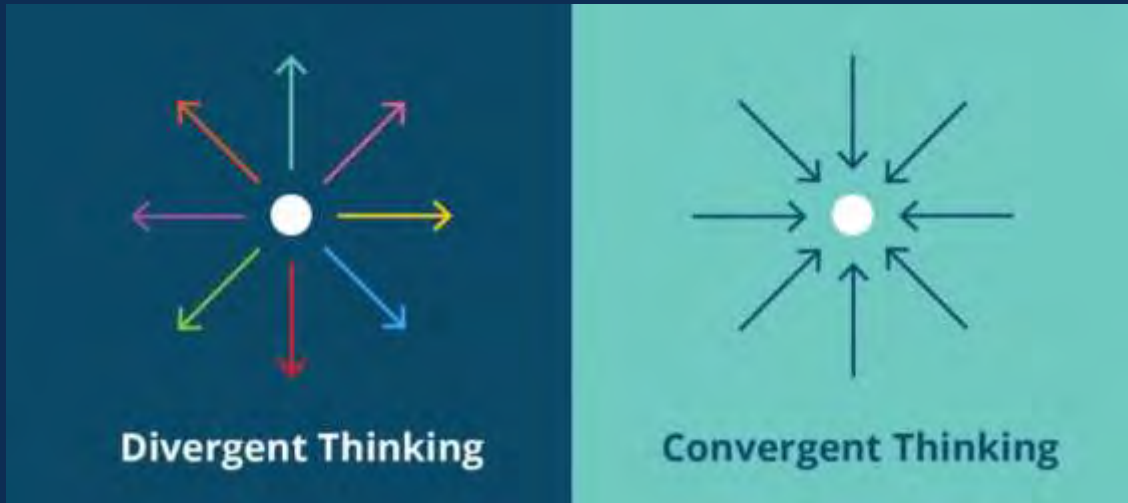


## Cultivating Divergent Thinking - Discovering New Possible Solutions

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### Cultivating Divergent Thinking

A student visited a famous Zen master and asked for guidance about living a life centered on Buddhism. The master began to discuss several topics: emptiness, mindfulness and meditation. But the student interrupted the master, saying, "Oh, I already know that." Then the master invited the student to have some tea. He began pouring the tea into a teacup, filling it to the brim, spilling tea over the sides of the cup and onto the table. The student exclaimed, "Stop! You can't pour tea into a full cup" to which the master replied, "Exactly, return to me when your cup is empty."

If we think about our own lives, we can probably realize that our creativity and thinking abilities are relatively low, making us less open to new ways of looking at a situation or discovering new possible opportunities or solutions. After all, so much of adult life is about structure, coming up with concrete solutions to problems, and thinking in more black-and-white terms. We tend to lose more of that out-of-the-box thinking the older we

get. Perhaps our teacup is filled with facts, thoughts and opinions that we have come to expect and accept.

***Divergent thinking*** is a type of creative process where several solutions and ideas are offered to address a challenge. This way of thinking can help increase creativity and innovation in problem-solving. Understanding how this thinking strategy works can also help us more successfully implement it at work, school, in our families and life.

The opposite of divergent thinking is convergent thinking. If divergent thinking is all about coming up with creative solutions to a particular problem, convergent thinking is about evaluating a problem and coming up with a single correct answer.

To be successful in life, we need both kinds of thinking. The challenge is that young children engage in creative thinking to a very high degree. In their early years, imaginative play is the dominant type of play they engage in--98% of kindergartners engage in "genius" levels of divergent thinking. But by the time they are 8-10 years old, research shows that number drops to about 50%.

One way researchers evaluate divergent thinking in individuals is by the number of answers they give to questions like:

- How many uses are there for a shoe?
- How many uses can you think of for a paper clip?

Most people offer 10 to 15 answers for these types of questions. Those who are able to access a divergent thinking process can come up with close to 200 answers.

The good news is that we can cultivate divergent thinking in our children and ourselves. Some suggestions are:

- Ask open-ended questions which promotes thinking from different

perspectives and not having only one answer.

- Don't demand absolute obedience. Creativity and obedience are often at odds. Work together to find solutions that work for both parties.
- Teach questioning assumptions in a respectful manner. Being able to challenge the norm in a safe environment with parents not only fosters divergent thinking but also teaches kids how to analyze problems.
- Learn a second language. Studies have found that children who learn a second language in elementary school years have more flexible and divergent thinking than those who speak only one language.
- Listening to music, practicing meditation, participating in improv experiences, and including humor in one's life all contribute to being a more creative person.

Like the empty teacup, our mind and life needs to open so that we may discover, learn, grow and see things differently. Awe and wonder can challenge or expand our thinking—allowing us to see beyond what is on the surface. This allows us to collaborate together to find win-win solutions that support thriving families and communities.

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