

The Arts, Health & Wellbeing

Why the arts make us happier and healthier

Foreword

By the time they leave primary school, one in five children will have experienced mental health problems at least once in their lives¹. Bereavement, family breakdown, witnessing domestic violence, parental substance misuse – these are just a few examples of the life-altering issues that young children can face before they even reach adolescence.

Untreated, poor mental health in childhood can lead to a lifetime of difficulties. A child with a conduct disorder is twice as likely as her or his peers to leave school with no educational qualifications; four times more likely to become dependent on drugs; and 20 times more likely to end up in prison². Aside from the grave personal cost, poor mental health in childhood has a high price-tag in terms of the long-term associated healthcare and welfare costs.

Creativity is one of Place2Be's core values, alongside perseverance, integrity and compassion. Giving children and young people the opportunity to explore and express their emotions through art and imaginative play is at the heart of our approach to supporting good mental health in schools.

I believe the arts can give children a vital creative outlet to express and make sense of their emotions, in particular when they might not always have the words to describe what they're feeling. Whether music, drama, dance, literature, visual art or film – the creative process can help children work through their problems and find ways of coping.

It can also be a welcome chance to switch off from the many pressures young people find themselves under in today's society.

Using our creativity is a way of discovering the unexplored dimensions and strengths of our personalities. Setting up life-long habits of taking part in the arts can provide children with valuable experiences, and can help give them the tools to cope with life's challenges when they become adults. We owe it to all our children to ensure that they experience an arts-rich education – it will contribute to all aspects of their development, whilst equipping them to be more resilient throughout their lives.

Dame Benita Refson

President & Founder, Place2Be

'The time has come to recognise the powerful contribution the arts can make to our health and wellbeing.'

Rt Hon. Lord Howarth of Newport, *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017 p4

'Art brings people together, initiates conversation, stirs feelings, conveys that which may not be expressed in words. It is no wonder that art plays an important part in many people's mental health experience, including my own ... Creating is a very human thing; I suppose you could say art made me feel human again.'

Grace Jeremy, YoungMinds blogger, extract from YoungMinds blog, May 2016

For a happier, healthier childhood and adulthood we need the arts embedded in children's lives, building their self-confidence, sense of identity, communication skills and resilience.

Poor childhood wellbeing

Young people are twice as likely to report feeling depressed or anxious now as in the 1980s (Nuffield Foundation, 2012). In the UK one in ten secondary age children have a diagnosable mental health problem; an average of three children in every classroom (Young Minds, 2016). The UK's children are particularly hard-hit compared to their international peers: the UK ranks 14th out of 15 countries for wellbeing in the Children's Worlds study (Rees & Main, 2015). Aside from the personal cost of poor mental health, mental illness during childhood and adolescence results in UK costs of £11,030 to £59,130 annually per child.

Poor physical health, particularly for children from more deprived backgrounds, is also a cause for concern. Over one in five children in the first year of primary school are overweight or obese, with minimal improvement in these figures over the past decade. In 2015/2016, 40% of children in England's most deprived areas were overweight or obese compared to 27% in the most affluent areas (Royal College of Paediatrics & Child Health, 2017).

'The arts take us to another world where we can explore our thoughts and feelings free of fear of stigma or judgement. They help children and young people to express things that they sometimes cannot say in conversation, and to celebrate feelings and thoughts that previously troubled them. The creative process can also be a curative process.'

Professor Peter Fonagy, CEO, Anna Freud Centre

Impact of the arts

There is growing evidence of the impact of the arts in improving mental and physical health. Study after study has found that subjective wellbeing is improved by taking part in arts activities. Italian data shows that cultural access is the second most important determinant of wellbeing above factors such as occupation, age, income and education (Grossi, et al. 2010 & 2012). Nordic data found that people who visited cinema, art exhibitions, museums or concerts, compared with those who rarely visited, had a lower mortality risk (Konlaan, et al. 2000).

Research by the Scottish Government has shown that those who participated in a creative or cultural activity were 38% more likely to report good health compared to those who did not. For participants in dance, the figure reporting good health leapt to 62% (Leadbetter & O'Connor, 2013).

Arts Council England cites similar data with even higher recorded benefits: people who had attended a cultural place or event in the previous 12 months were almost 60% more likely to report good health compared to those who had not (Mowlah, et al. 2014).

'I feel like the arts are such an important part of how we understand ourselves, how we laugh at ourselves, how we make sense of reality. Listening to a record that you love, reading a novel that you love – it connects you more forcibly into life. For your mental health, it's extremely important that people are accessing that part of themselves, tuning into other people's creative expression, expressing themselves.'

Kate Tempest, *The Guardian*, November 2016

'Singing oxygenates the blood, reduces stress hormones and related anxiety, whilst building relationships and creating a powerful sense of belonging.'

Dr Cliff Richards, former Chair, & Dave Sweeney, Interim CEO, *A Cultural Manifesto for Wellbeing*, NHS Halton Clinical Commissioning Group

‘The arts, including music, dance, theatre, visual arts and writing, are increasingly recognised as having the potential to support health and wellbeing.’

Public Health England (2016) *Arts for health and wellbeing: an evaluation framework*

What works

Different types of art activities increase different elements of health and wellbeing. Dance can be shown to improve the physical health and self-esteem of participants, in particular for girls who are not engaging in other physical activity (Connolly, et al. 2011). Theatre, drama and group music-making improve young people’s social skills and emotional wellbeing (Schellenberg, et al. 2015 & Hughes & Wilson 2004).

Learning to play an instrument has been shown to help children better cope with stress (Roden, et al. 2016) with Hallam noting in the *Power of Music* (2015) ‘Music has a particular role in the reduction of stress and anxiety.’ The act of making art (visual or performance) develops young people’s sense of identity and self-efficacy and increases children and young people’s resilience (Catterall & Pepler 2007, Merrell & Tymms 2002, Schellenberg, et al. 2015), a key component of good mental health.

‘Creative activity has been observed to stimulate an understanding of the process of making, giving rise to a greater sense of responsibility and self-reflection, increased confidence and self-esteem and better mental health.’

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017 p92

‘I’ve been in Alder Hey [Children’s Hospital] a lot but this is the first music project I’ve participated in. It’s really helped me. Music is my distraction and coping mechanism for being here ... Doctors look at the physical side but don’t necessarily consider the mental. I’ve struggled with my mental health but music helps me to manage this.’

Sian, Music Mentoring Project Participant

‘I firmly hold the view that the arts and creativity generally are not “additional”, they are fundamental. They are the glue that holds life together; that for some of us, makes life bearable and, for most of us, makes life better. They are what it is to be human.’

Richard Findlay, Chair, Creative Scotland

‘Our ongoing research is demonstrating that access to programmes which incorporate arts- and health-based interventions leads to increased independence, improved self-esteem, confidence and resilience and allows individuals to build a peer support network.’

Rebecca Johnson, Occupational Therapist and Clinical Lead, Breathe Arts Health Research (originally part of Guy’s and St Thomas’ Charity; now a social enterprise that designs and delivers arts-in-healthcare programmes)

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