
Early Years & The Arts

Why an arts-rich early years matters

Foreword

Access to an arts-rich early years not only lays the foundation for a culturally rich life, it is a social justice issue. Watch any baby or young child play and you will see them using the arts to explore and understand their world. But not every child experiences an arts-rich home and education that can scaffold and extend this learning.

Under 5s are currently experiencing a particularly hostile environment in which to grow up. Poverty is affecting increasing numbers of children. Mental health problems are on the rise and the disadvantage gap is growing.

Covid isolation has resulted in many under-fives not accessing early childhood education and care. Children without a rich home learning environment including the arts, could previously receive this input via Early Years settings such as Children's Centres.

Evidence shared by the Cultural Learning Alliance demonstrates that the arts enrich young lives, making them happier and healthier. Children who engage in the arts are more resilient, healthier, do better in school, are more likely to vote, to go to university, to get a job and to keep it.

Children with an arts deficit are disadvantaged right from the start of their lives educationally and economically.

We need to build the confidence of parents to provide an arts-rich home learning environment, and ensure that staff in early years and childcare settings feel confident singing, music-making, painting, drawing, dancing and role-playing with children in their care.

Professor Chris Pascal

Director

Centre for Research in Early Childhood

‘The parents ... recognised and highlighted the potential of creative activities to enhance the acquisition of a number of skills for their babies, including the following skills: curiosity, confidence, creativity, and imagination’

Ochieng, B et al. (2020). *Nurturing Babies During the COVID-19 Lockdown: Resilience, Art and Creativity. The Talent 25 Longitudinal Sub-sample Study*. Leicester: De Montfort University

Home learning environment

Large cohort studies from the UK and Australia demonstrate time and again the positive impact of an arts-rich home learning environment in the early years. The Millennium Cohort Study found that parents reading with children and drawing or painting at home, as part of a positive home learning environment, increased the probability of achieving the expected level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Outcomes (Hansen, Joshi, & Dex, 2010).

Research using the Australian NPLAN data from a large, nationally representative sample of Australian families has similar results, with the research noting ‘brain development is particularly sensitive to early experiences, and children’s social and cognitive skills are acquired most effectively during early childhood’ (Yu & Daraganova, 2015). The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has noted children with an arts-rich home learning environment are more motivated to learn.

‘Children whose parents engage in activities such as reading, writing words, telling stories and singing songs not only tend to achieve better reading and numeracy skills, but are also more motivated to learn.’

OECD. (2018). *Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publishing

Music, communication & language

Taking part in music activities in the early years develops phonological awareness, speech-in-noise perception, rhythm perception, auditory working memory and sound pattern learning (Tierney & Kraus, 2013). All these functions are needed to learn to read.

75% of staff in the OECD Starting Strong programme identified ‘singing songs or rhymes with children’ as an important element of the ‘process quality’ (how staff interact with children) facilitating literacy development (OECD, 2018). We know participation in music activities plays a role in auditory skill development, helping develop speech and communication, and then literacy from infancy onwards.

‘Music playschool significantly improved the development of children’s phoneme processing and vocabulary skills.’

Linnavalli, T., Putkinen, V., Lipsanen, J., Huotilainen, M., & Tervaniemi, M. (2018). Music playschool enhances children’s linguistic skills. *Scientific Reports*, 8(1), 8767

Mark making for literacy

Making art is an important step in the development of reading and writing for children. Mark making is the route through which children come to understand words can have meaning, while the act of making art enables children to develop the fine motor control needed to form letters and words.

Research has found that interventions by trained staff with 'visual and verbal prompts, collaborative drawing, and the visual consequences associated with drawing acts' (Dunst & Gorman, 2009) increase children's mark making, and thus their early literacy.

'... the more often a child was provided the opportunity to mark or scribble, the more a child engaged in drawing and the more complex was the child's drawing behaviour.'

Dunst, C., & Gorman, E. (2009). Development of Infant and Toddler Mark Making and Scribbling. *Centre for Early Learning Literacy Review*, Volume 2. Number 2

'Mark making is an important experience for children because over time they can attribute meaning to their marks.'

Department for Education. (2022, September 19). *Help for Early Years Providers*

Wellbeing and resilience

Structured music programmes foster self-regulation in the early years and shared music making plays a role in mother-infant bonding (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) which is key in building children's resilience. Artist-in-residence programmes, such as those offered by the Talent 25 longitudinal study (Ochieng, et al., 2020) and Ireland's Artful Dodgers (Hayes et al., 2017) report that children taking part in artist-led arts activities increased their initiative and confidence.

Children who take part in arts activities with their care givers grow their creativity, innovation, empathy, and resilience. The arts support the development of communication, pro-social skills and motivate children to learn (Pascal, Bertram, & Rouse, 2019).

Closing the outcomes gap

We need to harness the power of the arts to close the disadvantage gap before children reach school, committing resources to an arts filled early years education and supporting parents to provide an arts-rich home learning environment. This will compensate for the adverse experiences of children, rather than attempting interventions downstream when the impact and cost to children, families and communities is so much greater.

'The evidence indicates that expressive arts and design play an important role in supporting children's learning across a range of areas, and PSED (Personal, Social and Emotional Development).'

Pascal, C., Bertram, T., & Rouse, L. (2019). *Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence*. Centre for Research in Early Childhood

‘The quality and variety of what children see, hear and participate in is crucial for developing their understanding, self-expression, vocabulary and ability to communicate through the arts.’

Department for Education. (2021). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*

‘When we’re children we’re devoted to learning about our world and imagining all the other ways that world could be. When we become adults we put all that we’ve learned and imagined to use.’

Gopnik, A. (2009). *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*

Partnerships with artist educators

A range of studies have shown that artists-in-residence working in partnership with Early Childhood Education and Care staff over a term or longer have important impacts (Eckhoff, 2011). These include increasing educators’ confidence about artistic practices, increasing and deepening teachers’ pedagogical understanding of how to use the arts within early years education, enriched creative response from children and enriched early learning environments with improved uses of space and materials.

Support for staff and parents

Early years practitioners, trained by arts-educators, together with parents who are supported to be confident partners in their children’s learning, are able to scaffold and extend arts-based activities and enrich learning environments. Evidence shows the result of this early investment is lifelong, with better educational, employment and wellbeing outcomes, especially for the most disadvantaged children (Schleicher, 2019).

References

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www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/briefings

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