

Evidence brief: how the arts can support children and young people's development and wellbeing

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Introduction

This briefing describes key headline findings from the Social Biobehavioural Research Group's research into arts engagement and child health and development. The findings here are taken from our longer report, *The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health: Findings from Major Cohort Studies in the UK and USA 2017 – 2022*, available at: www.sbbresearch.org. We encourage people to read the referenced research papers in full before using findings to develop policies or services.

Headlines

Children and young people who participate in arts and cultural activities:

- Display less hyperactivity and inattention, and fewer antisocial or criminal behaviours.
- Have better prosocial behaviours, such as empathy or helping others.
- Are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and use substances.

Data suggest these benefits may stem from the arts' ability to support young peoples' creativity, improve their self-esteem, and support better self-control.

Background

A large body of evidence exists for the role that the arts can play in supporting child development and young people's health (1). However, much of this research is small scale and has generally focused on short term effects of arts engagement. Seeking to explore longer term effects, we've used large datasets from population cohort studies in the UK and USA. These track the health and activities of thousands of randomly sampled people over multiple years and decades, from which we can identify population-level links between arts engagement and children and young peoples' social development and healthy behaviours.

Developmental and social (or antisocial) behaviours

Our findings show that children who read daily for pleasure display lower levels of hyperactivity and inattention, and better prosocial behaviour, such as empathy or helping others. This is independent of their gender, ethnicity, their parents' demographics (marital status, education level, employment status) and how frequently children and their mother read together (2). We found similar benefits of dance, music and art lessons, and other performing arts programmes.

We also found that if adolescents engaged in a book club, drama club, band, cheerleading, dance, choir or orchestra they reported fewer antisocial or criminal behaviours, for at least one to two years (3). Furthermore, participating in a higher number of extracurricular arts activities at age 10 or 11 was linked to less hyperactivity or inattention three years later, again independent of demographics, socioeconomics, and school factors such as overcrowding or location. However, the same relationship was not found for in-school arts activities (4). This may be because young people who engage in extracurricular activities are more interested in the arts, facilitating greater development of their creative skills, which benefits transfer to other areas of life. Our findings suggest that extracurricular access to arts activities may be important for promoting healthy psychological and social behaviours.

Healthy behaviours

We found that children who read for pleasure were less likely to have started smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol at age 14 (5). Teenagers who participated in arts groups between the ages of 12 and 19 used substances less frequently, such as alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco, though this link was not maintained long-term after they stopped participating. This may mean that for young people, consistent engagement with the arts may be required for these benefits to be lasting (6).

Creative skills and development

Using cohort study data, we can explore whether data on teachers' reports about children's *creativity* can be linked to their development. Whilst a difficult concept to define objectively, here we may understand creativity as teachers' reports on children's originality, creativity, or imagination when engaging in free writing, telling a story, crafts, painting, drawing, or drama. We found that children who showed greater creativity, according to their teachers, at aged 7 had a lower risk of depression,

restlessness, social or behavioural maladjustment and behavioural instability later on in adolescence (7). This suggests that building creative skills through arts engagement is an important part of the reported beneficial effects.

Self-esteem and self-control

We found that children aged 11 who listen to or play music, draw, paint, make things, or read for enjoyment had higher self-esteem, which can in turn affect lifelong development and wellbeing. The link was even stronger if parents participated in the activities with their children (8). Adolescents engaging in arts and culture also reported higher self-control, suggesting the arts could help young people to regulate their emotions and behaviours (3). This may help explain the links reported above around arts engagement, social development, and behavioural outcomes.

Does ability matter?

Greater reported arts ability at age 10 was linked to fewer behavioural difficulties at age 16 (9), suggesting that cultivating arts skills (i.e., beyond just 'engagement') among children may positively influence later behaviours. However, whilst arts ability was linked to self-esteem amongst children with high educational ability (9), we did not find a consistent link between arts ability and self-esteem generally. This suggests that high ability is not necessary for arts engagement to elicit higher self-esteem for all children.

Policy and practice considerations

- The benefits of the arts will happen if we [normalise and facilitate arts and cultural engagement as part of all our daily lives](#). In particular, children, young people and families need consistent and accessible engagement with the arts and culture throughout childhood, [including outside schools](#).
- Since our work in other areas has shown that people living in more deprived areas may benefit even more from arts engagement than those in more affluent areas, [improving arts provision for young people in less affluent areas is therefore a priority](#) and may contribute to addressing health inequalities.

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