

Arts-Based Programs and Arts Therapies for At-Risk, Justice-Involved, and Traumatized Youths

Research suggests that the arts can have a positive impact on youth development, from birth through adolescence. For example, Menzer (2015) found that that engaging in various arts activities (such as singing, dancing, play acting, and doing crafts) at a young age is associated with positive social and emotional behaviors, including empathy, sharing, and mood control. Similarly, a series of longitudinal data analyses sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) examined the potential impact of arts engagement (such as taking arts courses or participating in a school band or choir) on education-related outcomes for children and teenagers from low-socioeconomic-status neighborhoods. The study found that, among children and teenagers from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with high levels of arts engagement showed more positive outcomes on indicators such as school grades, test scores, and high-school graduation rates, compared with youths with low levels of arts engagement (Catterall, Dumais, and Hampden-Thompson 2012).

For at-risk and justice-involved youths, the arts can provide an outlet for addressing emotional and/or problem behaviors through opportunities to learn new skills, develop new talents, and express thoughts and ideas in creative and therapeutic ways (Ezell and Levy 2003). Similarly, for youths dealing with trauma or victimization (including exposure to violence), the arts can help them to cope with painful experiences by fostering resiliency (Heise 2014). Creating art can strengthen a youth's problem-solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and social competence. Moreover, art can help encourage positive emotions and strength, allowing youths to view themselves as survivors and not as victims (van Westrhenen and Fritz 2014).

This review explores recent research on arts-based programs and arts therapies. Programs were considered arts-based if at least one of the main components was an arts-related activity, or if there was a deliberate use of arts in the program to bring about a change in behavior. This category includes standalone, arts-based interventions as well as programs incorporating the arts in combination with other approaches (such as mentoring).

The review focuses on the following three populations: 1) at-risk youths, 2) justice-involved youths, and 3) traumatized youths.¹ These groups are defined as follows:

- *At-risk youths* have risk factors (i.e., personality traits; characteristics of the environment; or conditions in the family, school, or community) that have been shown to increase their likelihood of engaging in delinquency and other problem behaviors (Murray and Farrington 2010).

¹ It is important to note that at-risk youths, system-involved youths, and traumatized youths are not mutually exclusive categories.

- *System-involved youths* include those who are currently involved in the juvenile justice system (e.g., on probation, in diversion programs, in detention.).
- *Traumatized youths* are those considered traumatized, based on their personal experiences. “Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014, p. 11).

Finally, this review does not include arts-based or arts education programs aimed at the general youth population, as such programs typically do not focus on the therapeutic nature of art.

Arts-Based Programs and Arts Therapies

Arts programs for at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized or victimized youths can generally be separated into 1) arts-based programs (“art *is* therapy”), including arts education programming; and 2) arts therapies (“art *in* therapy”) that focus on healing processes (Djurichkovic 2011).

Arts-Based Programs. A key assumption behind arts-based programs serving at-risk populations is that arts engagement can be therapeutic in itself (Hughes 2005). As Ezell and Levy explained, “these programs focus on both the creative process and product while broadly defining ‘therapeutic’ as any artistic activity that promotes positive change” (2003, p. 108). Arts-based programs for youths can be preventive or rehabilitative in nature. Programs usually target problem behaviors and behavioral health issues, including delinquency, anger, depression, anxiety, ADHD, and suicidal thoughts or ideations (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, and Rowe 2008; Ross 2016). Such programs generally focus on improving outcomes such as prosocial behaviors, resilience, problem-solving skills, self-regulation, academic achievement, and family functioning (Rapp-Paglicci, et al. 2011; Coholic, Eys, and Lougheed 2012).

Arts-based programs may be implemented at various points in the juvenile justice system. For example, programs may be designed as prevention interventions—targeting youths who have not yet come into contact with the juvenile justice system, but have displayed problem behaviors that place them at risk for arrest or referral. Alternatively, some programs may be diversionary and directed toward juveniles who have committed low-level or first-time offenses. Programs also may be based in detention or residential facilities for adjudicated juveniles who have committed more serious offenses (Clawson and Coolbaugh 2001; Wolf and Holochwost 2015; Ross 2016).

Arts-based interventions can take many forms, including visual or theater arts, drama, dance, crafts, literature, and music. Program activities may involve performing, drawing, painting, sculpting, singing, and playing instruments (Hughes 2005). Another example is expressive writing, in which one of the main goals is to encourage youths to write about stressful experiences (such as violence or victimization) and their feelings associated with those experiences, to help

them process their emotions and gain more control over their responses. In one expressive writing intervention implemented in schools in high-violence urban neighborhoods, students were instructed to write down their deepest thoughts and feelings related to violence they had personally experienced or witnessed. They also were given the option to write stories, skits, songs, or poetry instead of a simple narrative account. Students were also given an opportunity to share their writing with the rest of the group (Kliewer et al. 2011).

Different types of arts programs represent different approaches to working with youths. For instance, theater and performing arts place more emphasis on communication skills, team building, and developing problem-solving skills or empathy, whereas the visual and literary arts, such as painting or creative writing, are more solitary activities that can allow for self-reflection and mood control (Ezell and Levy 2003; Kliewer et al. 2011). These programs often are led by master artists from the community, who can serve as prosocial role models or mentors (Hughes 2005).

This diversity of arts-based programs can be seen in the YouthARTS Development Project. In 1995, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) partnered with the NEA to conduct a national evaluation of the program. The YouthARTS Development Project was designed to identify, implement, and refine effective arts-based, delinquency prevention programs in three selected communities: Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; and San Antonio, Texas. Each site implemented different arts-based programs targeting a specific population of at-risk youths. For example, in Atlanta, a program targeting juveniles who committed their first status offense (primarily truants) was designed to provide art instruction, job training, and literacy education. In Portland, the arts program was designed to allow youths (who were on probation for any status or delinquency offense) to work with artists and be involved in the production and administration of a public arts project. The media included printmaking, photography, poetry, drama, and videography. Finally, in San Antonio, an afterschool program for high-risk students involved three artists at each school who designed and implemented arts activities for students, including dance, visual arts, drama, creative writing, and storytelling (Clawson and Coolbaugh 2001). Evaluations of the programs were conducted separately for each site. Overall, the evaluations suggested the programs had positive impacts on youths' attitudes and behaviors (including delinquent behaviors). However, the evaluations had notable limitations, including small sample sizes, high attrition rates, and data collection mismanagement such as misplaced surveys (Clawson and Coolbaugh 2001).

Arts Therapies. Although the arts can be therapeutic in nature, arts therapies are distinctive in that their underlying goal is to use the medium of art to create a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client (Hughes 2005). Additionally, arts therapies strive to encourage the client to approach his or her own emotional and psychological issues from a therapeutic perspective. Arts therapies have the ability to increase an individual's awareness of the self and of others, cope with stress and traumatic experiences, and enhance cognitive abilities (Jackson 2015). They allow youths to deal with trauma or other negative experiences by providing an alternative way to

express negative feelings, insecurities, and vulnerabilities, rather than acting out in destructive ways (Vice 2012).

Arts therapies are delivered by trained professionals and can include visual art therapy, drama therapy, dance therapy, and music therapy. For example, visual art therapy may involve the creation and investigation of images, leading to the expression of feelings that a youth is unable or unwilling to express verbally (Jackson 2015). By using various art materials, youths are able to create metaphors for what they are feeling; this method gives therapists a greater understanding of their clients and it serves as a noninvasive conversation-starter (Sutherland, Waldman, and Collins 2010; Jackson 2015). Forms of arts therapies that involve personally creating or performing artwork are often called “creative arts therapy” (van Westrhenen and Fritz 2014).

The assortment of arts therapies represents different techniques for working with youths. For instance, music therapy, whether through active music-making or passive listening, can facilitate cognitive development by helping youths make links across areas of experience that are not otherwise accessible. Rickson and Watkins (2003) evaluated a music therapy program that was delivered to adolescent boys with social, emotional, and learning difficulties. The group therapy included positive discussion of group members’ self-selected music; personalization of a song, which was used for greeting peers; rhythm games in which the boys would engage in creative improvisation through a range of percussion instruments; and group song-writing activities. The program’s goal was to have the boys offer an appropriate response to a question, wait their turn, offer creative ideas, accept others’ ideas, and use self-control (Rickson and Watkins 2003).

Because of the highly structured and therapeutic nature of these interventions, the arts therapist must receive professional training and become certified to deliver one of the specific forms of arts therapy listed above (Hughes 2005; Jackson 2015).

Overall, arts therapies’ distinctive approach creates a forum in which therapists can engage at-risk and traumatized youths in finding alternative ways of processing difficult feelings and impulses.

Theoretical Foundation

A number of different psychological theories explain how arts-based programs can bring about changes in youths’ behaviors. Two of these theories are cognitive behavioral therapy and positive youth development (Hughes 2005).

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a problem-focused approach to help people identify and change the dysfunctional beliefs, thoughts, and patterns of behavior that contribute to their problems. The main premise of CBT is that to change behavior, it is first necessary to change the way a person thinks (Development Services Group, Inc. 2010). Some arts-based programs incorporate principles of CBT by involving exercises or activities that focus on self-awareness, expression, problem solving, self-identification, and other areas that relate to how a person thinks

(Hughes 2005). For example, activities such as role-playing allow youths to practice certain prosocial skills and behaviors that they may learn in a program. (For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment](#).)

Another theoretical model underlying some arts-based programs is the positive youth development (PYD) framework. Rather than relying on a deficits model, which views youths as “broken” individuals who need to be fixed, PYD focuses on their assets and healthy development (Development Services Group, Inc. 2014; Wolf and Holochwost 2015). Programs based on PYD take a strengths-based approach by providing youths with opportunities for prosocial involvement, enhancing skills, and facilitating the development of positive relationships (Rapp-Paglicci, Stewart, and Rowe 2008). (For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Positive Youth Development](#).) Arts-based programs can incorporate principles of PYD by encouraging the development of supportive relationships with prosocial adults (such as the master artists who run the program), educating youths about the arts and nurturing their creativity and skills, and providing a safe environment to participate in arts activities (Maschi et al. 2013).

Additionally, a number of theoretical frameworks support the use of arts therapies with traumatized children, including neuropsychological and developmental models. According to the neuropsychological model, traumatic memories may be stored in the part of the brain that is nonverbal, meaning that youths may have difficulties when attempting to verbalize their issues during therapy. This orientation suggests that nonverbal, expressive therapies (such as certain arts therapies) can be more effective than verbal therapies in maltreated children with traumatic histories (Klorer 2011).

Various developmental models are also used as foundations for creative therapy approaches for youths with traumatic histories. The arts can help children through each stage of development by helping them acquire multiple skills that can foster the development of their cognitive, social, and personal competencies (Hughes 2005). For example, art provides youth with the opportunity to learn through play, creating a medium for them to build bridges across stages of their personal development. Artistic practice can allow children to express their thoughts in a way that may not have been possible without using a creative medium (Hughes 2005; van Westrhenen and Fritz 2014).

Outcome Evidence

Although the research literature has identified generally positive relationships between arts participation and social-emotional skills among children and youths (Menzer 2015), more studies are needed to clarify the potential impacts of arts interventions for at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized youths. The research that is available suffers from methodological deficiencies such as small samples, lack of comparison groups, short follow-up periods, and reliance on self-report measures (Hughes 2005; Bittman, Dickson, and Coddington 2009). In addition, for programs or

therapies that integrate the arts with other components, research on the impact of the arts-specific components is lacking. Therefore, it is not known what effect the arts component of a program may have on outcomes, when compared with the effect of other components. Even within the context of standalone arts programs or arts therapies, more research is necessary to understand the relative effects of interventions using different art forms.

Although the quantity and quality of the research is limited, below are examples of arts-based programs and arts therapies featured on the *Model Programs Guide* that have demonstrated positive impacts on youths.

Reading for Life. One example of a literature-based arts program is Reading for Life (RFL). RFL is a diversion program in Indiana for juveniles (aged 11–18) who have committed nonviolent offenses. In this program, juveniles study works of literature in small reading groups, led by trained volunteer mentors. The goal is to foster moral development in juveniles who have committed offenses and reduce their rates of recidivism. The program is based on the idea that literature can facilitate moral development by helping youths vicariously experience situations and stories presented in books, and relate the lessons they learn to experiences in their own lives (Bruner 2003; Seroczynski et al. 2015)

Seroczynski and colleagues (2015) also found that RFL participants had significantly lower recidivism rates than did the comparison group. Specifically, at the 2-year follow up, RFL participants had a lower chance of being prosecuted for any offense (including misdemeanors and felonies) and had fewer arrests than did the comparison group.

Project Venture. Project Venture is an outdoor/experiential program that targets at-risk American Indian youths. The program concentrates on American Indian cultural values – such as learning from the natural world, spiritual awareness, family, and respect – to promote healthy, prosocial development. The goals of Project Venture are to help youths develop a positive self-concept, effective social and communication skills, a community service ethic, decision-making and problem-solving skills, and self-efficacy. The program is designed for American Indian communities seeking strategies to prevent alcohol abuse.

Project Venture does not provide a standard drug-and-alcohol education curriculum. Instead the program uses American Indian cultural values to build a positive environment through thinking activities, as well as arts-based activities such as speaking and singing, and storytelling of traditional folk stories/metaphors, to achieve prosocial outcomes.

An evaluation of Project Venture found youths in the treatment group demonstrated less growth in substance use as measured by four outcome measures (cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, and other illicit substances) taken together. The program also had a significant effect on the treatment group's use of alcohol (Carter, Straits, and Hall 2007).

Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools. An example of an intervention targeting traumatized youths through arts therapy is Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS). CBITS was designed for use in schools for children ages 10–15 who have had substantial exposure to violence or other traumatic events and who have symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the clinical range. The CBITS program has three main goals: 1) to reduce symptoms related to trauma, 2) to build resilience, and 3) to increase peer and parent support. The program was developed to reduce symptoms of distress and build skills to improve children’s abilities to handle stress and trauma in the future.

CBITS includes relaxation training, exposure, and problem solving. Symptom reduction is accomplished through cognitive techniques and trauma-focused work in imagination, writing, and narratives. “Imaginal” exposure first happens in a private session between the individual child and the clinician. Drawings and writings involving descriptions of the traumatic event occur later within a group setting. For example, Ngo and colleagues (2008) described how one adaptation of CBITS involved participants writing a song or rap about a traumatic event, and creating a poem or graphic novel as part of the trauma narrative.

Program evaluations by Stein and colleagues (2003) and Kataoka and colleagues (2003) found that CBITS had a significant, positive impact on the treatment groups’ PTSD symptoms, depressive symptoms, and psychosocial dysfunction.

For more information on the programs, please click on the links below.

[Reading for Life](#)

[Project Venture](#)

[Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools \(CBITS\)](#)

Conclusion

Arts-based programs and arts therapies provide a unique way to help youths in times of transition and development. It is sometimes difficult for at-risk, traumatized, and justice-involved youths to verbalize their feelings and experiences—a challenge that positions the arts as a beneficial approach in rehabilitative programming and therapies for these populations. The arts provide a nonthreatening way for children and adolescents to express their inner feelings, manage emotional and behavioral problems, cope with trauma and victimization, develop artistic talents and skills, and improve strengths and assets they already possess (Riley 2001; Clawson and Coolbaugh 2001).

Arts-based programs (including arts education programming) and arts therapies represent two approaches to incorporating the arts into treatments for at-risk, traumatized, and justice-involved youths. Although the two approaches are similar in terms of the various programmatic elements that are implemented, each uses a different method for working with youths and resolving problem behaviors. Arts therapies focus on the therapeutic relationship between the therapist

and the youth, whereas arts-based programming focuses on the process of creating art as a way to address youths' issues (Djurichkovic 2011).

A number of theoretical frameworks suggest that arts programs and arts therapies may be important interventions for at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized youths. For a population whose members feel that their lives are out of control, arts-based programming and arts therapies can provide youths with a greater sense of stability. Given that art is an interactive process, youths have the opportunity to form trusting relationships with prosocial adults (i.e., therapists, master artists, or teachers) who can encourage them to participate in solitary or group activities while reflecting on their problems. Youths have the opportunity to create a final product (via either arts therapy or arts programs), thereby earning a sense of accomplishment and, in the process, completing a piece of art that reflects the hard work done during the healing and rehabilitation process (Vice 2012). Despite indications of such benefits, more evidence is needed to disaggregate and connect the arts components of specific interventions to positive outcomes. Future studies should explore how and in what optimal conditions the arts directly can impact the behavior of at-risk, justice-involved, and traumatized youths.

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