

The Power of Youth Arts: Summary

Introduction to the research

For decades, researchers in Australia and around the world have done detailed and rigorous work exploring and measuring the benefits of arts participation for children and young people. This summary highlights some key sources from this research. For the full picture, read our guide to the literature [The Power of Youth Arts: What the research tells us about the benefits of performing arts participation for children and young people](#).

Key findings

1. Youth arts provides a platform for young people to explore important ideas - and boosts civic engagement.

Young Australians today are acutely aware of and passionate about issues like climate change and equality, [1.1] with social media making it easier than ever for them to stay informed. However, they're also likely to feel disempowered. In addition to providing young people with a platform to explore issues that matter to them (e.g. Case Study 1), arts participation has been shown to be positively associated with other forms of civic engagement, like voting and volunteering [1.4].

2. Arts participation provides socio-emotional benefits for young people that can act as protective factors against mental illness.

Around half of serious mental health issues in adulthood begin before the age of 14 – but youth arts participation can equip young people with known protective factors against mental illness [2.2]. An Australian systematic review of 56 studies showed that arts participation builds resilience and contributes to confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, improved coping mechanisms, and higher life satisfaction [2.3].

3. Arts can be used therapeutically or ‘on prescription’ to fight depression, anxiety, and PTSD in young people.

It’s already been established that exercise can function similarly to antidepressants, by acting as a neurogenic stimulus to form new neurons in the hippocampus – a part of the brain which depression causes to shrink in size [3.1]. A [systematic review with meta-analyses](#) of 8 studies similarly concluded that Dance Movement Therapy is an effective treatment for depression. They cited research showing that dance actively engages every part of the brain – while also providing the therapeutic benefits of exercise [3.5].

4. Arts participation is associated with better educational outcomes for students, including stronger academic performance.

Since the 1990s, research has established a strong link between arts participation and academic performance [4.1]. For example an Australian longitudinal study of over 600 students showed that arts engagement positively predicted class participation, educational resilience, and educational aspirations [4.3]. There’s also evidence that arts-rich education can help ‘close the gap’ for First Nations students [4.5].

5. Arts-rich education improves students’ motivation, engagement, attendance, and school enjoyment.

In addition to academic performance, a literature review by Robyn Ewing shows that arts-rich education can improve engagement, motivation, attendance, drop-out rates, and peer relationships [5.1]. For example, an American 2019 randomised control trial of 10,548 students showed that students who received arts education experiences were 3.6% less likely to receive disciplinary infractions [5.3].

Key takeaways

For young performers and their families:

- ▶ Taking part in youth performing arts can help build confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills – skills that will be helpful throughout your whole life.
- ▶ Not only that, it can make you happier – and promote better coping mechanisms when things get stressful. If you're going through a tough time, participating in things like dance and circus can help you get back on track.
- ▶ If you're passionate about a topic, whether that's climate change or gender equality, getting involved with performing arts through things like youth theatre can provide a platform for you to talk about the things that matter than you.

For the sector:

- ▶ With a robust evidence base demonstrating the cross-sector impact of youth performing arts, now is the time to be fostering partnerships to have even greater impact (for example, in the health and education sectors).
- ▶ If you're pursuing partnership or funding opportunities, consider developing case studies highlighting examples of transformation, mapping out a 'theory of change' for your work, and linking your case to the literature.
- ▶ There's space to continue exploring the power of youth arts to make a difference, including in exciting new fields like 'arts on prescription' – consider building relationships with universities and researchers who could take your work in this direction.

For funders and partners:

- ▶ Continue to support and celebrate high-quality arts programs and experiences for young people, including arts-based mental health and wellbeing initiatives.
- ▶ Look at ways to strategically support sector-wide evaluation programs and facilitate efficient approaches to building the evidence base and stimulating knowledge-sharing.
- ▶ Support efforts to integrate arts-rich learning into the school curriculum, including 'closing the gap' through arts-rich educational interventions for First Nations young people.

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