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05/29/2026

How the Arts Build Self-Esteem and Confidence in Children

Engaging in arts-related activities helps people, especially children, build their confidence and self-esteem. This is incredibly beneficial for a child, as a healthy self-image contributes to their personal relationships, academic performance, mental and physical health, and overall quality of life. The arts, which include drama, dance, art, music, and more, provide students with tremendous opportunities to develop in unique ways while giving them tools that will assist them throughout their lives.

What is self-esteem? “High self-esteem refers to a highly favorable view of the self, whereas low self-esteem refers to evaluations of the self that are either uncertain or outright negative” (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Research shows that self-esteem is beneficial for “relationships, school, work, mental health, [and] physical health” (Orth & Robins, 2022, para. 1). Every central aspect of people’s lives can be improved when they build their self-esteem. These benefits apply to people of any age, gender, race, or nationality, and no matter what stage of life they are in, all individuals can benefit from increased self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2022).

Self-esteem is important for everyone to cultivate, but it is especially critical for children. Having a positive view of themselves protects children from feelings of despair and from developing many mental health issues, and it allows them to effectively deal with the stressors of life (Hosogi et al., 2012). As Kang et al. (2021) put it, “Instilling high self-esteem in children is a central task in their development, particularly in adolescents” (Kang et al., 2021, para. 2). If children develop low self-esteem for whatever reason and it goes unaddressed, it can be much harder to correct later on and lead them to have an unfulfilling life. Children are very

impressionable, and if they are encouraged, accepted, and loved, they can grow into stable adults with a healthy sense of self. Hosogi et al. (2012) explain that self-esteem in children is created by the relationship between the parent and child, the means used to deal with unpleasant emotions the child displays, social behavior, and self-acceptance. Therefore, children must have a healthy upbringing to become as secure and confident as possible. That being said, many outlets and activities promote self-esteem and can be used to help children develop into confident people. Although it may not seem obvious, the arts are a phenomenal way for children to build their self-image.

According to Ronson Hawkins of Texas Southern University (2021), drama “...helps children develop positive cognitive characteristics, specifically a strong sense of confidence” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 2). This is due to the empowering feeling that acting instills in children, as it allows them to display their creativity in a glorified and expressive way. Other aspects of the arts, which Hawkins (2021) explains increase self-esteem, are risk-taking and effective performance completion. He states that risk-taking that may result in failure but is properly managed boosts a child’s confidence, as does the completion of a successful performance (Hawkins, 2021, pp. 5-6). Researchers conducting a systematic review on the effects of dance found that children and adolescents who participate in dance interventions may benefit from increased self-esteem, self-trust, body-related perceptions, self-expression, and other areas (Schwender et al., 2018). Other divisions of the arts, such as art itself, also play significant roles in self-development. For example, Fox and Berry (2017) write that making art improves children’s self-esteem because it enables them to express their thoughts and emotions more effectively. Creating something beautiful with one’s artistic abilities reaches people in a way that words alone do not, and can

allow children to express things that they do not have the vocabulary for. Regardless of the specific art form used, the arts can build adolescents' confidence in myriad ways.

One critical area that the arts benefit is mental health. As one researcher writes, “Theatre and performance mainly affect the psyche and emotional development of anyone who is exposed to the art” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 7). Having good mental health reduces stress, as does having a strong sense of self. According to Kang et al. (2021), “The most crucial internal resource for children to adapt to stressful situations is self-esteem...It is an essential factor in an individual’s healthy adaptation to the environment, personal development, and positive self-realization” (Kang, Kim, and Baek, 2021, para. 2). These authors explain that they used the arts to increase self-esteem and decrease stress in several children by having them participate in an eight-week art therapy program. A similar discovery was made by Kim et al. (2017), who conducted a 10-week art intervention program in a public elementary school and found that art improves children’s mental health. These researchers explain that art allows children to showcase their uniqueness, thereby promoting a positive self-image and feelings of self-worth. Given that having a favorable self-image fosters good mental health, art exposure improves people’s mental state by cultivating self-esteem (Kim, Wee, and Gilbert, 2017). There have also been findings suggesting that participating in the arts leads not only to children’s improved self-esteem, but also to them having fewer socioemotional problems and better moods in the long run. The students’ emotional states improved because of the sense of fulfillment they gained from the creative exposure and self-expression. This discovery was made using data about 6,209 children that was analyzed with propensity score matching to evaluate the results, which showed a positive correlation between arts involvement, improved self-esteem, and better moods as a result of that (Mak & Fancourt, 2019).

Creativity contributes to a child's ability to express themselves and feel significant and confident, and yet the extent to which the arts are beneficial in promoting and encouraging creativity is not widely known. Research shows a parallel between creative involvement in the arts and higher efficiency, and children who increase their creativity through performing have improved overall well-being and confidence in themselves (Ganzermiller, 2018). It was found that after spending large amounts of time performing utilizing creativity, students actually experience a self-transformation. According to one researcher, the changes range from a "sense of accomplishment, to increased confidence, to increased self-awareness and beyond" (Ganzermiller, 2018, p. 4). Creative expression allows children to look beyond the obvious and become well-rounded critical thinkers, leading them to develop into accomplished people with more self-esteem (Asante, 2016). This is due to the fact that creativity allows children to access their imaginations and express them in new ways, while developing their problem-solving and analytical skills in order to make their visions into realities. Students are challenged to think outside the box to create original work and uniquely display their talents, which leads to feelings of self-fulfillment when accomplished. The arts and creativity are strongly connected, and oftentimes becoming associated with one leads to involvement with the other. Regardless of which one comes first, the duo fosters positive feelings about oneself and leaves a person with life skills and lasting growth. As one author put it, "In today's society, creativity and imagination are essential skills, not only for the artist, but for people in all walks of life" (Asante, 2016, p. 2). Displaying one's uniqueness through creative expression is something everyone should take part in, as it considerably fosters self-fulfillment and self-esteem.

The arts boost children's self-perception, thereby giving them the confidence to be more outspoken and become better communicators. When students feel positively about themselves,

they are much more likely to voice their opinions and share their thoughts. Being able to effectively express oneself is a key step in a person's healthy development, and it allows one to collaborate with others and be part of a group. As Mak and Fancourt (2019) explain, participation in the arts can lead one to communicate more impressively and “...have been shown to support a sense of social identity and foster social cohesion” (Mak & Fancourt, 2019, para. 21). By utilizing the social opportunities the arts have to offer, people can improve their communication skills and connect with others.

Many children with low self-esteem tend to suffer from shyness. Being shy prevents a person from having the ability to talk to whomever they would like and inhibits their capability to express themselves freely. A study was done on the effects drama has on shyness and self-esteem, and it showed that involvement with the arts for just a few months can help students open up to others and feel more confident. The students were measured before and after the drama program using the following scales: Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI), Shyness Scale, and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS). The results showed an increase in self-esteem, self-respect, and mental well-being, and a decrease in shyness, which were the desired results. Regardless of their background, each student left the sessions more empowered, less afraid of social situations, and feeling better about themselves (Karatay, 2022).

One study found that drama therapy gives hospitalized children the ability to express themselves. This three-year study resulted in many positive changes in the subjects, with the patients' ability to share their emotions being one of the biggest transformations (Gallant, 2023). According to Ronson Hawkins, every device used within theater is a dimension for children's communication. He states that children may feel something and be unable to properly express it because words are not always enough. “At that point,” Hawkins explains, “the only channel of

expression for them that will accurately allow them to express the richness of their emotions is song. That is what theater offers to children[:] a channel of communication and expression that doesn't limit them to just words” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 21). Later in his paper, he reiterates this point by stating, “Theater teaches youth collaborative leadership and communication skills which in turn allows the youth to develop skills with which they can excel...” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 26). The ability to express themselves through the arts has helped the children in the hospitals feel more comfortable and build their self-esteem.

The arts benefit neurotypical and neurodiverse children. Children with specific learning difficulties, multiple developmental disabilities, communication difficulties, and other challenges have benefited greatly from involvement in the performing arts. Rawal (2006) aimed to help her students with learning impairments reduce stress, improve their behavior, and boost their confidence through incorporating drama activities into their education. The results of this study showed increased emotional development, self-esteem, and creativity, and “a gain in positive behavioural intentions and improved psychosocial competence” (Rawal, 2006, p. ii). Vidrih and Grošelj (2025) maintain that the skill that benefits children the most, and can be gained from the arts, is self-advocacy. They found that drama is also a superb way to improve children’s assertiveness, empathy, and self-image, specifically in children who have disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These researchers note the relationship between dramatic improvisation and self-esteem in people with special needs, and how the arts help individuals with autism achieve a higher level of independence (Vidrih & Grošelj, 2025). This is due in part to the nature of these activities, which tend to have the performers take on responsibilities in order to create the final product. In terms of improvisation specifically, the exercise is designed

in a way that largely prohibits outside interference, making it an effective tactic to improve independence.

Other critical, self-building life skills that the arts help children improve include friendships, which are one of the main pillars of an individual's life. Everyone needs friends in order to have a healthy support system, build meaningful connections, and have a balanced sense of self. Children especially feel a strong desire to be accepted by their peers and included in the majority. By utilizing the gifts the arts have to offer, one can make lasting friendships and better their relationships in general. Researchers Kang et al. (2021) write that art therapy improves the self-esteem, confidence, and peer relationships of students, "suggesting that the therapy improve[s] social relationships both quantitatively and qualitatively" (Kang et al., 2021, para. 5). Using the arts to make friends benefits other areas of one's life as well. Gallant (2023) explains that drama therapy not only enhances children's relationships but also improves their self-expression and social skills, as these tools are exercised while working within a theater group. Other researchers, such as Shen (2016), highlight how drama catalyzes social communication and explain that incorporating drama into education lays the foundation for positive, meaningful relationships. This is because theater itself promotes social activity through the medium of acting within a cast, which often leads to connection with others. By incorporating it into a curriculum, schools will give students the opportunity to partake in a beneficial activity that they may have never done otherwise. As Shen (2016) puts it, "Drama is one kind of interactive activity that makes children interested in learning and improving social interactions" (Shen, 2016, p. 6).

Relationships can refer to better friendships between peers or even improved interaction between caregivers and children. One paper that illustrates the effect of art therapy on

relationships describes how storytelling drama therapy improves the relationships between the children and the adults (Gallant, 2023). These parties were observed, and they communicated more effectively and were able to better see each other's points of view because of the therapy. The experience allowed the children to see themselves as more valuable and to connect more with their caregivers, as the format of the drama therapy created a space in which all parties were considered equal. Through the use of the performing arts, children can better their relationships with others and, in turn, themselves, because they feel more respect for themselves when others respect them.

Some may be concerned that introducing performing arts programs into schools will lead to lower academic performance because children will spend less time in class. This idea was disproven by a group of Irish researchers who did an intensive study on the matter. The community art project they wrote about, known as the "Macleinn" project, attempted to bring a large amount of community arts input into a limited number of schools. One of the project's goals was to "assess the impact of the project on the self-esteem and academic attainments of the children" (Gabhainn et al., 2001, p. 271), which was measured using the Coopersmith self-esteem inventory. Although the project took time away from students' class time, it had no harmful effects on the children's academics. In terms of self-esteem, it was found that "participation in the community arts project was associated with a significant increase in self-esteem" (Gabhainn et al., 2001, p. 274), as high as $t=2.34; p<0.05$.

As illustrated above, some have found that incorporating the arts into school settings has no harmful effects on students' academic achievement. Many studies and researchers show that the performing arts actually improve children's grades while simultaneously increasing their self-esteem. In a review of recent studies on the effects of the arts on children, Jenkins (2017)

writes that participants in art courses had better grades and lower suspension rates than those who were not involved in them. Researchers Mak and Fancourt (2019) share a similar sentiment, stating that students who partake in the arts have “higher levels of academic self-confidence” (Mak & Fancourt, 2019, para. 1). It appears that there is a strong reciprocal relationship between feeling good about oneself and being able to perform well academically. Additionally, Bungay and Vella-Burrows (2013) discuss a study conducted with 25,000 children that aimed to examine the effects of art programs on academic achievement. They found that participation in the performing arts had “a positive impact with students involved becoming more creative, with lower dropout rates, improved social skills and higher educational achievement...” (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013, p. 45). No matter how it is looked at, there seems to be only a positive correlation between the arts, self-esteem, and improved school performance. As Gallant (2023) so poignantly puts it, “In a world where young individuals are so often pressured to mature and grow up too fast, drama therapy creates a space where these developing minds can flourish, leading to academic and social successes” (Gallant, 2023, p. 23).

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. If children feel poorly about themselves and do not have a healthy outlet that can boost morale, such as the arts, they will start to suffer academically. Kim et al. (2017) address the problematic correlation between low self-esteem and poor academic performance. They state that having low self-regard has been proven to increase mental, physical, and emotional issues, which damages students’ whole academic career. This is because children with low self-esteem tend not to believe in themselves or their abilities, so they develop negative thought patterns, do not push themselves to succeed, and fail to prioritize their overall health. Therefore, teachers must build an environment that is nurturing and conducive to students feeling positively about themselves. The researchers studying this suggest implementing

an art program into schools to boost children's self-esteem, confidence, and self-acceptance, thereby predisposing them to academic success (Kim et al., 2017). Researchers Kang et al. (2021) drew similar conclusions after using art therapy with children aged 7 to 13. In their words, "students' self-efficacy, self-confidence, and peer relations improved [along] with their academic abilities" (Kang et al., 2021, para. 5). If teachers and parents want children to achieve as much as possible in school, it would be prudent to allow them to join an art program. This has been proven to have only positive effects, making children feel much more confident and comfortable with themselves.

Asante (2016) notes that many children have hidden creativity and talents that remain dormant unless they participate in the arts. He is distraught that so many of them are unable to reach their full potential and utilize their gifts because their abilities go undiscovered. Parents and educators should do their utmost to unlock the talents in each child so that they can make the most of their lives with all the resources they now know they possess. While some may claim that it is beneficial to wait until the child is older to introduce them to the arts, this is unwise, given that "50% or more of a child's mature knowledge is developed by the time he turns four" (Asante, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, the earlier the exposure, the better.

The performing arts give children space to develop and become people who benefit society as a whole. By being exposed to the arts, children learn about their environment and cultures and gain a better understanding of how to be productive members of society. As Ronson Hawkins (2021) states, "The social diversity we are exposed to is correlated to our ability to navigate within different social dynamics amongst people from different social and cultural backgrounds" (Hawkins, 2021, p. 8). He then says that theatre enables children to learn about their societies and to become exposed to the social differences that exist among their peers.

Through theater, he explains, they can become educated and increase their social awareness.

Hawkins uses ensemble work as an example of a performing arts activity that “allows children to unify and cooperate on a social and artistic level, giving children the ability to navigate different social interactions that involve teamwork” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 8). He also mentions that “Researchers say that life skills are needed to help students become productive members of society” (Hawkins, 2021, p. 23), and he lists many strengths that come from participation in the arts. These skills include work ethic, cooperation, etiquette, problem-solving, and time management, among others, which are gained because theater often involves group work, collaboration, constant practice, and organization. Essentially, Hawkins argues that children involved in the arts are better prepared to be active members of society, as the arts help them grow into well-rounded individuals who feel good about themselves and are therefore more willing to assist their communities.

Given that involvement in the arts improves one’s life in myriad ways, including self-esteem, academics, communication, and relationships, it has the potential to enhance a person’s overall quality of life. Shen (2016) addresses this in a paper on the effect of drama on children's confidence. He discusses how confidence depends on one’s personal outlook on oneself, others, the universe, and life, and how it is connected to children’s present and future lives. He uses drama as a means of helping children build a good future for themselves by building their self-esteem and confidence. Another author describes how plays can help students improve their lives by allowing them to question how and why the world works through the themes and metaphors presented in drama (Gallant, 2023). This helps them become critical thinkers and more inquisitive individuals. Hawkins (2021) states that students who are very involved in the arts perform better not only in school but also as citizens, volunteers, and

participants, compared with those who do not have an arts-heavy background. This clearly illustrates the many ways in which a child's quality of life improves through enriching art activities.

The arts benefit children in so many ways, including improving their grades, communication, relationships, quality of life, and more. Through teamwork and conflict resolution with peers, the arts utilize critical life skills, such as collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, etc., to help individuals grow into more secure and well-rounded adults who contribute to society. The performing arts enable people to express their feelings and talents in new ways, which has incredible effects on the self-esteem and confidence of children and adolescents. Through improving students' sense of self-worth, the arts enable them to take greater control of their lives and destinies, and benefit society as a whole.

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