

How creativity supports children's mental health and wellbeing in schools

The [National Centre for Creative Health](#) promotes creativity for healthy lives, aiming to advance good practice and research, inform policy and promote collaboration, helping foster the conditions for creative health to be integral to health and social care and wider systems.

Creativity as part of the education system is a key part of this work, particularly in the current context where levels of poor mental health in children and young people are rising to unprecedented levels, overburdening NHS services. As well as support for children with mental health conditions, prevention and early intervention is vital to reverse this trend and limit the adverse impacts on children into adulthood.

Evidence summarised below shows that creativity supports children's mental health and emotional wellbeing, promotes a sense of belonging, and improves life skills and future outcomes. Creativity has been used effectively as part of whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. Schools can help to tackle inequalities by ensuring universal access to creative opportunities.

Ensuring access to creativity for all children as a routine part of the school day enhances children's health, wellbeing and life chances and aligns with the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. Creativity as an early intervention to support children's mental health and wellbeing will also reduce future pressures on the NHS and contribute to economic growth.

The benefits of creativity for children's mental health and wellbeing

There is good evidence linking creative engagement with improved mental health and wellbeing in children and young people. The mechanisms for this can be:

- biological e.g. influencing the physiological symptoms of depression and anxiety
- psychological e.g. self-expression, confidence and self-esteem
- social e.g. facilitating social connection and fostering a sense of belonging.

Arts activities have been identified as 'active ingredients' that help young people with anxiety and depression, particularly those with experiences of trauma, with evidence of significant decreases in symptoms in experimental studies.

- Pote, I. (2021) What science has shown can help young people with anxiety and depression - Identifying and reviewing the 'active ingredients' of effective interventions. Wellcome. Available at: <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-science-has-shown-can-help-young-people-anxiety-and-depression>

Participating in creative activities has been shown to positively impact behaviour, self-confidence, emotional regulation, relationship building and sense of belonging, contributing to resilience and mental wellbeing.

- Bungay, H. and Vella-Burrows, T. (2013) 'The effects of participating in creative activities on the health and well-being of children and young people: a rapid review of the literature', Perspectives in Public Health, 133(1), pp. 44–52. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913912466946>

- Zarobe, L. and Bungay, H. (2017) 'The role of arts activities in developing resilience and mental wellbeing in children and young people a rapid review of the literature', *Perspectives in Public Health*, 137(6), pp. 337–347. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913917712283>
- Fancourt, D. et al. (2023) *The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health: Findings from Major Cohort Studies in the UK and USA 2017 – 2022*. London: UCL. Available at: <https://sbbresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Arts-and-population-health-FINAL-March-2023.pdf>

Engaging with the arts helps young people cope with their feelings and distracts from negative thoughts. Creative activities which offer a safe space to showcase work can raise aspiration and facilitate the formation of friendships.

- Dowlen, R. (2021) *Research digest: Young people's mental health*. Version 1. Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value. Available at: <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Young-peoples-mental-health.pdf>

Young people's engagement with heritage has been shown to positively influence personal development outcomes such as knowledge, skills and confidence and to build identity and belonging.

- Institute for Community Research & Development and Arts Connect and with Historic England (2023) *Young People's Engagements with Heritage - Tackling Inequality & Other Opportunities for Public Policy*. Available at: https://artsconnect.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Young-People-and-Heritage_Final-Report.pdf

Creative interventions delivered to children in nature is linked to improved health and wellbeing, including reduced stress and increased happiness, self-esteem and resilience, as well as fostering a sense of connection to nature.

- Moula, Z., Palmer, K., Walshe, N (2022) *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 A Systematic Review of Arts-Based Interventions Delivered to Children and Young People in Nature or Outdoor Spaces: Impact on Nature Connectedness, Health and Wellbeing Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.858781>

Creative and cultural activities are an important resource for children accessing or waiting to access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

- For example, ICE Heritage programme, a partnership between Hampshire CAMHS and Hampshire Cultural Trust has observed improvements in wellbeing through confidence and self-esteem, self-expression, social inclusion, focus and concentration and fun and relaxation - <https://www.hampshireculture.org.uk/social-impact-young-people/ice-heritage>
- Bradbury A, Hayes D, Burton A, Fancourt D, Wright J, Sticpewich L, Page J, Jarvis L, Empsom L, Marshall R. (2024) *Social Prescribing in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: A Guide for CAMHS Practitioners*. Learnings from Phase I of the UCL 'Wellbeing While Waiting' Study. London: University College London. Available at: <https://sbbresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CAMHS-SP-guide-final.pdf>
- Arts4Us is a £2.5m AHRC-funded research programme which will create a digital platform where evidence-based local arts activities supporting mental health can be made

accessible for children and young people, their families and relevant organisations and services. <https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/research/healthresearchinstitute/research-centre-for-arts-and-wellbeing/arts4us/>

Creative health in schools

Schools are the ideal setting to provide equal access to creative opportunity for all children. Creativity should be a pillar of the education system. This will not only provide children with creative skills to support the future of the creative industries, but also transferrable skills which lead to improved life outcomes and tools with which to manage their emotional and mental wellbeing throughout their school life and into adulthood.

A World Health Organisation review of the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing collates studies which show associations between arts activities and educational attainment and behaviour. It finds that arts can improve social skills, reduce bullying, support engagement with learning and enhance emotional competence.

- Fancourt, D. and Finn, S. (2019) What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/329834>

Creative programmes in schools have demonstrated a wide range of positive outcomes.

Data gathered by the Royal Shakespeare Company, Tate and the University of Nottingham from 6000 young people and teachers across 30 schools about the benefits of cultural engagement in educational settings found that the arts helped children develop critical thinking, a sense of identity and personal responsibility in their schools and communities, self-belief, confidence and empathy and an appreciation of diversity. They also considered the arts engagement as a way to release pressure and relieve stress, improving overall health, wellbeing and happiness.

- Royal Shakespeare Company (2018) Time to Listen. Available at: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/learn/research/previous-research/time-to-listen>

Evaluation of an immersive music education programme with children from low-income backgrounds in Scotland (Big Noise – Sistema Scotland) found that the programme positively impacts children across several domains: educational outcomes; life skills; emotional development (including happiness, security, pride, self-esteem, emotional intelligence and resilience); social skills (including cultural awareness, forming friendships and social mixing); protection (someone to confide in, a calm and safe environment, reduced stress) as well as physical and musical skills.

- Osborne, M.S. et al. (2016) 'Exploring the academic and psychosocial impact of El Sistema-inspired music programs within two low socio-economic schools', Music Education Research, 18(2), pp. 156–175. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2015.1056130>

The programme has measured long-term outcomes and as participants reach school leaving age, they have been found to achieve better educational attainment and post-school destinations, including employment, than children from similar backgrounds who did not take part.

- Harkins, C. (2022) Statistical analysis of educational outcomes among Big Noise Raploch participants. Glasgow Centre for Population Health. Available at: https://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/000/000/515/BN_educ_outcomes_analysis_FINAL_Oct22_original.pdf?1700036424

Evaluation of Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's 'In Harmony' programme, which provides music education in schools serving some of the most disadvantaged areas in Liverpool, demonstrates improvements in educational attainment as well as music skills. Participating children also found improvements in confidence, resilience, teamwork and personal responsibility. Children described happiness and fun as well as a sense of stress relief.

- Hignell, S., Sandbrook, B. and Hollows, S. (2020) Evaluation of the In Harmony Programme. Arts Council England. Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/evaluation-harmony-programme>

A Creative Curriculum

The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education highlighted the importance of using arts-based subjects post-covid to restore well-being and happiness to school life. The Commission recognises that creativity, defined as 'the capacity to imagine, conceive, express or make something that was not there before' can and should be embedded across all subjects. However, the link between creativity and wellbeing is most strongly associated with arts-based activities.

- Durham Commission of Creativity and Education (2019) <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/durham-commission-creativity-and-education>
- Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2021) Durham Commission on Creativity and Education – second report Available at: <https://www.creativityexchange.org.uk/about/about-the-durham-commission>

Despite the wide-ranging benefits of creative engagement, performance measures currently focus on core subjects, leading to a reduction in resources for arts education at all ages, and a decrease in provision. Several reports have made the case for a fundamental rethink of the curriculum which reassesses the purpose of education and fully recognises the value of creativity.

- Tambling, P. and Bacon, S. (2023) The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future. Available at: <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/the-arts-in-schools>
- Ashton, H., Brownlee, D., Gamble, J., Stavrou, M (2024) The State of the Arts. Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick. Available at: <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/reports/the-state-of-the-arts/>

Curriculum redesign in Wales in 2022 provides a template for this. Expressive arts are recognised as integral to achieving key skills including creativity, innovation, critical thinking and problem solving.

- See <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/expressive-arts>

Creativity and Mental Health Support in Schools

Schools are important settings through which children develop social and emotional skills, where positive health and wellbeing can be promoted and where early signs of mental ill-health can be identified and addressed.

Creative activities and creative arts therapies are effective when used with children facing emotional, social or behavioural difficulties.

- Moula, Z. (2020) 'A systematic review of the effectiveness of art therapy delivered in school-based settings to children aged 5–12 years', *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 25(2), pp.88–99. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2020.1751219>
- Moula, Z. et al. (2020) 'A systematic review of child-focused outcomes and assessments of arts therapies delivered in primary mainstream schools', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 112, p. 104928. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104928>
- Moula, Z. (2021) "I didn't know I have the capacity to be creative": children's experiences of how creativity promoted their sense of well-being. A pilot randomised controlled study in school arts therapies', *Public Health*, 197, pp. 19–25. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2021.06.004>

Studies have also evidenced the value of using creative approaches with children who may have additional needs or may not be able to access mainstream education. This often forms part of a trauma-informed approach.

- Thompson, I. and Tawell, A. (2017) 'Becoming other: social and emotional development through the creative arts for young people with behavioural difficulties', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(1), pp. 18–34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2017.1287342>

Creativity has been used with refugees, in youth justice settings and pupil referral units to support wellbeing, sense of belonging and enhanced engagement with learning.

- Daykin, N. et al. (2013) 'Music making for health, well-being and behaviour change in youth justice settings: a systematic review', *Health Promotion International*, 28(2), pp. 197–210. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/das005>
- Parker, A. et al. (2018) 'Marginalised youth, criminal justice and performing arts: young people's experiences of music-making', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(8), pp. 1061–1076. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1445205>
- Crawford, R. (2020) 'Socially inclusive practices in the music classroom: The impact of music education used as a vehicle to engage refugee background students', *Research Studies in Music Education*, 42(2), pp. 248–269. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X19843001>

In practice example: Kazzum Arts – Trauma-informed approaches which children excluded from mainstream education

[Kazzum Arts](#) is a trauma-informed arts charity based in London, working with young people who have experienced high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Their work in pupil referral units with children who have been excluded from mainstream education, and who have often experienced trauma, uses creativity to support children to build connections with their peers, to develop self-expression, to feel safe and to engage in learning.

Whole School approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing

The Department for Education already recommends a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing, with a focus on early intervention and prevention. Creativity can be used as part of a whole-school approach to equip pupils with a tool for mental self-care they will be able to draw on as required and into adulthood. Working with creative practitioners can support teachers to achieve a mentally healthy school environment and meet the requirements of the curriculum.

For example, children's mental health charity Place2Be's Art Room programme delivers creative wellbeing workshops, training and activity resources aligned to the national educational wellbeing curriculum for school staff to use as part of a whole school approach that helps children to thrive through creativity.

- <https://www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/services-in-schools/the-art-room/>

In practice example: **Mortal Fools** - Melva digital media creative intervention

The **Melva** programme supports schools to deliver Key Stage 2 mental health education (specifically worries and anxiety) and practical self-management techniques through storytelling. The programme and its resources are structured using the research informing the [NHS 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing](#) and the [PERMA™ Framework for mental wellbeing](#), within the field of Positive Psychology, and aligned with the Physical Health and Wellbeing and Relationships and Education curricula. Teachers can access training and support in delivery of mental health and wellbeing programmes.

The programme has already engaged over 3000 pupils with [nearly all showing improvements in their knowledge of tools and techniques to manage their mental health and wellbeing](#). It has been designed for delivery at scale, and is commissioned for delivery (2025/26) in 100 schools across the North-East Mayoral Combined Authority.

In Practice Example – Arts Lab

Arts Lab in Cornwall matches young people aged 10–16, with professional artists to co-design bespoke workshops which support their health and happiness. Since 2022 it has engaged 3011 young people from across primary, secondary, SEND schools and alternative provision, investing £244,000 into local artists to deliver projects.

The value of the programme is recognised by schools and teachers, who see an increased demand for initiatives that support mental health and wellbeing. CPD has been an additional legacy of the programme. ([Impact Report](#))

Addressing inequalities – Breaking down barriers to opportunities

Longitudinal studies show that there is a social gradient in children's engagement in arts and culture, with children from lower social-economic backgrounds less likely to access extracurricular activities such as dance, music or drama, or to visit cultural institutions.

- Mak, H.W. and Fancourt, D. (2021) 'Do socio-demographic factors predict children's engagement in arts and culture? Comparisons of in-school and out-of-school participation

in the Taking Part Survey', PLOS ONE. 16(2), p. e0246936. Available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246936>

The Bee Well survey, which collects the voices of children and young people in years 8-10 to measure life satisfaction and wellbeing, finds that participation in arts, culture and entertainment activities is a predictor of future wellbeing, but that there are socio-economic inequalities in who accesses these activities.

- Thornton, E., Humphrey, N., Marquez, J and Peterson, K (2024) Do patterns of young people's participation in arts, culture and entertainment activities predict their later wellbeing? Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. Available at: <https://beewellprogramme.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PACE-briefing-1.pdf>

Provision of arts and cultural opportunities for young people in schools can therefore help to address future health inequalities. However, performance measures linked to core academic subjects mean that pupils with lower attainment levels, often linked to social deprivation, can be discouraged from taking arts-related subjects, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in creative engagement.

- APPG for Music Education (2019) Music Education: State of the Nation. Available at: <https://www.ism.org/images/imag-es/FINAL-State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-for-email-or-web-2.pdf>

Where creative programmes have worked in schools in disadvantaged areas, such as In Harmony and Sistema Scotland cited above, benefits have been shown not only in attainment and wellbeing outcomes for the individual child, but also across the whole school and local neighbourhood, building stronger communities, and generating civic pride, hope and aspiration. Families are more likely to engage in cultural activities, breaking cycles of low participation in arts and culture. These examples, along with many others, demonstrate how whole-system approaches, bringing together creative, cultural and community assets, schools, local authorities and health partners can promote children's mental health and reduce inequalities. For example, the Branching Out project worked with local creative organisations and schools in deprived areas of Cambridgeshire to develop a sustainable model promoting children's mental health.

- Dadswell, A., Bungay, H., Acton, F. & Walshe, N. (2024) Branching Out: Mobilising community assets to support the mental health and wellbeing of children in primary schools. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1386181>

In Practice Example – STAR (South Tees Art Project)

The [STAR programme](#), a collaboration between the ICS (North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network), schools and local creative and cultural organisations, consisted of weekly dance sessions for primary-age pupils in years 1-5. Dance facilitators from local dance organisation TIN Arts worked with the Northern Ballet to align with the themes of local performances. Families were also offered theatre experiences as part of the programme. Schools were identified using public health data, prioritising underserved areas. The programme improved the health and wellbeing of pupils, and further benefits were felt by schools and families. ([Evaluation Report](#))

Recommendations

The National Centre for Creative Health and All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Wellbeing Creative Health Review, published in December 2023, makes recommendations for a cross-departmental strategy on Creative Health to help address major policy challenges, such as the rise in poor mental health in children and young people.

Further evidence and examples of how creativity can support mental health, and how this can be effectively applied in schools to support the mental health and wellbeing of children can be found in the final report.

- National Centre for Creative Health. Creative Health Review: How Policy Can Embrace Creative Health. December 2023. <https://ncch.org.uk/creative-health-review>

The Department for Education has a vital role to play. The Creative Health Review makes the following recommendation:

The Department for Education can promote and enable the provision of creative opportunities for all pupils, across the curriculum. This will not only ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop creative skills and the transferable life skills which are associated with a creative education, but also that the UK's creative industry sector continues to flourish.

DfE and DCMS can work together to ensure equitable and inclusive opportunities to access creativity for all school pupils. Links between schools and local cultural organisations could be further reinforced, particularly in areas where pupils may face barriers to accessing such opportunities outside of school.

Incorporating creative health into guidance on promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing will support whole-school approaches to mental health. This will ensure young people are equipped with an understanding of the link between creative activity and health and wellbeing and can develop the skills to employ this across their life course.

The NCCH roundtable session on Creativity and Wellbeing in the Education System is summarised here - <https://ncch.org.uk/blog/roundtable-on-education-and-training-session-1-creativity-for-health-and-wellbeing-in-the-education-system>

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