



## Why the Arts Matter for Kids' Self-Esteem

A new study finds that kids who paint, draw, play music, or read more often feel better about themselves.

BY TOM JACOBS | OCTOBER 10, 2019

Middle school can be tough on an adolescent's self-esteem. Social comparison often becomes fierce, leading to feelings of unworthiness that can have negative consequences in years to come.



How can a parent help? New research suggests that one great answer is to encourage your kids to participate in the arts—or, better yet, to join them in some creative pursuit.

“Initiatives to promote arts engagement in children may provide a practical and efficient way to improve children’s self-esteem,” report Hei Wan Mak and Daisy Fancourt of University College London. Importantly, they found that kids didn’t have to be good at their chosen creative activity for these positive effects to blossom.

The research, published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, features 6,209 youngsters from the United Kingdom Millennium Cohort Study. The kids were born in the U.K. around the turn of the century; most data here came from interviews conducted during “Sweep Five,” when they were 11 years old.

The kids completed an abbreviated version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which asks them to list their level of agreement or disagreement with statements such as, “I feel I have a number of good qualities.”

They were then asked how often they (a) listen to or play music; (b) draw, paint, or make things; and (c) read for enjoyment at home. The youngsters answered using a five-point scale from “never” to “most days”; the researchers focused on differences between those who marked “most days” and the others.

Teachers rated the kids’ abilities in music, art, design, and the English language. Finally, the youngsters noted whether one or both parents joined them in such activities, on a scale from “not at all” to “almost every day.”

The researchers then paired each child who frequently participated in the arts with one or more who did so less often or not at all—but who otherwise had a very similar profile. Among other factors, the kids were matched for gender, ethnicity, and their parents’ educational level and employment status.

“Among the matched sample, children who participated in arts activities most days were significantly more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem than those who participated less often,” the researchers report. This difference was doubled when the “most days” kids were compared with those who participated in the arts less than once a month.

For reading, as well as for music-making or listening, this boost in self-esteem was limited to kids whose parents were involved in arts activities with them at least once or twice a week. Painting and drawing, however, were associated with higher self-esteem whether the parents were involved or not.

The researchers surmise that creating works such as paintings or drawings “may help people feel unique and thus foster one’s self-esteem” regardless of parental input.

Mak and Fancourt offer several “broad explanations” for their findings. Creating art can “validate the uniqueness of an individual, which gives rise to a sense of accomplishment and to feelings of self-worth,” they write. Also, “the arts have been shown to support a sense of social identity” and can “encourage goal-directed behavior, and enhance social resilience.”

Finally, their results suggest that “it is not necessary for children to be good at arts” to get the benefit of higher self-esteem: “Engagement, not ability, seems to be the key,” the researchers write. Stressing the inherent value of the process could encourage more participation by kids who are reluctant to get involved owing to fears of failure.

“Arts engagement may well be important in supporting children’s self-esteem—a core marker of positive development,” the researchers conclude. Given that other research has found such activities can improve grades and boost overall cognitive development, it’s increasingly clear that some of the best tools you can provide your child may be a paintbrush or a piano.

*This story originally appeared as “Participation in the Arts Raises Kids’ Self-Esteem” on Pacific Standard, an editorial partner site.*

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## About the Author



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**Tom Jacobs** is a staff writer for *Pacific Standard* magazine. Through interviews, reviews, and essays, he has tracked and analyzed trends in the arts and sciences, with an emphasis on psychology, the role of culture, and the cultivation of creativity. A native of Chicago, Jacobs earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in journalism from Northwestern University.

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