Supporting Youth Mental Health in and through the Arts

An evidence base and guide for teaching artists

Prepared for the English Language Arts Network
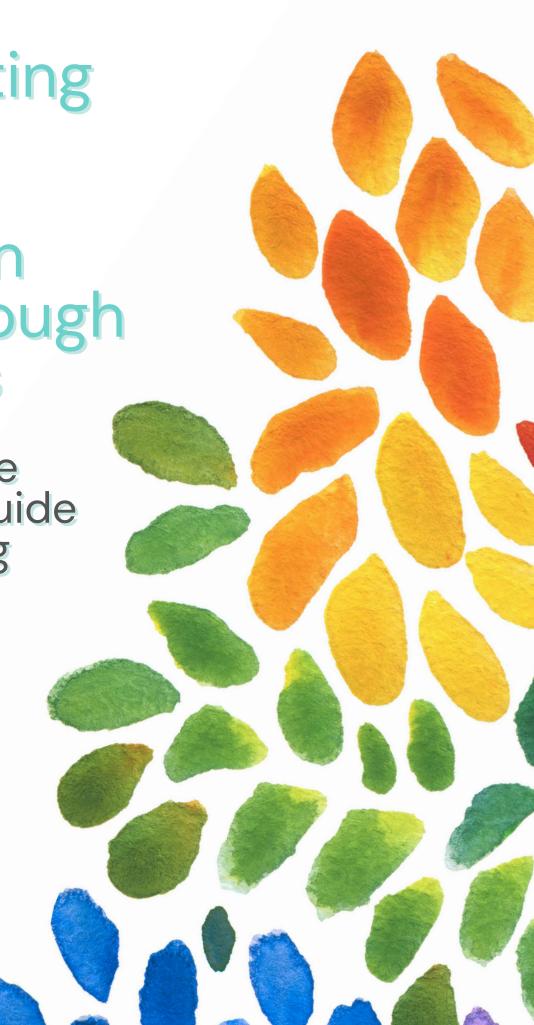
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Introduction

The spiritual and healing potential of art has been recognized throughout the world and across time. [1]

The reason being that several universal components of art (e.g., aesthetic engagement, sensory and emotional activation, cognitive stimulation, social interaction) link to factors determining our overall health. [2] Mental health, in particular, is influenced by all of these components and has emerged as a target area for artistic interventions and creative arts therapies. [3–4]

Given that most mental illnesses have their onset in adolescence and early adulthood, a main focus of mental health promotion is the early prevention and/or treatment of unhealthy behaviours. [5–6] The need for diverse mental health supports for children and youth is therefore critical. Arts–based interventions and programming have been successful in fostering positive youth mental health in the past and offer a wealth of possibilities for present and future support. [6]

This evidence base and guide is intended as a resource for teaching artists and others with an interest in advocating for and promoting youth mental health in and through the arts from a *non-medical* perspective. Although much of the research discussed comes from the fields of psychology, social work, and art therapy, the takeaways are meant to inform educational practices and not encourage educators to take on the role of therapist.

The guide begins with evidence as to why we need more arts engagement and opportunities for youth *now*, followed by a discussion of the relationships between art therapy, arts education, and artistic practice. The final section summarizes research on how engaging with arts can support youth mental health with practical recommendations and considerations for teaching artists.

Did you know...

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report summarizing evidence from over 3000 studies supporting the positive impact of the arts on health-related factors and conditions. [2] Based on their findings, they recommend:

- Supporting the implementation of community arts programs for mental health
- Ensuring equal access to culturally diverse art experiences across the lifespan
- Developing interventions that encourage arts engagement as a way to promote healthy lifestyles

Key Concepts

Health

is defined by the World Health Organization as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." [7] Health Canada has adopted a similar view by recognizing the broad range of factors that influence our health (e.g., social support networks, education, personal coping skills). Good health, in this sense, involves both "physical and emotional resilience." [8] In other words, mental health *is* health.

Arts Education

for the purpose of this guide, refers to learning that occurs in, through, and about the arts, in all its forms, and in a variety of formal and informal educational settings (e.g., home, school, community, online). [9]

Art Therapy

combines the creative process and psychotherapy to facilitate self-exploration and understanding. In Canada, it is practiced by qualified art therapists with a minimum of a Master's degree or Master's level diploma. [10]

Teaching Artists

are professional artists who have chosen to make teaching art an active part of their careers. They have been given many names (e.g., visiting artist, artist-in-residence) in an effort to describe their role in facilitating arts experiences in schools and communities. In recent years, however, the term 'teaching artist' has gained in popularity as a way to distinguish the careers of working artists who are equally committed to both the arts and education. [11-12]

Resilience

is recognized as a component of mental wellbeing, enabling people to cope with and "bounce back" from adverse situations by positively adapting to them. In the context of facing adversity, it can also be understood as the ability seek out and advocate for essential and culturally-relevant resources to sustain wellbeing. [6, 13-15]

Trauma-informed practice

in the context of arts-based interventions, acknowledges that:

- Trauma experiences are unique to each individual
- Trauma responses are normal reactions to distressing situations and many factors influence individual responses
- Individuals are not "deficient" or "lacking" because of their trauma experiences [16]

More recently, certain advocates have questioned the use of the term "trauma", preferring instead *healing-centred* practice to emphasize strengths and shift how we think about trauma. [17]

Strengths-based practice

emphasizes and celebrates the assets and strengths of individuals and communities, rather than what they lack. It empowers individuals to express their lived experiences in authentic and meaningful ways, such as through art. [14, 16]

Culturally-relevant pedagogy

recognizes, includes, and values the cultures of learners. Students are able to maintain their own cultural integrity and academic success, while also being encouraged to challenge cultural norms. More recently, *culturally-sustaining* and *-revitalizing* pedagogy has built on these ideas, emphasizing the survival/reclaiming of cultures. [18-19]

Youth Mental Health: Why we need more arts engagement **now**

Youth Mental Health Canada reported that...

70% of mental health problems have their onset during childhood and adolescence

75% of children with mental disorders do not access specialized treatment service

Canada's youth suicide rate is **among the highest** in the industrialized world.

Suicide rates for Inuit youth are among the highest in the world at **11 times the national average.**

https://ymhc.ngo/resources/ymh-stats/

That was before 2020.

Although we do not yet know the full extent of the effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on young people around the world, early evidence suggests that young people's mental health has been negatively affected. [20–23] In Canada, we know that visible minority and immigrant youth have reported higher levels of pandemic–related fear and negativity than their counterparts. [24]
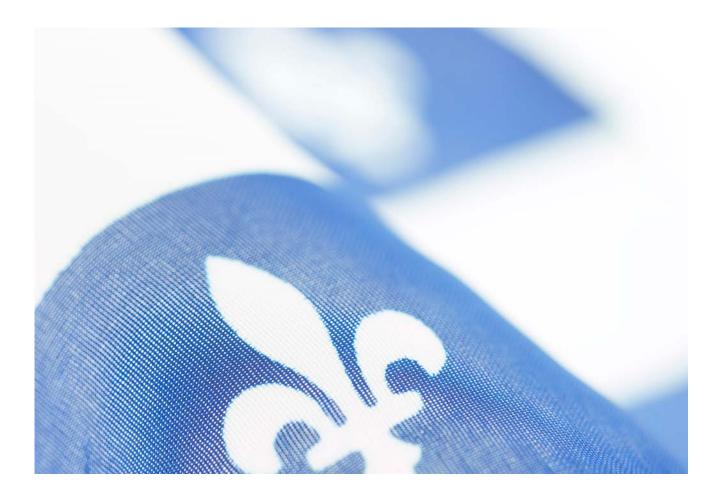
There is additional concern that some youth may experience long–term mental health complications because they have not yet fully developed the ability to cope with and recover from emergencies. [22] In short, the youth need all the help we can give them, in every way possible, to get them through this difficult time and to help them heal afterward.

"Across the history of our species, crisis has always been intertwined with creativity. Humans are called again and again to discover and harness our primal will to create, which resides within us all, in order to survive." -Dr. Nisha Gupta [25]

Currently, people of all ages are engaging with the arts as a way to cope with feelings of isolation, anxiety, and other COVID–19 related stressors. For instance, videos of neighbours gathering at their windows and balconies to sing, play, or simply enjoy music together have gone viral: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBByYjjvNzs

Children are using drawing as a way to explore the threat COVID–19 poses to them and their loved ones. [26] Creative work brings hope to youth in times of crisis because they are able to make sense of their fears, communicate with others, and feel a sense of social solidarity. [27]

Mental Health Snapshot:

English–Speaking Youth in Quebec

A recent online survey of Quebec residents, both English- and French–speaking, revealed the percentage of youth (aged 18-24) experiencing moderate to severe depressive symptoms has more than tripled in 2020, as compared with a survey conducted five years earlier. On indicators of depressive behaviour (e.g., feeling down or hopeless, trouble falling asleep, poor appetite), the same age cohort was found to be at higher risk for depression than older age groups. [28]

In general, Quebec's English–speaking population has reported lower levels of mental wellness in comparison to the French–speaking population. Within the English–speaking community, youth (aged 15-24) are more likely than older people to have negative views of themselves and their mental health. They perceive stress as a major barrier to improving their health more so than older age groups, but are also the most intent on reducing their stress levels. [29] From this perspective, English–speaking youth in Quebec are placed at a disadvantage in terms of mental wellness, as compared with older and French–speaking populations, but are nonetheless motivated to improve their wellbeing.

> "Bringing people together, inspiring, soothing and sharing: these are the powers of art, the importance of which has been made emphatically clear during the COVID-19 pandemic." –Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO [30]

Recognizing the continued need for arts engagement, artists have stepped up to the challenge of helping the public through this time using a variety of mediums. [25] Specifically, with the halt of in-person residencies and workshops due to COVID-19, many teaching artists and arts organizations have adapted their practices to online audiences and platforms.

The arts have a history of helping youth and communities heal after crises and disasters [31–32] and will most certainly have a restorative role to play as we begin to adjust to post-pandemic life. Many young people are not seeking out mental health services and/or do not have adequate access to supports, despite having a need for it, [23] suggesting that additional community supports are required to strengthen mental health promotion. This kind of support is particularly critical in rural and remote communities that tend to lack access to adequate mental health resources. [16, 33]

Formal and informal arts learning experiences are, therefore, key to supporting the wellbeing of youth across different geographic regions and demographics.

Virtual artist-led initiatives that focus on engaging young people:

ELAN's ArtistInspire free youth and family workshops:
https://artistsinspire.ca/free-youth-family-interactive-workshops/

Artscan Circle's #ArtsCanConnects initiative:
https://artscancircle.ca/artscanconnects/

N'we Jinan's "Windcarriers" challenge:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ef2brzrzds

SKETCH's "Art in Pandemic" series:
https://www.sketch.ca/artinpandemic/

MASC's online program:
http://www.masconline.ca/en/programs/online-programming.aspx

Intersections of Art Therapy, Arts Education, and Artistic Practice

When supporting youth mental health in and through the arts, there are important connections and distinctions to be made between art therapy, arts education, and artistic practice.

Much of the research linking art-making and youth mental health comes from the field of art therapy. Edith Kramer, an influential figure in the art therapy field, was herself a painter who recognized the healing potential of art through her work with refugee children. She proposed an alternative theory of art therapy that views the creative process *itself* as powerful and healing, rather than focusing on the art product as a way for therapists to communicate with and understand their patients. [1]

This 'process-over-product' view aligns with many theories of arts education that suggest the process of making art is as important to student development, if not more important, than the outcome. For example, researchers at Harvard University identified eight "studio habits of mind" that students learn through the art-making process to encourage them to think like artists. These include developing craft, observing, envisioning, expressing, engaging and persisting, stretching and exploring, reflecting, and understanding art worlds. [34–35]

As students move through the creative process, they encounter opportunities to explore aspects of their health and wellbeing in embodied ways. In fact, many Canadian arts education curriculum documents explicitly encourage students to express their emotions and feelings (Quebec) [36]; reflect on and convey global, social, and personal perspectives (Ontario) [37]; and develop awareness and understanding of factors that contribute to a healthy sense of self, including heritage, language, and beliefs (British Columbia). [38] In other words, schools are expected to support students' mental health and wellbeing through arts learning experiences that allow for personal/cultural expression and reflection.

ART
IS
THE
HEART
OF
HEALING

[39]

7

The Important Role of Teaching Artists

Teaching artists have played a crucial role in the delivery of arts education in schools and communities for decades. [40-43] In schools, teaching artists are brought in to support the arts curriculum and/or learning through the arts across subject areas. [41, 43] In addition to subject-related learning benefits, studies have shown that working with professional artists in schools can positively influence students' mental health in a number of ways, such as increasing their motivation, self-confidence, and sense of social membership. [44] Similarly, engaging with teaching artists in community settings can help youth cope with stress, build community, and promote resilience in the face of challenging circumstances. [14, 45-46]

Why are teaching artists well-positioned to support youth mental health in and through the arts?

One reason is simply that they are makers and creators themselves. They understand what it means to explore aspects of one's physical, mental, and emotional self through art, along with all of the joys and frustrations involved in that process. They frequently model adaptability through their artistic practices, as well as promote a holistic view of learning that is experiential, collaborative, and grounded in sensory awareness. [47]

The "Grey Area" in between Arts Education and Therapy

The connections between art-making and mental health create a confusing grey area in terms of what constitutes arts education versus therapy, since both approaches encourage "inner seeing" through making and interpreting art. [48] Despite these overlaps, **the treatment of mental health complications through creative arts therapies should only be practiced by a certified therapist or counsellor.** Teachers and teaching artists without professional training in therapy are not equipped to "treat" students and risk crossing ethical boundaries if they attempt to do so. [48]

That said, there are many approaches and recommendations from the fields of art therapy and social work that, when applied appropriately, can be helpful for teachers and teaching artists who want to explore and promote mental health and wellness with learners. These are discussed in the next section.

Supporting Youth Mental Health in and through the Arts: Evidence & Practice

Drawing from research in art therapy, social work, and arts education, this section summarizes how hands-on arts experiences can impact and support youth mental health by:

1 **Relieving Stress and Promoting Mindfulness**

2 **Building Resilience**

3 **Developing, Exploring, and Empowering Identities**

4 **Enhancing Social Connectedness and Inclusion**

Each of these components, although discussed separately, are interrelated and influence each other to promote youth mental health. The practical suggestions for educators and facilitators offered under each heading may therefore apply to the other components as well.

1

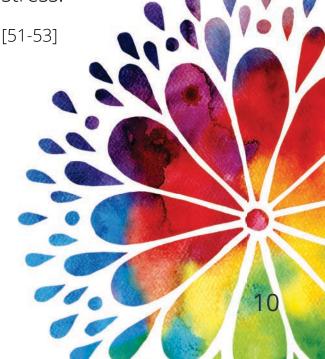## Relieving Stress and Promoting Mindfulness

Arts-based interventions (e.g., poetry, drawing, dance) for youth with existing mental health concerns have been shown to relieve stress, reduce social pressures, and encourage relaxation. [49-50] A community-based dance intervention for teenage girls, for instance, provided an "oasis from stress" and helped them let go of the pressure of maintaining a certain appearance in front of others. [50] The ability to remain present, grounded, and focused in the moment (i.e., mindfulness) was also cited as a benefit of arts engagement in these types of interventions. [49-50]

Helpful Practices:

- Creating a safe and non-judgmental environment where participants can "be themselves" and express their emotions
- Planning fun and enjoyable activities that encourage participants to become absorbed in the process of art-making
- Establishing positive group dynamics that promote social inclusion and solidarity

Did you know...

Tibetan sand mandalas are thought to transmit positive energies into the environment and to those who view them. For the monks who create them, the process is a form of meditation and mindfulness. Mandalas have been popularized through colouring books and zentangles, offering a simple and accessible way to zone out and relieve stress.

[51-53]

Case Study:
Sistema Music Programs

El Sistema, started in 1975 in Venezuela, is a free classical music education program for underserved children facing challenging circumstances. As a vehicle for social change, Sistema programs have been shown to support children's musical, cognitive, social, and creative development. [54] Sistema-inspired music programs have been implemented all over the world, including communities across Canada (e.g, Encore Sistema in Montreal, Sistema Toronto, Sistema New Brunswick, Sistema Winnipeg). A recent study on the effects of a Sistema-inspired program in Montreal on children's wellbeing showed that the program helped children cope with stress, develop confidence, and build a sense of community, among other benefits. The program includes choir, instrumental, orchestral, and music theory lessons offered 4 days a week by professional music instructors. [46]

2

Building Resilience

Arts programming and interventions have been used to build resilience in youth facing adverse life circumstances, which might include mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, self-control issues, post-traumatic stress disorder), being involved in the child welfare system, or living in communities with high rates of suicide and substance abuse. For example, one community arts program in the Northwest Territories promoted resilience among Indigenous youth by encouraging them to address critical issues facing the community and explore potential solutions through the arts. [14] A review of the literature on the connection between arts activities and youth resilience reported that increased self-confidence and self-esteem were the most commonly identified benefits of arts programs. [6] Although these are usually targeted interventions for particular youth populations, resilience-focused arts programming can benefit young people in general, with or without existing conditions, by developing their coping skills and reducing stress. [55]

Helpful Practices:

- Balancing structured and non-structured activities without forcing youth to share sensitive information
- Developing culturally-relevant programming (e.g., working with local artists or adolescent peer leaders, or encouraging facilitators to learn about local history and culture)
- Adopting a strengths-based approach that recognizes the assets of individuals and communities, rather than what they lack
- Modeling, discussing, and practicing specific resiliency-related skills in each session (e.g., social skills, problem-solving, anger management, seeking help)
- Helping students discover meaningful ways to connect to and engage with projects, rather than treating it as work (e.g., through community-building and brainstorming exercises)
- Promoting youth ownership over the process and their art (e.g., deciding what, how, where, and when to showcase their work)
- Establishing a set of ground rules or a collective agreement with youth emphasizing safety and respect

3

Developing, Exploring, and Empowering Identities

Community- and school-based arts programs can help develop young people's identities, as well as empower and encourage awareness of diverse identities within society. Through a community-based theatre program, for instance, Indigenous youth were given the opportunity to explore various identity roles and challenge the oppressive identities that have been imposed on them. [56] Other workshops have provided learners with a safe space to explore their own sexuality and gender identities, as well as cultivate a more inclusive understanding of gender. [57-58] By exploring different art forms and acquiring new discipline-specific skills, young people may also develop a 'creative' or 'artistic' sense of self, which can positively influence their overall self-image. [33, 59]

Helpful Practices:

- Providing youth with opportunities to recognize and connect with aspects of their self-identified cultures through the program
- Reminding youth that their identities and stories are important, valid, and respected
- Ensuring youth have ample time to debrief after each session
- Addressing any sensitive content or disclosures in private with individuals and making sure they have access to mental health support if needed
- Using social media as a positive tool to explore and communicate young people's stories
- Encouraging caregiver/family involvement in the program

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

A 12-week afterschool arts program was implemented in California to encourage "expansive understandings of gender" among primary- and middle-school-aged children. The program was facilitated primarily by a transgender artist-educator—with additional curriculum support from teachers—and included age-specific activities. Example: Grade 2 students explored clothing norms throughout history and the possible origins of drag, then created "drag masks" to express personal identities. Using pre- and post-program interviews with students, researchers found that children's awareness of traditional gender roles increased and their attitudes towards individuals who challenge these norms became more positive. [58]

4

Enhancing Social Connectedness and Inclusion

A commonly reported benefit of arts engagement is the opportunity to develop social networks, friendships, and a sense of social solidarity and belonging to a group—all of which are vitally important to a young person's mental wellbeing. Arts programs that involve collaboration and working towards a shared goal (e.g., a group performance or exhibition) appear particularly beneficial for youth, in this sense. For instance, youth participants in a street dance program in Hong Kong gained wider social networks and a sense of accountability to the group as a result of weekly rehearsals and culminating performances. [45] Another community-based dance program in Northern Ireland succeeded in developing cross-community friendships among youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. [60] Drama-based interventions have also shown promise in reducing instances of bullying and increasing social solidarity among high school students, but may require additional support from schools to have a lasting impact. [61]

Helpful Practices:

- Making space for youth from different backgrounds and communities to work together
- Helping youth participants find common ground and interests
- Fostering a positive and friendly atmosphere (e.g., through icebreakers, humor, positive feedback)
- Scheduling regular rehearsals/sessions to allow friendships to develop among youth
- Establishing a set of shared goals and expectations with and among youth
- Integrating peer-to-peer teaching and small group work
- Encouraging schools and/or communities to implement necessary changes and strategies to ensure lasting impacts

More to think about:

Factors that can influence how young people experience and benefit from arts programs

There are many factors that can influence a young person's experience of an arts program that should be taken into consideration when planning and facilitating activities. For example, **the age of participants** can influence their ability to control their emotions and be respectful of others. Typically-developing children only learn this type of self-regulation as they get older. [62] **Prior achievement and experience in the arts** can also influence participants' motivation to take part in the program and, in turn, the mental health benefits they experience as a result. [59] Other influencing factors might include **gender identity, ethnicity and language, and socio-economic status,** to name a few. [59]

In some cases, **participants may exhibit negative feelings or reactions** to certain activities because of their lived experiences. For example, individuals who have experienced trauma may feel stressed, shamed, or triggered by certain prompts or topics. [13] If participants do not feel safe or secure in the environment, they may create disruptions or act out aggressively. [63] Those with internalizing issues, such as negative body image or anxiety, may feel distressed when asked to wear certain costumes or perform in front of others. [6, 33] That said, when such instances are handled with care and with appropriate professional support, **the creative process can be healing** for participants and increase their resilience. [13]

Some researchers have suggested the **need for prolonged engagement with the arts** in order to fully experience mental health benefits. According to an Australian study on the relationship between recreational arts engagement and mental wellbeing, people who engaged regularly with the arts scored higher on measures of mental health (e.g. optimism, interest in other people, thinking clearly, feeling loved and cheerful) than those who had little or no arts engagement. [64] From this perspective, **one-off arts workshops are less likely to influence youth mental health than longer-term residencies** with teaching artists. Teaching artists need time to first establish a safe environment and build trust with and among learners. Only then will the youth feel comfortable and confident enough to participate freely and be receptive to the benefits of making art. [50]

Conclusion

Young people experience an abundance of mental health benefits by participating in the arts and working with artists—even more than what could be covered in this quick review of the literature. The research examined for this guide demonstrates that, among other things, arts engagement has the potential to relieve stress, build resilience, support identity formation and empowerment, and develop vital social connections among youth. In cases where young people do not have access to or are not seeking out professional mental health services, arts programming can provide a safe space in which to cope with hardships and find joy in the process of making art.

Teaching artists have shown great dedication and adaptability when it comes to supporting youth development in and through the arts, especially in the wake of COVID-19. Despite challenging circumstances, they have contributed to the wellness goals of schools, communities, and individuals in profound ways and continue to do so. Whether in-person or online, children and youth have benefited not only from the artistic expertise of artists, but also from their ability to create learning environments that are inclusive, collaborative, and most of all, fun.

Now, more than ever, young people need as many healing and wellness outlets as we can provide. Hands-on engagement with the arts is one approach that has repeatedly demonstrated effectiveness in promoting youth mental health. Through art, we can help foster future generations of healthy, grounded, and resilient individuals with the ability to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

"Art is something that makes you breathe with a different kind of happiness."
-Anni Albers

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