

Arts Interventions with Young People

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This Information Sheet looks at the use of arts based interventions with young people involved in or at risk of offending behaviour. It focuses on the potential benefits to be gained from participating in the arts, recognising arts programmes as an important resource when working with young people involved in offending behaviours and on the ways practitioners can access and incorporate the arts into their practice.

Ranging from visual arts such as drawing, painting and sculpture, to music, singing, dance, drama, storytelling and creative writing, the variation and breadth of possible arts interventions is vast.

The Theory and Benefits of Arts Interventions

It is broadly accepted that those involved in offending behaviours are more likely to have had negative schooling experiences. Research suggests that participation in the arts opens up avenues to learning that are more engaging and accessible to young people who have had an adverse experience of the education system. Arts interventions can provide young people with a positive experience and provide the opportunity to learn a vast array of necessary life skills (McNeil et al, 2011).

Research suggests that participation in arts based programmes can have a positive effect on the personal wellbeing and interpersonal relationships of the individual, as well as the wider community. The evidence shows that involvement in the arts not only provides young people with new and transferrable skills but also that they gain a 'sense of personal achievement' (Albertson, 2015), an improvement in the attitudes and behaviours which lead to offending and an increased ability to engage in education (Anderson & Overy, 2010).

In research undertaken at HM YOI Polmont, participants reported that whilst taking part in arts and music based projects they felt they were not treated differently for being in prison, which ultimately helped towards a more positive self-identity and the chance to see themselves as something other than a prisoner. They described positively the experience of working 'together' in a group and also that having 'meaningful, engaging work' to do helped to make serving time more manageable. Facilitators of the projects in HM YOI Polmont reported seeing participants grow in their confidence, coping skills and means of expression (Anderson & Overy, 2010).

Similarly, a case study undertaken by Barefoot Research for Helix Arts found that arts projects undertaken with young people who had committed offences and were either in a Restorative Justice Programme or on an Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Programme, contributed to a reduction in reoffending amongst participants. Through involvement in arts based activities participants demonstrated considerable changes in 'perceptions of themselves, how they behave and, in some cases, improving aspirations'.

Furthermore, an exploratory study of 118 young people aged 13-21 from a range of custody and community based youth justice settings in England found that the musicians working with the young people observed supportive interaction between participants. For example, participants were observed showing regard for each other, expressing encouragement and praise as well as a development of more sophisticated group skills such as listening, turn taking, respecting others, planning and collective decision making (de Viggiani et al. 2014).

Current desistance research indicates that people involved in offending are more likely to move away from criminal activity when they have ceased to see themselves as 'an offender' and have developed a more positive self-identity. Through the development of these essential practical and social skills and a more

positive self-identity and wellbeing, the arts have shown to play a crucial part in allowing those involved in offending 'to imagine and to embark on the desistance process' (McNeil et al, 2011).

How Can Arts Interventions be Incorporated into Practice?

As a practitioner, it may be a daunting prospect to begin creative work with young people, particularly if you have no prior experience or have not picked up a paint brush since school but this should not deter you from trying to incorporate a creative approach to your work with young people. Whether it be as a method to engage young people in their educational journey, a way of teaching and encouraging the development of new skills, both social and practical, or a means of therapeutic work that enables the young person to express themselves, arts interventions can be a multifaceted benefit to the young person.

The arts can take many forms and it is not necessary to be an expert at painting, singing or acting to introduce creativity into your work with young people. Whilst this should not be considered as a replacement for specialist arts interventions such as therapy or treatment, incorporating creative processes into your day to day practice can be a useful and meaningful way of engaging young people, offering a positive distraction and facilitating dialogue. A creative intervention could be as simple as facilitating a collage by providing young people with a piece of paper, a stick of glue and cut outs from magazines and newspapers; it could be beginning a creative writing process by asking them to think of obscure possibilities like what would happen if cats ruled the country or making a bird feeder with a length of string and an apple with seeds pressed into it. The possibilities are endless and can be a simple and cost effective way of engaging with young people.

You may find that the young people you work with are also reluctant to take part but evidence from the [Musical Pathways](#) research indicates that any reticence that participants may initially show will, in most cases, recede over time if given enough encouragement, praise and patience.

If you are unsure how to proceed or would benefit from exploring creative possibilities before incorporating this into your practice, there are many organisations offering help, support and training out there and online resources providing networks to arts professionals, as well as the following tools and ideas for creative projects:

Useful resources

[Hands on Scotland](#) provides a [tool kit](#) with suggested activities and videos for how to incorporate creative activities to help children flourish as well as information on using [art therapy](#) with young people with troubling behaviours.

The [BBC](#) has created an online resource for younger children with many suggestions for creative things to make and do.

[Youth Link Scotland](#) has compiled the [Create Scotland Arts Directory](#) which lists all arts organisations in Scotland that are working with young people.

[Scottish Prison Arts Network](#) (SPAN) is a professional network for artists working with people who have offended and their families and provides a space for sharing practice and connecting with artists and supporting organisations.

[Vox Liminis](#) is an organisation creating spaces where differently situated people communicate and connect in new ways through the arts, and can imagine a more positive and human future together.

[Theatre Nemo](#) provides a space where people can explore their creativity in a friendly and nurturing environment to rediscover their identity through positive reinforcement and social interaction and can deliver projects tailored for your organisation.

[Youth Theatre Arts Scotland](#) aims to transform lives through youth theatre by providing inspiring participatory opportunities for young people in Scotland and by connecting, supporting and training the professionals who work with them. They have a page for professionals on their website which links to organisations and events across Scotland.

[Impact Arts](#) help people and communities transform their lives through creativity and the arts.

[Artlink Central](#) is a social enterprise and charity working across Central Scotland and beyond, inspiring social change through extraordinary participatory arts experiences.

As well as organisations that can support practitioners, the 10 year National Youth Arts Strategy '[Time to Shine](#)' which commenced in 2014 has established nine regional youth arts hubs: Argyll Youth Arts Hub, #FreshCreations, Glasgow Youth Arts Hub, Ayr Youth Arts Network, Youth Arts Collective North East, #Artcore, Fife, Highlands Youth Arts Hub, iGNITE

Further research on the impact of arts-based projects, programmes and interventions within the Criminal Justice System can be found at the Arts Alliance Evidence Library:
www.artsevidence.org.uk/

We would like to thank those who gave feedback on this information sheet

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