

Evidence briefing: The benefits of creative activities for the wellbeing of children and young people

This briefing is aimed at health professionals, including GPs, practice nurses, health visitors, and social prescribing link workers, and other practitioners who may be supporting the wellbeing of children and young people.

It synthesises a wide range of published research around the benefits of creative activities for children and young people and offers a set of practical recommendations for health and care professionals. You can find out more about the evidence sources we've used, at the end of the briefing.

Quick read summary

There is growing evidence that creative activities can improve the wellbeing of children and young people (CYP). The benefits of creative activity for CYP wellbeing can be summarised across four key areas:

General wellbeing

Creative activities can improve self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging in CYP. These effects have been seen across a range of activities including music, dance, drama, visual arts, and reading. Everyday creativity, where the focus is on process rather than product, can promote positive emotions, a sense of purpose, and social connectedness, regardless of artistic skill.

Mental health

Music-based interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression in CYP. Dance can reduce depressive symptoms, physical (somatic) complaints, and emotional distress in adolescents. Drama and theatre can support emotional awareness, empathy, and coping skills. The mechanisms through which creative engagement improves mental health include biological pathways such as neural and hormonal changes, psychological pathways such as improved self-expression and confidence, and social pathways such as greater connection and belonging. Evidence also suggests that creative activities can build resilience, particularly for CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have experienced trauma.

Physical health and activity

Dance participation is associated with improved cardiovascular fitness, motor development, musculoskeletal strength, and increased physical activity levels in CYP. It can be particularly effective for engaging young people who avoid traditional forms of exercise. Reading for pleasure has been linked to healthier lifestyle behaviours in adolescence. Creative activities more broadly can support body awareness, coordination, and fine motor skills, with benefits noted even for CYP with disabilities.

Child and adolescent development

The evidence is particularly strong for the role of music and shared reading in supporting speech and language development from infancy through childhood. Creative activities can also support social and emotional development, including prosocial behaviours, emotional regulation, communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively. There is also early evidence linking arts engagement with improved educational engagement and reduced behavioural difficulties.

Key message: Research evidence has shown that creative activities can be a valuable resource for supporting the wellbeing of CYP.

Health professionals and other practitioners working with CYP and families are well placed to encourage creative engagement, whether through social prescribing pathways, signposting to community arts programmes, or simply recommending everyday creative activities as part of conversations about wellbeing.

The focus should be on the **process of creating rather than the quality of the product**, and activities don't need specialist artistic skills to deliver benefits.

Eight practical suggestions for health professionals and practitioners

1. **Recommend everyday creative activities** as part of wellbeing conversations with CYP and families. Activities such as drawing, singing, dancing at home, reading for pleasure, crafting, and creative writing all carry wellbeing benefits and require no special skill and minimal equipment.
2. **Use social prescribing pathways** to connect CYP with community-based creative programmes. Link workers can help identify suitable local arts activities and support sustained engagement.
3. **Signpost families to accessible community arts provision** such as local music groups, dance classes, drama clubs, and library-based reading and craft sessions. Emphasise where these are open to all abilities and do not require prior experience.
4. **Promote music and shared reading from infancy.** The evidence is particularly strong that music and parent-child reading support language development, social bonding, and early emotional regulation. Encourage these activities in early years health visits.
5. **Highlight dance as physical activity.** Dance can engage CYP who may not enjoy traditional sport, offering both physical health and mental wellbeing benefits. It requires no special equipment and can be practised at home, in school, or in community settings.
6. **Consider creative activities for CYP with additional needs.** Arts activities can be adapted for CYP with disabilities, long-term conditions, or neurodivergent profiles. Some examples of activity modifications include breaking the activity down into simpler steps, or using written or illustrated instructions; supporting sensory sensitivities by playing music more gently, or slowly introducing different textures and colours; or for visual impairment or motor problems, use larger materials and tools – for example, create collages with large leaves instead of flower petals, or use thick pens instead of pencils. Creative engagement offers non-verbal modes of expression and can support those who find clinical or verbal settings challenging.
7. **Encourage group creative activities for socially isolated CYP.** Group arts participation supports social connection, reduces loneliness, and builds a sense of belonging. This is particularly relevant for CYP experiencing social difficulties or transitions.
8. **Emphasise process over product.** When recommending creative activities, reassure families that the benefits come from the experience of being creative, not from producing something impressive. This removes barriers related to perceived lack of talent or skill.

This briefing was produced by the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) North East and North Cumbria (NENC) in collaboration with the [Child Health and Wellbeing Network](#) of the Integrated Care Board in the North East and North Cumbria, to support their Arts and Creativity workstream and awareness-raising campaign around creative health.

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More details about this briefing

This briefing summarises findings from the key evidence sources listed in the references section below, including a World Health Organisation (WHO) scoping review, a UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport evidence summary for policy, reports from the APPG on Creative Health, the National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH), the Child of the North partnership, and published systematic reviews and primary studies on creative activities and CYP wellbeing.

For more information about the ARC NENC Knowledge Mobilisation team, get in touch at arcnenc@cntw.nhs.uk

Visit our website: [About us - ARC](#)

Visit our Evidence Hub to explore short and easy-to-read summaries of health and care research findings:

[Evidence Archive - ARC](#)

Find out more about the Creatively Healthy campaign: <https://www.healthiertogether.nhs.uk/chwn/arts-and-creativity>

Further information about the sources used and the detailed findings can be found on the following pages.

More detailed findings from the evidence review

The approach to compiling this briefing was a rapid evidence review of key reports, policy documents, and systematic reviews that captured the breadth of existing evidence in this area. Sources reviewed were either shared by experts in the subject area working with the Child Health and Wellbeing Network or found through review of references in the shared reports. Some of the evidence outlined in the findings below is from original research cited in the systematic reviews and wider reports. The sources included cover a range of creative activities including music, dance, drama and theatre, visual arts and crafts, literature and reading, and cultural participation. Information was extracted from the reports and articles and collated into themes and key messages.

Key findings are organised below by the domain of impact on CYP, drawing on both the formal graded evidence from the DCMS and WHO reviews, and the wider literature identified through the thematic analysis of published research.

General wellbeing

What the evidence shows

There is consistent and strong evidence that creative activities improve aspects of wellbeing in CYP. The DCMS report gives an overall Grade B recommendation for the use of the arts to support wellbeing in children and young people, indicating the evidence can be trusted to guide policy in most situations.²

Example findings include:

- A meta-analysis of 11 Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) of music therapy found improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-concept in children and adolescents with psychopathology.²
- A systematic review of 7 RCTs found dance can improve wellbeing in young people aged 15 to 24.^{2,9}
- Longitudinal data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study showed that children who engaged in listening to or playing music, drawing, painting, or making things, and reading for enjoyment at age 7 had higher self-esteem at age 11, with the relationship stronger when children engaged alongside their parents.¹⁴

Everyday creative activities, including those not requiring artistic skill, also carry benefits. One study found that creative activity on one day predicted increased positive emotions and a sense of purpose, engagement, and social connectedness the following day.⁵ Other research found that creative engagement promoted emotional wellbeing because the activity satisfied basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.⁶

Community-based arts programmes have been found to enhance self-confidence, happiness, and social functioning. An evaluation of a creative dance programme for primary school children in the North East of England reported increased confidence, happiness, and improved social skills, as well as reduced isolation and improved classroom engagement.¹⁵ It also found that multi-modal creative tasks involving movement, music, drawing, and poetry increased feelings of creativity, energy, and pride in CYP.¹⁶

How it works

- **Psychological mechanisms:** Self-expression, increased self-esteem and confidence, enhanced emotional regulation, sense of achievement and purpose.^{2,5,6}
- **Social mechanisms:** Sense of belonging, peer connection, reduced isolation, family engagement.^{4,15}
- **Accessibility:** Benefits are accessible regardless of artistic skill or talent. The focus on process over product removes barriers to engagement.^{6,8}

Mental health

What the evidence shows

Evidence supports the role of creative activities in promoting positive mental health and reducing symptoms of mental distress in CYP, though the DCMS report notes that evidence specifically for the treatment of diagnosed mental illness in CYP remains limited (Grade D), primarily due to a lack of research rather than negative findings.²

Example findings include:

- Music-based interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression in children and adolescents.^{2,11} An RCT showed that music therapy improved self-esteem and reduced depression in CYP aged 8 to 16 with behavioural and emotional problems.² Digital music tools have also supported young people aged 16 to 25 with mild mental distress to identify and manage their emotions.²
- Dance has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms and somatic complaints in adolescent girls, including headaches, stomach pains, tiredness, and emotional distress.¹³ Participation in drama and theatre can support emotional awareness, empathy, and communication skills.^{2,3}
- Evidence from community-based arts activities shows significant decreases in emotional problems including unhappiness, anxiety, and depression, and reductions in behavioural incidents.⁴
- Longitudinal data in one study showed that children showing creativity at age 7 had a 22 to 49 per cent lower risk of social and behavioural instability and maladjustment at age 11, with effects persisting after controlling for socioeconomic status, intelligence, and personality factors.⁷

Creative activities have also been identified as supporting resilience, particularly for CYP from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have experienced trauma.^{4,12} The APPG on Creative Health report concluded that there is good evidence linking creative engagement with improved mental health in CYP through biological, psychological, and social mechanisms.¹¹

How it works

- **Biological:** Influencing neural pathways, hormonal responses, and physiological symptoms of anxiety and depression.^{1,11}
- **Psychological:** Creative expression provides an outlet for complex feelings that may be difficult to articulate verbally.^{8,12}
- **Social:** Facilitating social connection and fostering a sense of belonging; reducing isolation; building supportive peer relationships.^{4,15}

Physical health and activity

What the evidence shows

Dance is the creative activity with the strongest evidence base for physical health benefits in CYP.

Example findings include:

- A systematic review found that dance participation improved cardiovascular fitness, endurance, musculoskeletal strength, motor development, and physical activity levels in children and adolescents.¹³ Dance was found to be particularly effective for engaging CYP who avoid traditional exercise, including those who are overweight.
- Dance exergaming (dance video games) was identified as a way to combine screen time with physical activity.¹³

Reading for pleasure has been linked to healthier lifestyle behaviours. Longitudinal data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study showed that reading at age 7 was associated with lower odds of trying cigarettes and alcohol, and increased fruit consumption at age 14.¹⁴

How it works

- **Direct activity:** Dance and movement-based arts provide moderate to vigorous physical activity.^{9,13}
- **Motivation and engagement:** Creative framing makes physical activity enjoyable and accessible, particularly for CYP who do not enjoy traditional sport.^{13,15}
- **Motor development:** Creative activities support fine and gross motor skills, balance, coordination, and body awareness.^{8,13,15}

Child and adolescent development

What the evidence shows

The evidence is particularly strong for the role of music and shared reading in supporting speech and language development. The DCMS report gives a Grade A recommendation for music in infant speech and language development and for both music and reading in childhood language development.²

Example findings include:

- A meta-analysis of 19 RCTs found that shared book reading in children aged 1 to 6 improves both expressive and receptive language.²
- Among children with additional needs, music training has shown benefits for children with dyslexia, cochlear implant users, and autistic children.^{1,2}

Creative activities also support broader social and emotional development. A meta-analysis of 18 RCTs found that parent-child book reading is beneficial to child and parent psychosocial functioning.² Music programmes have been shown to improve self-control, reduce aggressive behaviour, and enhance prosocial skills.²

The Child of the North report positions play as the foundational creative activity for child development, describing it as the cornerstone of physical and mental wellbeing and cognitive, social, and emotional development.¹²

How it works

- **Neurological:** Music training is associated with structural differences in children's brains and enhanced neural processing of speech.^{1,2,8}
- **Cognitive:** Creative activities support attention, memory, problem-solving, and decentration (the ability to consider multiple perspectives).^{2,7}
- **Social-emotional:** Develops emotional literacy, empathy, turn-taking, teamwork, communication skills, and self-regulation.^{1,4,10}

Accessibility and equity considerations

The evidence highlights both the potential and the challenges of creative activities as an equitable health resource for CYP:

- **Social gradient in participation:** CYP from the most economically advantaged areas are twice as likely to engage in music or performing arts outside school as their least advantaged peers.^{12,14}
- **Barriers to address:** Stigma around certain art forms (e.g. dance perceived as gendered), reduction in community spaces, and lack of time and resources for families in disadvantaged areas.^{12,13,15}
- **Inclusive by nature:** Many creative activities require no special equipment and can be practised anywhere. Everyday creativity is accessible regardless of artistic skill, and activities can be adapted for CYP with disabilities.^{6,8,13}
- **Creative activities as equity tools:** The Child of the North report describes arts and creativity as an essential component of breaking the links between a child's background and their life chances.¹²

Implications for social prescribing

Social prescribing through link workers offers a mechanism for connecting CYP and families with community-based creative activities. However, the DCMS evidence summary found no published studies on arts-based social prescribing for CYP at the time of review, and this remains a significant evidence gap.² Among adults, the evidence for arts-based social prescribing is promising for wellbeing and social cohesion (Grade B), albeit weak for other domains, with economic evaluations suggesting returns on investment.²

Primary care professionals can support this agenda by raising awareness of creative activities during consultations, making referrals through social prescribing pathways where available, and advocating for the inclusion of arts provision in local community assets.^{2,10}

Strength of the evidence

The quality of the evidence varies across different outcomes. The DCMS evidence summary used the FORM Body of Evidence Matrix.² The table below summarises the grading for outcomes most relevant to CYP:

Outcome	Grade	Interpretation
Music for infant speech and language development	A	Can be trusted to guide policy
Music and reading for child language development	A	Can be trusted to guide policy
Music for infant social development	A	Can be trusted to guide policy
Book reading for child social development	A	Can be trusted to guide policy
Arts for wellbeing in children and young people	B	Can guide policy in most situations
Arts (other than reading) for child social development	B	Can guide policy in most situations
Arts for educational attainment (music)	C	Use with caution
Arts for educational attainment (other)	D	More research needed
Arts for management of mental illness in CYP	D	More research needed

Source: Adapted from Fancourt, Warran and Aughterson (2020).²

References

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