

As the coronavirus upends schools, experts say don't forget the arts

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For some parents and schools, education amid a pandemic will mean a

focus on reading, writing and arithmetic. But brain experts say don't forget the singing, dancing and painting.

Arts education often is seen as a frill. But research shows it boosts educational performance. Exposure to the arts can have direct and indirect benefits to mental and [physical health](#). Far from being a luxury, they fill an essential human need.

"Sometimes they say that the arts are like exercise," said Susan Magsamen, executive director of the International Arts & Mind Lab within the Brain Science Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. "Exercise is something that helps you with your whole body, right? It helps your stamina. It helps you maintain your balance. It helps you sleep better. It helps your brain work better. The arts are like that, too," for brain development.

Theater, for example, teaches empathy for differing views and lets students explore complicated issues in a safe space, she said. Choir builds socialization skills. Learning to play an instrument teaches resilience.

They also bring happiness—which can be in short supply during a global health crisis.

"You can't learn if you don't feel safe," she said. "You can't learn if you're depressed."

That has health ramifications because lower levels of education have been linked to heart disease. But the arts also produce direct benefits. Music, visual art, creative writing and dance have long been used in physical and mental therapy.

Engaging in a creative act or even visiting an art gallery has been shown

to reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which may affect heart health. A study in the journal *Art Therapy* showed just a 45-minute session of making art tended to significantly lower cortisol levels.

And a person doesn't even have to be a "serious" artist, Magsamen said. "Just the physical act of making [art] lowers cortisol and also blood pressure."

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a professor of education, psychology and neuroscience at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, said the physical act of creativity begins at a young age.

"In every culture in the world, there's some kind of little sing-songy, interactive games adults play with their babies," said Immordino-Yang. "This is very fundamental as a kind of cultural conduit for engaging in relationships that enable people to co-construct worlds together, which develops children's brains, minds and full selves."

Immordino-Yang has written that the satisfying feeling of creating may derive from the way our brains evolved. Survival depended on seeing and making sense of our environment and connecting with other humans around us.

Her brain scan research shows as people process narratives based on true stories designed to evoke admiration and compassion, it affects not just the high-level executive functioning parts of the brain, but the brain stem, which regulates the body's most basic functions.

She sees the arts as vital to education as well. It's the part of a school day where students learn that their classwork has meaning. And it keeps kids coming back. "The things that we traditionally consider arts are often kids' biggest reason for being at school, and the one place where they can actually establish relationships that really feel meaningful."

Those connections could be particularly important in the coronavirus era. A recent survey from South Korea found that people who engaged in arts and culture in their leisure time were more likely to follow virus-fighting measures.

Arts classes also have been shown to boost academic performance in math, science and reading. And low-income students who engage in the arts are more likely to attend and do well in college.

But nobody says it's easy to do during a pandemic.

Liz Vacco knows firsthand. She's director of dance education at the Gabriella Charter Schools in Los Angeles. The kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school's students, most of whom come from low-income homes, receive dance instruction every day.

Dance is entwined with the entire program. In the studio, students might dance about states of matter they learned in science class. In the classroom, dance teachers might suggest ways for kids to move around.

But when the pandemic hit, the focus became traditional core classes online. "We had to put the arts a little bit in the background," Vacco said.

She now thinks that was a mistake. "Now more than ever, kids are feeling lonely. They're feeling big feelings, right? They need to find their unique voice, and they need to have opportunities to express the things they're going through."

By the end of last school year, her school had restored some of the dance curriculum, using video. "We were able to create like a 10-minute piece. That was really fun." Visual art and choir teachers also found ways to work with students. And more is on the way for the coming year.

Vacco has drawn on resources posted by The Kennedy Center. Educators also can find help in an exhaustive list of details compiled by the coalition Arts Ed NJ, an arts advocacy group in New Jersey. Music education groups have issued safety guidance for music instruction during the pandemic.

Magsamen's center also has a field guide full of potential projects. And it doesn't have to be complicated, she said. "Families can encourage kids to literally put on a show, write a story, have a dance party." Cooking is also an art, she said, and can be a basis for lessons on measurements, chemistry and even family history.

It's crucial for students to have lessons that engage them and feel relevant to the moment, said Immordino-Yang.

"The arts are about expressing yourself as a human being," she said. "And if there's anything more fundamental and necessary for a kid to do than that, I'd like to see it."

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