

Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

In 2021, over a quarter of U.S. parents reported their adolescent had seen a mental health specialist, according to a survey published this April by a University of Michigan children's hospital (Mott, 2022). The CDC reported in 2019 that suicide was the second leading cause of death among children 10 to 14 - *before* the pandemic. The data has spurred the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association to declare a national adolescent and child mental health emergency (AAP, 2021).

School counseling resources are strained (Barshay, 2020). Although more states and schools have been designated to receive federal relief funds to address the problem, creating programs on "mental health first aid" and other interventions, the scale of the problem demands additional resources from schools, families, and communities.

Some of the most effective tools already exist in almost every school - the art, music, drama, and media classrooms. Brains run on art! It's time we recognized that the protective effects of the arts on mental health are a necessity, rather than a luxury.



Kids were already struggling, and the pandemic exacerbated the issues

The Center for Disease Control published the first national survey of pandemic mental well-being of high school students in March, 2022. It illuminates issues that have made the headlines and spotlights specific populations at greater risk.

The 2019 report already indicated that, "Mental health and suicide ideation or actions among young people is a severe and growing problem in the United States. Poor mental health is associated with a host of health risks, both during adolescence and into adulthood. It can lead to risky sexual behavior, illicit substance use, unintended pregnancy, school absence and dropout,

Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

and other potentially life-long health problems.”

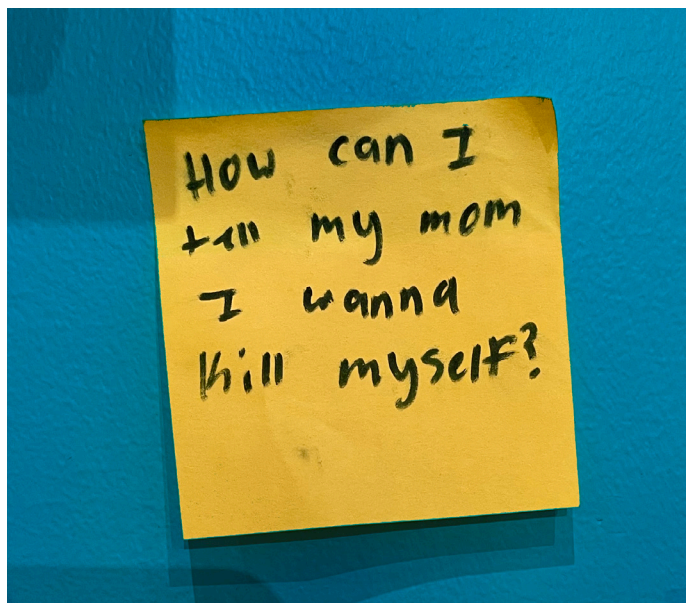
The 2022 study showed that the pandemic has “created additional traumatic stressors that have the potential to further erode students’ mental wellbeing.” More than half of the students in the post-pandemic study (55%) reported they experienced emotional abuse by a parent or other adult in the home, including swearing, insults, or put-downs, and 11% experienced actual physical abuse. Over a quarter (29%) reported job loss by an adult in their home.

Girls and LGBTQ youth reported greater levels of poor mental health; emotional abuse by a parent or caregiver; and having attempted suicide than their counterparts. A large proportion of Asian students (64%) and Black or mixed-race students (both 55%) reported experiencing instances of racism, which is linked to poor mental health, academic performance, and lifelong health risk behaviors. It is shocking that the number of black students who reported a suicide attempt in 2019 increased by almost 50% - even before the pandemic.



Left: a question left in our “Q and A” section by a student at the Richmond Art Museum.

Above: students doing what they are supposed to in the “hangout” area of our exhibit.



On the protective factor side, students with a sense of being cared for and supported at school were significantly less likely to report feelings of sadness, thoughts of attempting suicide, or actually attempting suicide, than those who did not feel connected to school. Unfortunately, less than half (47%) of youth reported feeling close to people at school during the pandemic.

Schools lack the resources to address mental health. In the 2018-19 school year, there were roughly 425 students for every school counselor, which exceeds the American School Counselor Association’s recommended ratio of 250 to 1. Twenty-three percent

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of students attended schools with no psychologists and 53% attended schools with no social workers. (Barshay). Data also shows that the situation worsened over the pandemic and the “great resignation” as more education workers left the system, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics reporting a 3% drop in the school workforce between February 2020 and May 2022.

To pick up the slack, classroom teachers have been urged to incorporate aspects of Social-Emotional-Learning (SEL) into their curriculum (Durlak, 2011). But crowded class sizes and mandated content defined by state testing standards don’t make it easy to focus holistically on students’ emotional wellbeing. During pandemic lockdowns, teachers struggled mightily to create personal connections to students learning online. Delivering hands-on lessons in art and music were especially challenging. On the positive side, parents thrown into home-schooling created a huge surge in art supply sales, as everyone recognized the value in “non-screen time” and people gravitated to what brought some peace and happiness (McCann, 2021).

Efficacy of arts programs as a protective factor

In the realm of social and emotional health, there are protective factors that contribute to a child’s wellbeing, and risk factors that interfere with health. Protective factors help insulate kids from poor choices and make them more resilient, or better able to withstand internal and environmental stressors (Palmer et al, 2022). Of course, trying to intervene before a crisis is preferable (and more cost-effective) than repairing one afterward.

A review of studies exploring the effects of creative activities on the health and wellbeing of children and young people identified benefits like “increased self-esteem, a sense of achievement and empowerment, improved social skills and promotion of social engagement” (Zarobe, 2017). The analysis found additional positive protective factors including

greater happiness, increased self-confidence, closer relationships, and appreciation for working in a team. A 2018 review of twenty separate studies on the arts and mental health reports “non-clinical engagement in arts, culture and creative activities can increase mental health wellbeing of individuals who are experiencing mental health problems” (Jensen, 2018). The activities measured ranged from hands-on arts or crafts, to singing, dancing, hearing stories or listening to music, and included patients suffering from chronic pain, cancer, and other diseases, as well as health care workers and patients reporting other stressors.

The review reported health impacts including, “Subjective feelings of increased self-confidence and wellbeing, being part of a community, building new social relationships, participating in meaningful activities, creating a connection between body and mind, promoting relaxation, fostering a sense of hope and developing new coping mechanisms and experiencing increased sense of self-worth, motivation and aspiration and decreased levels of depression.”

Below: a 6th grader works on a piece for the Chromatic Data Project, depicting a “Stressor” and a “Strength”.



Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

An additional study compared the use and non-use of an art intervention in different units of the hospital (Staricoff 68). The groups experiencing art programs had a measurable improvement in clinical outcomes, including better vital signs, diminished stress-associated cortisol, and needed less sleep medication.

These studies were conducted among hospital patients – but what about kids? A randomized, controlled study of over 10,000 third- through-eight-graders in Houston showed arts programs had significant positive impacts on student academic and social success. Specific data included a 3.6 percentage point reduction in students receiving disciplinary infractions, and a slight increase in students' standardized writing test scores. Three subgroups showed even more pronounced effects: Elementary age students, those with limited English proficiency, and those designated as gifted or talented showed significant improvement in school engagement, empathy and college aspiration (Bowen, 2019).

Below: a group reflecting on the ways creativity, addiction, and mental illness have touched their lives. Right: contributing to the Chromatic Data project.



Trauma-informed approaches, including those that integrate the arts, recognize the signs of trauma, incorporate understandings of trauma into practices and seek to prevent re-traumatization (SAMSHA, 2014). Art experiences build resiliency by giving students a way to process their emotions from disaster and trauma and begin to heal (Dev Services Group, 2016).

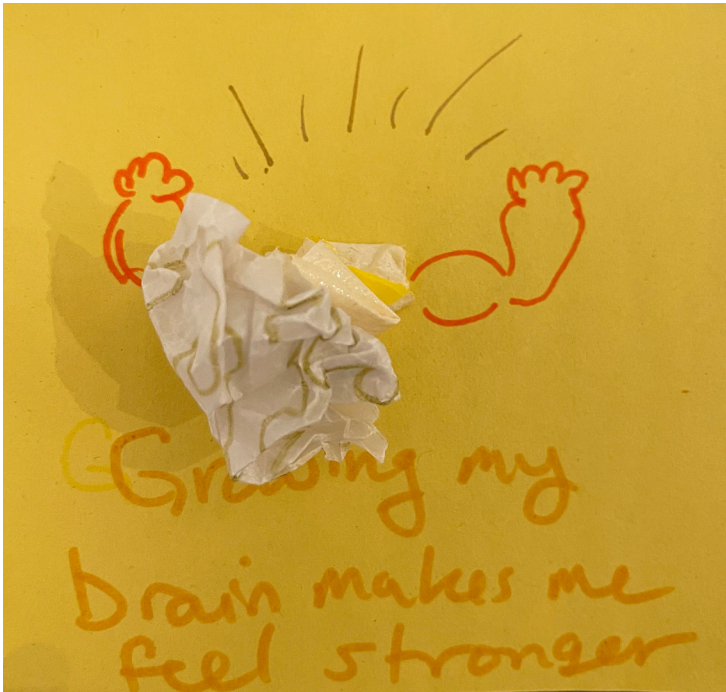
The arts include nonverbal, individualized SEL skills such as developing emotional regulation, and improving personal aspirations and compassion for others. The more traumatized the student is, the more healing the effects can be.

Longitudinal research of student outcomes has consistently suggested that both at-risk and not-at-risk students involved in arts education outperform their non-arts peers on a host of educational, social, and behavioral outcomes, even when controlling for other demographics. (Catterall et al, 2012),

Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

And the results of school-based arts education experiences in childhood are lasting. Having even one formal arts class in school is associated with later adult arts engagement as creator, performer, patron, or donor/financial supporter (Elpus, 2015).

Below: A depiction of where one student finds “Support” - at school, from the Chromatic Data Project.



A burning need for wrap-around programs

Arts programs are historically “on the chopping block” when budgets shrink. Although about 82% of all high schools in the nation offered at least one course in one or more of the four major arts disciplines, a 2019 survey reports that only about 37% of eighth graders reported taking an arts class. “Academic track” college-bound students often find arts electives are squeezed out of their schedules, whereas students in technical programs may not have any electives at all, and underperforming students may be steered to test-preparation or remedial courses to pass state standards. In short, it can’t be assumed that every student gets to enjoy the mental-health boost of an art, music or theater class during school hours (Von Zastrow, 2019).

Parents, volunteers, community nonprofit and grant-making organizations are resources that can collaborate with schools to provide cost-effective programs. Many schools already have artists-in-residence or other programs that only reach students in art classes, but creating or finding arts-related programming to support mental health can energize not only students, but frazzled faculty and staff. Imagine harnessing the same community spirit that rallies around physical health programs like sports teams and physical fitness programs, and devoting a fraction of it to mental health.

This simple recommendation from the CDC could apply to arts-based programs: “Schools, families, and communities can work together to provide more intentional messages, skills, and mental health support for adolescents so that encouraging trends can continue and troubling trends can be reversed.” Using the arts to deliver these messages can lead not only to fun and memorable experiences for “arty” kids, but to overall well-being for the entire school community.

Jonathan Mermin, M.D., director of the CDC’s Center for monitoring and addressing school-based health, says it well, “The data tells us what works. So, what will it take for our schools and communities to help youth withstand the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond?” Let’s paint a brighter picture for kids.

ABOUT US

The Amos Lemon Burkhardt Foundation is a 501 (c)3 nonprofit organization. Our mission is inspire teens to STAY ALIVE and MAKE ART.

We deliver both in-school workshops and a community-based experiential exhibition that engage students in the topics of mental health and substance abuse prevention. Our unique evidence-based approach wraps proven content and skill-building exercises in participatory, hands-on art experiences that motivate students to reflect, inquire, make, do, write and play.

For more information go to stayalivemakeart.org or contact ann at a.lemon.burkhardt@gmail.com

Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

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Teens, Art & Mental Health: A Post-Pandemic Analysis.

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The young artist Amos Lemon Burkhart was enormously talented - and also struggled with anxiety, depression, self-harm, gender dysphoria, and substance abuse. Despite a bright future in animation, quality long-term addiction treatment, and a full ride to art school, he passed away in 2018 at the age of 19, drowning while under the influence of alcohol, pot, and Xanax.

The Amos Lemon Burkhart Foundation is a federally recognized 501c3 organization founded in 2019. We are located in Mohnton, PA 19540. Our mission is to inspire teens to STAY ALIVE and MAKE ART.

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