

The Arts as Part of Our Everyday Lives: Making Visible the Value of the Arts in Learning for Families

Susan H. Magsamen¹

ABSTRACT—Family engagement, in many forms, has been shown to be an essential component to successful learning for children. A child's first exposure to the arts is often through family rituals and traditions. New research suggests these activities can form the basis for personal exploration and skill development and reinforce in-school learning. Because public schools continue to reduce art programs due to budgetary contraction, families and communities need to enhance and increase their commitment to informal arts and learning opportunities. These experiences can occur at home, in youth and arts museums, and in libraries and family-based organizations as evidenced by a range of events already underway throughout the country. Communication and outreach about the relevance and the science of arts and learning for families needs to be expanded. By recognizing the important role families hold it is possible to enhance learning through the arts at home and in the community. More targeted research is required to better understand how families can use the rich array of arts-integrated experiences in age-appropriate ways to enhance literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and more.

Home is where the arts are often first shared with children. From lullabies to bedtime stories, finger painting to bucket bands, home is where families naturally introduce the arts to translate and symbolize values, ethics, habits, and cultural rituals and traditions. Regardless of a child's age, there are

developmentally engaging, and medium-specific, explorations for a child to experience the world through the arts. Home is where rich, positive, and safe environments are created to allow children to explore, create, make mistakes, and try again. It seems that, regardless of time limitations on busy families, parents and primary child care providers bring art experiences to children through endless personalized interpretations.

Yet we often labor under great misconceptions about the value of the arts when it comes to raising children. What if parents could be informed with knowledge about how the arts can enhance learning? Imagine researchers, families, and educators joining together to expand the impact of the arts at home, in school, in neighborhoods, and in the community at large. The benefits could be significant for our children and society.

THE CHALLENGE TO BUILD STRONG BONDS BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOLS

The loss of the arts in schools robs many children of much of their access to music, dance, theater, creative writing, and visual arts—the very vehicles by which motivation, problem solving, self-discovery, context, and meaningful learning may be gained. With or without much knowledge or training, the reduction and loss of arts programs in the schools put even more responsibility on families and the community to provide quality arts experiences that inform learning than ever before. Families need to be strong partners with schools on behalf of their children.

As the most influential people in a child's life, families have a tremendous opportunity to support, enhance, and promote the arts. "Everything points to the critical link between schools and home that bridges performance arts, arts appreciation, and arts integration. This link needs to be nurtured so that the arts can contribute fully to the development of future skills including

¹Brain Science Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Address correspondence to Susan H. Magsamen, Director of Interdisciplinary Partnerships, Johns Hopkins Medicine Brain Science Institute, John G. Rangos Building, 855 North Wolfe Street, 2nd floor, Rm 271, Baltimore, MD 21205; e-mail: smagsam1@jhu.edu.

collaboration and creativity,” said Kurt Fischer, the Charles Bigelow Professor of Education and Director of the Mind, Brain, and Education Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Without this consistency and integrated support between school and home, it is very difficult for children to succeed in learning the many skills and strategies that they naturally learn from the arts.”

EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING THROUGH ART

There are many ways that the arts can be incorporated into the lives of children. But perhaps it is the everyday moments that offer ideal opportunities for families to use the arts to enhance topics and issues, support homework, gain valuable insight, develop perseverance, reduce stress, and more. A parent quietly points out the range of colors in the sky as golden leaves float to the ground. The lesson: Art is everywhere and it is through observation we see new things. A teenager raps a song about life and a lost girlfriend at a coffee house. The lesson: Communications, creativity, emotional development happen through self-expression. Kids and parents play music together on a pots and pan band. The lesson: Collaboration and creativity are fun and we learn through pleasure. But, parents on the whole know little about arts, learning, and the brain. Parents do not naturally make these connections—and science is just beginning to explore them. “Providing parents with accurate and reliable information is essential if we are going to help kids meet their potential using the arts,” says Ellen Galinsky (2010), President and Co-Founder, Families and Work Institute and author of *Mind in the Making*. “Schools, home, the workplace, and community must work together to use what we know about the importance of the arts everyday.”

Many parents do not realize the potential impact of the arts on cognition, social emotional development, attention, executive function, or memory development (Hardiman et al., 2009). Like all parents, they abundantly share what they know and many times what was taught to them as children. Many parents resort to the *because I said so* school of parenting because they do not have the answer to why the arts matter. It might seem like the right thing to do, but parents need to know why. Whether it is encouraging a child to practice a musical instrument, paint a picture, write a story or poem, understanding the benefits behind creativity, practice, perseverance, and mastery in the arts will influence how parents support and guide their children’s artistic decisions.

BUILDING RESEARCH: SHARING EVIDENCE WITH PARENTS

Research findings in many disciplines, from psychology and genetics to neuroscience and engineering, are converging

to inform the science of learning through the arts across the country and around the world. Brain scientists know more about perceptual sensory systems and are making cognitive connections to practical applications (Society for Neuroscience, 2009). Studies by Posner (2010) reveal that attention-focusing art forms improve listening skills and concentration, whereas other research suggests the role of the arts as a conduits for problem solving, motivation, collaboration, and innovative thinking (Fiske, 1999).

Project Zero, founded at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has an active research program that builds on and contributes to understanding of human cognitive development and the processes of learning in the arts. For example, Tina Grotzer’s work focuses on topics such as learnability of intelligence and how children develop causal models for complex science concepts (Perkins & Grotzer, 2000).

In 2008, The Dana Foundation published the results of a 3-year study by cognitive neuroscientists from seven leading universities across the United States addressing a fundamental question: Are smart people drawn to the arts or does arts training make people smarter? *Learning, Arts, and the Brain* provide new understanding of the impact of dance, music, and drama on other forms of learning (Gazzaniga, 2008). This work was later advanced during a conference jointly held by Johns Hopkins University Neuro-Education Initiative and the Dana Foundation at a summit in 2009 (Hardiman et al., 2009).

Another major research effort in the arts was undertaken by the National Science Foundation through a workshop entitled “Art, Creativity, and Learning” in 2008. Specific research strategies were discussed for the emerging field learning enhancement through the arts as well as methodological recommendations.

In October 2010, The Brain Science Institute (BSI) at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine held an innovative speakers series entitled *The Science of the Arts: Perceptual Neuroscience and Aesthetics* (www.brainscienceinstitute.org). *The Science of the Arts* brought together researchers and artists in a series of informal conversations about aesthetics and beauty in music, architecture, art, and dance. The BSi created an opportunity to discuss current research, ideas, and perspectives in hopes of helping to shape and inform this work in the coming years. Among the issues discussed included the scope of research already being conducted; new research questions; artist perspectives; and relevance and application of this work in health, architecture, education, and design.

Policy makers, educators, and researchers agree that bringing parents into this conversation has the potential to change access to activities that enhance children’s skills, attitudes, behavior, and outcomes. Some of this dialogue is already happening through back-to-school arts nights, portfolio assessments, after-school enrichment programs, free museum admission, and access to other cultural arts programs.

Educators have been incorporating the arts as an important part of learning for years. This was evidenced in the 2009 *Learning, Arts, and the Brain* summit hosted by Johns Hopkins University and the Dana Foundation. In many ways, the conversation about arts and learning between educators and researchers shows exciting promise. Educators are eager to incorporate the arts into learning but are perplexed about research findings and worried that information is overstated or overinterpreted. Creating a strong research and practice framework through continual interdisciplinary collaboration and dialogue is essential to share the best science in ways that are true to the science and useful to educators.

This confusion and uncertainty is even more the case for families and parents. Lack of clarity, sometimes conflicting evidence, and intimidation about research create an impediment to encouraging parents in the practice of engaging their children in the arts. Without easy and affordable access to usable practical applications and lack of parent knowledge and understanding about the reasons why creativity enhances cognitive development, there will be little progress made toward a more arts-enriched environment at home.

COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE THROUGH INNOVATIVE METHODS AND PLATFORMS

Some media outlets provide quick and sometimes shallow interpretations of research with little practical application for at-home and community use. Parents feel left out of the conversation. They have not been included in the discussions among researchers and educators to better understand what is known; they have not been participants in shaping new research and practices. Andrew Ackerman, Executive Director of the Children's Museum of Manhattan, shared some thoughts about this confusion:

We have parents coming to the museum all the time that want to provide environments and opportunities for their children in the arts, but are not sure what to do, what is age appropriate, or what is important for their child's development. We need to be educating parents to be good consumers of arts and learning. Without this, they are at the mercy of the latest educational fads. We have seen this with the Mozart Effect, and with changes in policies and priorities in schools that limit or eliminate the arts to make more time for testing.

Over the past 10 years, researchers have been reaching out to families to share information about the science of the arts and learning. This has been a challenging task. Communication channels to parents are diverse and scattered. There is not a common language between parents and researchers. Misunderstandings and misinterpretation of findings have

often caused researchers to pull back from the discussion. It is hard to find a way to have an ongoing, sustainable conversation with parents, educators, and researchers about the role the arts can play in learning because, so often, what will work best for children depends on age, access to a particular art form or medium, and the vast number of interests that children and their families can choose from.

SOME EXAMPLES OF EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SUCCESS

The good news is that there are many initiatives that have shown promise in addressing these complex communications issues.

The Ultimate Block Party: The Arts and Science of Play is an innovative example of bringing the science of arts and learning to communities, families, parents, and educators (www.ultimateblockparty.org). The inaugural event, held in Central Park in New York City in October 2010, married arts, play, and learning. Organizers expected 5,000 families but were thrilled to welcome more than 50,000 participants. Through a range of media platforms, *The Ultimate Block Party* also reached more than 4.5 million American families with strong messages about the value and science of the arts and play. Through this experience, organizers learned that there are resources committed to making opportunities available to children across the spectrum to engage in arts learning. Funding support came from a host of partners including the National Science Foundation, corporations, schools, individuals, and public and private foundations.

There is growing interest in making lessons and tools more widely available in practical and practice-able ways. The goal of *Mind in the Making* is to share the best knowledge about how children learn best. *Mind in the Making*, developed by Families and Work Institute, is another collaborative effort that communicates the science of early learning and practical hands-on ideas to enhance learning to the general public, families, and professionals who work with children and families.

KaBOOM! is yet another example of an exceptional program developed to provide families with support that enhances imagination, creativity, and much more. KaBOOM! is a national nonprofit dedicated to saving play for America's children (<http://kaboom.org>). Its mission is to create great play spaces through the participation and leadership of communities. Ultimately, the organization envisions a place to play within walking distance of every child in America.

Consider the results when the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) collaborated recently with the Grammy Foundation and MusiCares to sponsor a video music contest for kids to talk about why they should stay "clean" and away from drugs and alcohol. Winners would have the chance to see their original compositions posted on the Grammys website and win a backstage tour

during the Grammys Music Awards. Check out the three prize winners posted on NIDA's teen-oriented Sara Bellum blog (<http://teens.drugabuse.gov/blog/tag/musicares/>). Engaging in artistic outlets has proven to be a means of self-expression and an outlet for emotions children and their still-developing brains might have difficulty controlling. Anger, frustration, and fear, as well as happiness and wonder find voice in painting, song, poetry, and other arts engagement, particularly during adolescence, when teens are likely to lack the maturity to apply emotional brakes on widely swinging emotions.

The young people who submitted the winning entries have their own amazing stories to tell—and their ability to tell those stories by composing and performing their own music is a great example of how arts engagement can provide a healthy focal point, especially for teens. In addition, such public artistic expression can also inspire others in an immediate way that cannot be approximated in a classroom or through a textbook. And with social media, young people can share their expression with each other and a wider audience directly—and obtain immediate feedback. Bloggers, particularly mommy bloggers, are filling Internet pages with ideas and best practices about ways to enhance children's experiences through the arts. *The Motherhood*, developed by Emily McKhann, is an excellent example of a blog that hosts weekly chats with authors, educators, and researchers to share what works with thousands of users (<http://www.themotherhood.com/>).

The City of Baltimore Public Schools has developed an innovative initiative called The Family Institute. Led by Michael Sarbanes, executive director of The Office of Partnerships, Communications, and Community Engagement, Baltimore City Public Schools, is rolling out an extensive family engagement program that includes an arts integration program combined with a developmental skills model for 21st-century skills developed by researchers Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Golinkoff.

And finally, one project taking shape to address communications between families, educators, and researchers is a proposed online communication portal called *L_RN (Learning Resource Network)*. “*L_RN* will provide information about the science of learning for topics such as arts, play, stress, homework, and more, plus practical applications and a place for ongoing communication,” says Robin Stevens Payes, managing editor of *L_RN*. Being created through a consortium of institutions including Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Harvard University Mind, Brain, and Education, Temple University's CiRCLE program, University of Delaware, Families and Work Institute, and Maryland Institute of Art, *L_RN* will launch in the spring of 2011.

Families and communities are vital to a child's achievement. Social science, behavioral, and brain science research are beginning to demonstrate that the ways parents approach the role of the arts at home, after-school and, in summer

learning have the potential for a profound influence on their children's lives. Whether parents and child care providers have 5 min or 5 h to spend engaged with children making things, daydreaming, and imagining, the result demonstrates the benefits. The positive implications of having families and parents more informed about arts and learning are enormous.

These reflections are based on North American culture. The examples shared are mostly from the United States, and of course there are many other cultures with quite different relations to the arts in family life and in schools. Mind, brain and education studies is an international movement and it is important for us to show the richness of the variety of cultures in the arts as well as in the sciences that can inform a global conversation. I hope to continue to identify, collect, and share examples of arts and learning from around the world to better inform practice. I am reminded that I once heard an anthropologist lecture that in some indigenous cultures there is no word for *art* because *art* is such an inherent and integral part of everyday life.

No matter where we live, life draws on art in unexpected ways. As no less a rational thinker than Albert Einstein said, “I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

REFERENCES

- Fiske, E. B. (1999). *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning*. Washington, DC: President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.
- Galinsky, E. (2010). *Mind in the making: The seven essential life skills every child needs*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Gazzaniga, M. (2008). *Learning, arts and the brain: The Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition*. Washington, DC: The Dana Foundation.
- Hardiman, M., Magsamen, S., McKhann, G., & Eilber, J. (2009). *Neuroeducation: Learning, arts and the brain: Findings and challenges for educators and researchers from the 2009 Johns Hopkins University summit*. New York: The Dana Foundation.
- Magsamen, S. (2010). *The classic treasure of childhood wonders: Favorite adventures, stories, poems, and songs for making lasting memories*. New York: Random House.
- Perkins, D. N. & Grotzer, T. A. (2000, April). *Models and moves: Focusing on dimensions of causal complexity to achieve deeper scientific understanding*. Cambridge, MA: The Understandings of Consequence Project, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Available at <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/ucp/overview/papers/CausalityAERA.pdf>
- Posner, M. (2010). *Cognitive neuroscience of attention*. New York: Guilford.
- Society for Neuroscience. (2009). *Neuroscience research in education summit: The promise of interdisciplinary partnerships between brain sciences and education*. Retrieved from http://www.sfn.org/NeuroEd_Summit