
Imagination, Play, and the Role of Performing Arts in the Well-Being of Children

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37.1 Introduction

Children require more than just the fundamental means for survival. To develop a sense of personal significance and fulfillment, children warrant more. In this chapter, I will explore the potential that lies in the arts, specifically the performing arts, as engagements that enable children to achieve and maintain a sense of well-being. Campbell (2002) suggests, “For children, music is a natural inclination, and it often appears to be as essential to their well-being as it is for them to be warm, fed, and well-rested” (p. 57). I aim to identify the characteristics of music and other performing arts that could render them “essential” to the lives of children. I intend to show how fostering such inclinations might significantly enhance the quality of life experienced by children.

People from cultures around the world have demonstrated an interest and investment in the performing arts through their participation and patronage of these arts. Although this in itself suggests the acceptance of artistic endeavors as worthwhile pursuits, it may be difficult to articulate exactly why they are valued and whether or not this involvement contributes to health and happiness in any measureable way. With this in mind, I will pursue the following questions: How might participation in performing arts such as music, dance, and theater contribute to a child’s state of wellness? Are these kinds of benefits achievable by other means? What contributions toward health and peace of mind can be gained through participation in artistic endeavors?

I will begin by examining the phenomenon of play in the lives of children and its connection to the work of performing artists (Wennerstrand 1998). I will focus on imaginative forms of play as they naturally lead to artistic play. Furthermore, I will explore the link between imagination, imaginative play, and the performing arts.

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I will note how free and informal artistic play may progress to more formal and focused study in the performing arts. I will then consider each of three main performing art forms, how they are similar, what distinguishes them, and what research shows regarding their impact on a child's well-being. I will conclude by proposing four purposes that arts participation might serve in meeting important needs of growing children. These four functions can be characterized as (1) activity, (2) belonging, (3) identity, and (4) ownership.

Children may live their lives without any engagement in the performing arts. Children can and do survive this way. Realistically, in conditions of extreme hardship where basic needs go unmet, activities in the arts are likely to be of secondary or little value. Yet despite this, the arts as a cultural phenomenon persists, sometimes even among those facing the most challenging of circumstances (Colijn 1995). The practice of some form of music-making, for example, occurs in every known culture, which has prompted philosophers and sociologists alike to puzzle over its purpose. Some even suggest that the key to understanding the human condition may lie in examining the pervasiveness of such arts when these acts are not necessary for survival (Gardner 1983). An exploration of why humans value arts activities may provide some insight into what influences the quality of a child's life; that is, a child's need to do more than simply remain alive, but to thrive.

37.2 Play and Culture in the Lives of Children

When basic needs are assured, children play. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/2003) described the healthy child as "impetuous, sprightly, animated, without corroding care, without long and painful foresight, wholly absorbed in his actual existence, and enjoying a plentitude of life which seems bent on reaching out beyond him" (p. 122). According to this characterization, children are filled with a natural sense of curiosity which stems from an unfulfilled yet "innate desire for well-being" (p. 135). Children explore their surroundings, run fingers over surfaces, and balance on rocks. They survey what is before them and react to sounds behind them. As Eisner (2002) notes, children find satisfaction and delight in exploring the sensory world. The inclination to play allows for important sensory experiences to occur in the lives of children. Play is a way they willfully engage with the world, generally on their own terms. When given freedom and time, they are inclined to participate in a wide range of play activities. Howard Gardner (1973) identifies a child's play activity as crucial to his or her development, remarking that "... through play, the child is able to make manageable and comprehensible the overwhelming and perplexing aspects of the world" (p. 164). Kennedy (2004) provides an overview of scholarship supporting the importance and value of play in the healthy development of children. Despite the potential for numerous factors that may discourage informal play, under optimal conditions, children play (Guddemi et al. 1998).

The role and importance of play is common for children from various cultures. Much has been written about play and its many forms. Historically, Huizinga (1949) defined play through identifying its formal characteristics. First, play is a voluntary act. Secondly, it has a quality of being removed or outside of the ordinary, "... a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own" (p. 8). Thirdly, play occurs within the limits of time and space. Fourth, it creates a sense of order. And lastly, play is not motivated by a desire for material gain (a quality which distinguishes it from "work"). These attributes correlate with the conditions of the performing arts. Arts activities are an assertion of the will, set apart from the everyday, occurring within the limits of time and space, organized to express or communicate. When children are granted freedom, space, and time, they will use forms of play to create order or to exercise power over their surroundings. They will generally do so for the sake of creating an experience rather than as a means to gain a specific outcome or profit.

As growing children encounter the world over time, they begin to test boundaries, exercise their abilities, and expand their sensibilities through play. As language skills develop, they may pretend to be a creature, or someone else, or even experiment with being another version of themselves. In order for a child to develop in a healthy, timely manner, this learning process must somehow unfold at a pace in keeping with the maturing child's needs. I suggest that in part, children maintain their sense of well-being through those engagements that foster their growth at an appropriate pace. We neither want children to grow up too fast, nor do we want them to postpone this development. Rather, children must be given the opportunity to mature in an unhurried manner (Elkind 1988).

The conditions of this growth process are contingent on the environment, relationships, and the child's accumulating experiences. As Eisner notes, the term culture can refer to a shared way of life, but also in biological terms, a culture serves as a "medium for growing things" (Eisner 2002, p. 3). Children are nested in overlapping rings of cultural groups and identify with multiple cultural units or macrocultures, microcultures, supercultures, and subcultures (Campbell 2002). They are learning not only to absorb and assimilate these cultures but also to shape and transform them. Anttila (2007) notes that children create their own play culture during unsupervised interaction with peers and that this time is important as children seek power, meaning, and identity.

An important earmark of any culture is reflected and captured in its arts. Art forms portray and embody facets of a community of people and serve to crystallize "cultural patterns of expression" (Blacking 1973, p. 73). Often we learn to understand and value cultures outside our own through observing and participating in that culture's arts. We experience these cultures through our perception and experience of their arts. A child's participation in the arts of her own culture is an important means for her to see herself in relation to that culture, both as a recipient of shared understandings and also as a contributing member.

In more recent examinations of the phenomenon of play, the diversity of play forms and the way they are discussed across disciplines contribute to what

Sutton-Smith (1997) characterizes as the ambiguity of play. He lists nine categories of play forms or play activities that range from those activities which are mostly private (such as daydreaming) to those that are often more public (such as playing the piano). Among this list are three categories that are most relevant to the ways play relates to the performing arts. These are solitary play, informal social play, and performance play.

37.2.1 Solitary Play

An active child released into open space is likely to engage in numerous forms of solo play. These may include running, jumping, and repeating movements with arms, legs, and hands. A child may also yell, shout, speak softly, hum, or sing. A child may engage in play acting, that is, pretending to be (or control) something that in the child's imagination becomes more than what it literally is. A child might create a role or voice for a plaything (which could be a toy or perhaps a found object reimagined). These are exploratory actions, ways for children to assert themselves (or "try out things") in their worlds. A disengaged child who does not participate in these kinds of actions appears to be removed from the world or protecting herself from the world.

A child's solo play may be exploratory, spontaneous, and undirected. It may also take on a more directed form, as when a child runs across a field in order to arrive at a destination or see how fast she can run. This kind of play is goal-oriented. The child seeks an end (at least temporarily), and this shapes or drives the actions. These two distinctions are important for understanding the ways children play and how that relates to artistic interests and development. In contrast to goal-directed play, exploratory play is the investigation of options with unknown ends. It is the act of trial. These kinds of spontaneous actions yield information that the child may use to inform future kinds of play.

37.2.2 Informal Social Play

Children play together. Frequently during play, their actions foster or spring from their engagement with others. A child's social interactions with adults and peers often take place in the context of play activities. Engagement in play with one or more others can be considered communal play. In some cases, play actions are aligned, repeated, or coordinated. Two or more children attempt to move or sing or enact a story in a similar way. Children may produce mirror images of a playmate's movements or echo a playmate's (or parent's) sounds or actions. But often, play involving more than one child results in interactions and responses that are not simultaneous or aligned. In this case, children's play activities are individualized and create a sort of counterpoint of activity. Play may also be cooperative, such as when children choose to play different characters in an

imagined story they pretend to enact. Children act and react, initiate and respond. A child's behaviors are impacted by the presence of others and their watchful eyes. Even when playing alone, children may simulate this social aspect of play. The act of singing or humming can be a means to perform for self to keep from feeling alone. As Burrows (1990) proposes, "Hearing the sound of their own voices returns vocalizers to themselves in a new form . . . [w]hen we hum to ourselves, we divide ourselves in two, into sound producers and listeners, and two is company" (p. 34).

It is important to note that this kind of social play can also result in comparisons and competition. Competitive play includes the many games and challenges that students pose to one another in order to determine a winner (Huizinga 1949). Whether cooperative or competitive, children use play as a means to relate to others.

37.2.3 Performance Play: Improvisatory Play and Audience

For young children, play is often exploratory and improvisatory. Children pretend and engage in imaginative scenarios that evolve in the moment. Sawyer (1997) describes the pretend play of children as improvisational performance, like that practiced by small ensemble Jazz musicians or improvisational theater groups. This comparison raises a potential link between these play activities and the more purposeful pursuit of various performing arts. Wennerstrand (1998) cites the ability to improvise as being a central aspect of play and also central to performing artists as they seek to generate new material. She further notes four key dimensions of play: spatial, temporal, physical, and social. As I will demonstrate more fully, each of these dimensions correlates with play as an activity that corresponds with involvement in performing arts.

Children who play can often be seen as children who perform. They may act as their own audience, perform for their playmates, or perhaps perform for an adult they wish to impress. Children engaged in solitary play often change their behavior when they become aware that someone is watching. They may minimize sounds and movements due to feelings of vulnerability, or they may enlarge and amplify actions in order to encourage a response from onlookers. These changes in behavior are readily visible to those who have the opportunity to observe children at play. When others are present (such as siblings, peers, family, or other adults), these outsiders become observers of the child and what the child is doing. They constitute what might be identified as an audience. Those behaviors that qualify as forms of the performing arts take place when a child is given space and time and the will to express or communicate, that is, to impact or move an audience. To perform is to carry out a task, to do something. These arts are time-bound and require physical engagement and therefore hold significant potential as forms of embodied learning (Davidson 2004; Bowman 2004). When I utter sounds, make movements, or emulate characters as a means to express, I am performing.

37.3 Imagination and Artistic Play

37.3.1 Imaginative Play

Historically, child psychologists have devoted much attention to studying the play behaviors of children (Fein 1981). In particular, those studies examining imaginative play have yielded informative yet inconclusive findings. Despite this uncertainty, there is support that playfulness is related to creativity and inclines youngsters toward divergent thinking.

Among the many forms of play, imaginative play is an important and common type of play that has immediate relevance to the performing arts. During this type of play action, children create a fantasy version of reality where they generate characters that do not really exist and stories that are not, in actuality, happening. This kind of play creates something set apart from the real world, set apart in a way that protects the actor yet allows him or her to safely “try on” identities and attitudes.

Imaginative play is an exercise of imagination. Vygotsky argued that “imagination develops in connection with the development of play and other forms of socially organized action and interaction” (Minick 1996, p. 44). In other words, the act of play itself can enable imagination to develop. According to Vygotsky (1966), the child advances developmentally or progresses most evidently through play activities or enacted imagination. Imaginative play in itself is not necessarily art-making, but imaginative play may result in artistic actions or performances. For my purposes, imaginative play will serve as a broader category of activities that may lead to types of play that can be characterized as artistic play.

37.3.2 Artistic Play

Artistic play, or play that results in artistic creations, has elements of both play and the arts. Sutton-Smith (1997) points out the historical pairing of play and art in what he calls their “conflation,” resulting from the fact that they both involve “the freedom, the autonomy, and the originality of the individual” (p. 133):

What develops in the twentieth century is a complex of ideas in which the child’s play and art are brought together with ideas about the imagination, about the child as a primitive, an innocent, an original, and, in effect, the true romantic, because he or she is untouched by the world and still capable of representing things in terms of an unfettered imagination. (p. 133)

This romanticized fusion of play and art further obscures distinctions. Sutton-Smith indicates a recent shift away from this view toward more discrete definitions. In this revised model, play is conceptualized as a diffusive act of exploration, while art is a particular and specific form of exploration that ultimately seeks to develop sensuous forms. In other words, artistic play seeks to manipulate a medium (in the case of dance, music, and theater, voice and body serve as medium) in order to

express or communicate in a more specified way. Free play or exploratory play does not have this stipulation.

In keeping with this more differentiated definition of artistic play, Gardner (1973) suggests a hierarchy with play serving as a necessary precursor to the aesthetic process, distinguishing art as a “goal-directed form of play” (p. 166). What sets apart the arts from play, Gardner maintains, is that they require a child to connect the impulse to create with a desire to communicate. But this desire to create or make, that is, fashion a product, may not be all that could motivate a child to be artistic. The desire to express in itself may also serve as motivation.

The will to express is linked to a need to expel or release emotions, but it is more than a pure discharge of emotion. It is one thing for a child to move his body to expel energy but quite another for him to move about as a means to show joy or frustration in an expressive manner. Yet expression does not merely mean a release of emotion, as Dewey (1934/1989) establishes:

[E]motional discharge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of expression . . . there is no expression, unless there is urge from within outwards, the welling up must be clarified and ordered by taking into itself the values of prior experiences before it can be an act of expression. (p. 67)

Thus, artistic play may be seen as the clarification and ordering of unbridled emotions. Dewey recalls English novelist and playwright John Galsworthy (1912) and his definition of art: “Art is that imaginative expression of human energy, which, through technical concretion of feeling and perception, tends to reconcile the individual with the universal, by exciting in him impersonal emotion” (p. 255). In this case, the word impersonal is used to “signify momentary forgetfulness of one’s own personality and its active wants” (p. 256). This definition underscores tenets held in more contemporary views of art. Art entails the expression of emotions that is somehow detached by means of “technical concretion” or arrangements of various media (sound, body, language). The outcome, according to Galsworthy, carries an internal resonance with the outside world. The child having a tantrum is discharging emotion, whereas the child drumming aggressively to express the qualities of strong emotion may be engaging in a form of artistic play.

Dewey (1934/1989) validates the child’s accumulation of experiences as a source for expressive, artistic play:

I do not think that the dancing and singing of even little children can be explained wholly on the basis of unlearned and unformed responses to then existing objective occasions . . . the act is expressive only as there is in it a unison of something stored from past experience, something therefore generalized, with present conditions. (p. 78)

In other words, children make sense of their accumulating experiences, or personal history, by the expressive ways they respond to the influences of the world around them. Dewey proposes that imagination develops through the physical and sensory process, meaning that the actual engagement and experimentation with a medium (sound, body, character/story) are what develops imagination:

The imagination, by means of art, makes a concession to sense in employing its materials, but nevertheless uses sense to suggest underlying ideal truth. Art is thus a way of having the substantial cake of reason while also enjoying the sensuous pleasure of eating it too. (p. 263)

In this way, the arts serve an important function in bringing together mind and body. In keeping with Dewey's sentiment, Sutton-Smith (1997) summarizes the views of Kant who believed that imagination serves as a means to mediate between sensory knowledge and formal reason. A child experiences the world through her senses and by doing so begins to make sense of the world.

Eisner (2002) makes less of a distinction between art and play, viewing the two as having a close kinship. He states:

[T]he arts provide a kind of permission to pursue qualitative experience in a particularly focused way and to engage in the constructive exploration of what the imaginative process may engender. In this sense, the arts, in all their manifestations, are close in attitude to play. (p. 4)

Each of these conceptualizations of play in relation to art suggests that a playful child may develop into a young artist, provided the child has opportunities to develop the necessary skills for these pursuits. The impact of the artistic outcome depends on the tools that the child intentionally develops and refines over years of practice. According to Gardner (1973), a young person achieves the status of an artist or performer when these systems of communication effectively work together for purposes of expression:

When he is capable of expressing with a symbolic medium those ideas, feelings, or experiences that have affected him, he has realized the essential function of the artist. When he is able to contemplate the work of another person, and to perceive fundamental aspects of this work, then communicate it through his own actions to other persons, he has achieved the essentials of the performer. (p. 168)

It is important to note that in Gardner's description of performing artists, he assumes they will perform someone else's creation (composition, choreography, or script). In improvisatory performance, individuals generate the work as they create it. Artistic play is goal-directed and may be either generative (seeking originality or novelty) or mimetic (imitative). Imitating the world (singing melodies learned elsewhere, moving like an animal, pretending to be a parent speaking to a child) offers an accessible structure for children to explore their capabilities and mirror what they have sensed around them. The intent is to emulate what has been observed or heard and perhaps begin to create a newly conceived version or variation of this. But initially, the child most often desires to mimic, repeat, or echo. As Campbell (1998) notes, the musical expressions children create "may appear spontaneous, but many of them are a blend of bits of songs, rhythms, and music they have known before" (p. 193).

As children engage with the sensory world, they begin to explore forms of representation through manipulating various media. For the performing arts, this means making sounds, attempting movements, and trying out characters and voices. All these actions are intended to transform conscious understandings through manipulating "material" or, in this case, the body and voice as a performance

medium. Through the process of endeavoring to represent, a child essentially engages in a dialogue or conversation with her surroundings. This engagement allows for surprises and discoveries that emerge through acts of exploration. As Eisner (2002) notes, “The arts invite children to pay attention to the environment’s expressive features and to the products of their imagination and to craft a material so that it expresses or evokes an emotional or feelingful response to it” (p. 23).

The nature and value of play and its artistic forms can be summarized in the following way. Play serves as a natural and important means through which a child develops. Imaginative play offers a unique and valuable way for a child to test and respond to the world. Artistic play, as a form of imaginative play, provides particularly important ways for children to develop their expressive capacities and make sense of the world in which they live. This particular kind of sensemaking is part of what children require in order to experience a greater sense of well-being.

37.3.3 Imagination and the Well-Being of Children

In the previous section, I have shown that the arts can serve as a cultivated and refined manifestation of imaginative play. If this is the nature of what children experience, imagination and the capacity for it can be seen as important for their well-being. In fact, the exercise of the imagination in overt ways (i.e., artistic play or performance) may be an outgrowth of a defining aspect of our well-being. Winnicott (1971) proposes:

The creative impulse is therefore something that can be looked at as a thing in itself, something that of course is necessary if an artist is to produce a work of art, but also as something that is present when *anyone* – baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman – looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately . . . (p. 69)

Thus, creativity is a way of seeing and doing that proves essential to a person’s health.

Many others have developed these ideas further. Participation in the arts, says Maxine Greene (1995), “can release imagination to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives . . . encounters with the world become newly informed” (p. 18). She adds, “To call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). According to Greene, “[t]he role of the imagination . . . is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28). The child who engages in imaginative play begins to entertain possibilities for how anything encountered might be viewed differently.

In a discussion of the generative possibilities of theater and dramatic arts, Woodson (2007) notes:

Art allows us to see how the world is made and remade. Through deliberative thought and carefully considered action, artists posit what-ifs, juxtapose disparate elements to present alternative emotional states, and engage perceivers in imaginative conversations of emotion, intellect, and form and context. Through the generative possibilities of art-making—in all its forms—young people rapidly see the consequences of their actions, and how their choices impact the work as a whole. (p. 931)

The process of artistic performance provides a means for children to negotiate their impact on a medium. This allows them to entertain possibilities that did not exist prior to their own experiences of working within this medium.

To elaborate further, Eisner (2002) notes an important function of imagination as a tool for exploration:

Imagination, that form of thinking that engenders images of the possible, also has a critically important cognitive function to perform aside from the creation of possible worlds. Imagination also enables us to try things out—again in the mind’s eye—without the consequences we might encounter if we had to act upon them empirically. It provides a safety net for experiment and rehearsal. (p. 5)

In other words, imagination is a safe way for children to test the waters of the unknown without the threat of any harmful consequences. A child who is emerging into more fully developed stages requires this zone of safety to be able to investigate that which is outside his current realm of experience. A healthy state of growth is dependent upon this kind of venturing out.

Egan (1992) further characterizes imagination in terms of its social virtues: “By imaginatively feeling what it would be like to be other than oneself, one begins to develop a prerequisite for treating others with as much respect as one treats oneself” (p. 55). Thus, imagination can serve as a tool of empathy and may help create a more tolerant and compassionate view of others. This sense of living in the shoes of another can provide insights that allow us to experience a kind of harmony with others that impacts our own state of well-being. There is nothing quite so unsettling as the unknown. When we empathize, as imagination allows us to do, we begin to relate to and “know” the other, making it more familiar and less foreign.

I would add that the instability or uncertainty of a child’s immediate circumstance can be quieted or answered by the reassurance felt from a sense of possibility. Winnicott (1971) suggests that it is “creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living” (p. 65). Our ability to visualize or sustain the potential for realizing a desired future for ourselves (or our capacity to, as Emily Dickinson aptly wrote, “dwell in possibility”) can provide us with the purpose or drive to endure the current state of incompleteness, or delayed gratification, or unpleasant yet temporary circumstance.

37.4 Formal Instruction in Performing Arts

Artistic play is experimental and often informal. When children reach the age of schooling, they may have the opportunity to participate in more formalized study in the performing arts. Others have noted the value of this kind of structured participation in the arts. During the act of creating (or recreating, as when a child learns to perform an existing work), a child experiences self-realizations. Fowler (1996) notes: “It is precisely because the creative act flows from the inside out rather than the outside in that it helps youngsters discover their own resources, develop their own attributes, and realize their own personal potential” (p. 57). He goes on to provide seven reasons he

believes every child needs the arts. These include self-definition, seeing themselves as part of the larger culture, broadening perceptions, expanding abilities to communicate, escaping the mundane, and developing imagination. He explains how developing the imagination contributes to the betterment of mankind:

By exercising imagination, humans have been able to transform and reinvent the world in infinite arrangements. Our evolving adaptations, adjustments, recyclings, and inventions enable us to cope and to survive. By using our capacity to imagine, we reinvent our lives every day, and we invent our future as well. Imagination enables us to burst the confines of the ordinary. It allows us to rise up to meet new challenges and to improve the human condition. (p. 63)

Fowler goes on to say that the play of very young children is abundant with invention, but this trait seems to wane as children mature. Participation in the performing arts provides a way for children to continue to cultivate and sustain this propensity for inventiveness.

Although the performing arts are pursued in many ways, it would be difficult to consider these arts in children's lives without including a discussion of their occurrence in schooling and education. Many adults choose to engage or enroll their children in more purposeful instruction in one or more of the performing art disciplines through means that are formal or informal, public or private, home-based or community-based. Although these decisions are sometimes contingent on the ability to pay for such services, programs exist that provide ways for less-advantaged children to receive arts instruction. An extensive body of scholarship addresses and examines the role of the arts in education. For my purposes here, it is sufficient to note that the arts play an important role in those settings.

As Fowler (1996) notes, a child engaged in the performing arts moves, acts, or vocalizes as a means to amplify what is inside or to express a response to what is felt or thought. These activities have significant educational value for developing children. Eisner (2002) concurs:

Education . . . is the process of learning to create ourselves, and it is what the arts, both as a process and the fruits of that process, promote. Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture. (p. 3)

According to Egan (1992), "Education . . . is a process that awakens individuals to a kind of thought that enables them to imagine conditions other than those that exist or that have existed" (p. 47). By engaging with aspects of the world within the structure and limits provided by the arts, young learners can begin to shape their own views and intentions regarding how they will operate within this world.

I have established that play, and in particular imaginative play, occurs as a natural part of a child's developmental process. As children mature past the years of exploratory play toward more disciplined pursuits, they may discover interests or propensities for one or more of the performing arts disciplines. Each child has the potential to benefit from exploration in any arts medium, but with the limits of time, a child may need to choose which of these to pursue intentionally. Often during early

years of schooling, a child participates in an exploratory curriculum at school. This provides opportunities for that child to experience activities in all of the art forms. At this time, the child may recognize an art form that is more appealing, often based on success or her own demonstrated ability to excel in that art form.

Each performing art form provides a unique experience with a different sensory medium. Musical performance provides the opportunity for making expressive use of sounds. These may be vocalized sounds or sounds produced through a musical instrument. A child and parent may need to make choices regarding what kind of music-making to pursue. This is also true for progressing from exploratory dance play to more formalized dance instruction. Likewise, children may find formal opportunities in theater. Of these three performing arts, music appears most often as a regular curricular offering through schools. Opportunities to study dance or participate in theater may be found in settings outside of school, such as community theater organizations, theater arts programs after school or in the summer, dance companies and independent dance schools, or church or faith-based performance opportunities.

I want to reiterate that improvisatory and exploratory forms of performing exist in many informal settings and contribute to the development of young people as an important kind of play. They are likely to continue to occur in numerous ways, even if a child is pursuing one or more art forms in a formal setting. Providing children with space, time, and safety can encourage improvisatory forms of artistic play. That is, creating a sense that they are free to experiment, to explore, and to invent within their surroundings.

37.4.1 Common Traits of Performing Arts

The performing arts share important similarities. As noted earlier, Wennerstrand (1998) identifies four such dimensions as spatial, temporal, physical, and social. First of all, the performing arts require the occupation and use of space. The act of performing implies movement, which requires spatial parameters that allow for such action. Secondly, the performing arts are temporal. That is, they unfold over time and are constrained by time. Because of this, they lend themselves to the development of form through repetition. In many cases, their form may follow a narrative that unfolds over time. Because they are time-bound, they require rehearsal, that is, repetition and cycling back through elements in order to develop and refine efforts to manage and manipulate the various media. Thirdly, a performer engages his body in the production of sound, the organization of movement, or the development of character through the combination of sound, movement, and language. This use of the body is fundamental to the performing arts and represents an important form of knowledge. Lastly, the performing arts are social. Frequently, these art forms are learned and studied in group settings or ensembles. Private study occurs, as well as solo performance, but the intention is to communicate with others (the audience), and therefore even solo performance has a social dimension.

Of these four dimensions, time plays a particularly important role. Performing arts occur in real time. They cannot be stored or viewed in any kind of static way.

Even preserving these forms through audio or video recording devices does not eliminate the fact that they are confined by time. To listen or view a performance requires the passage of time. This also means that for the performer, repetition becomes a critical tool for remembering and recreating more sophisticated and structured performances. Because time is a finite and limited resource, children and parents must make choices about how to allocate their waking hours. Perhaps the most challenging consideration regarding the role that performing arts might play in the life of a child is how these pursuits (or the opportunity for practice and exploration) might fit into the schedule of activities that make up each day. With these four parameters in mind, I will briefly examine what each of these performing arts offers children in terms of their state of well-being.

37.4.2 Music

To make music, young performers use the artistic medium of sound. Because sound is immediate and pervasive, it is already communicative in helping us orient ourselves in the world. According to Dewey (1934/1989), “. . . sound itself is near, intimate,” and it is “. . . the conveyor of what impends, of what is happening as an indication of what is likely to happen . . . [i]t is sounds that make us jump” (p. 242). This relationship between sound and our orientation to our surrounding, as well as its influence on our perception of time, contributes to its potency. Using sounds as a means of artistic expression has an immediacy and can create an audible reference point for the originator, even if the sound is coming from within.

Much could be written about music and the important role it plays in the lives of children. Campbell (2002) underscores this value, saying, “music contributes in positive ways in children’s lives, and many recognize—even in their youth and inexperience—that they could not live without it” (p. 61). O’Neill (2006) situates musical development in the context of recent child development scholarship which embraces the universal potential and capacity for healthy development in all young people. Rather than music being viewed as a domain for the talented few, “every young person has the potential and capacity for positive musical development” and notes “engagement in musical activities should be associated with positive or healthy outcomes for all young people” (p. 463). Since young people generally exercise autonomy over the way they engage with music, the promotion of musical activities by the community can foster a child’s sense of self through opportunities for self-governed expression, direction, and responsibility (O’Neill 2006).

37.4.3 Dance

In dance, the human body itself serves a medium, and in that sense, it is potentially the most embodied form of art-making. Humans move to get themselves from place to place and to accommodate their needs. People dance at social gatherings as a means to interact and celebrate, generally in conjunction with music. But humans

also move to express emotions and ideas and to communicate these in direct and indirect ways. It is the intentional shaping of movements, or what Dewey (1934/1989) calls the “organization of energies” (p. 176), that constitutes dance.

Stinson (1997) examined adolescent engagement in school-sponsored dance instruction. She proposes the possibility of an experience that falls between the realms of work and play, two categories of action that are customarily kept separate in school settings. She argues that students be given opportunities to become deeply engaged in activities that are nondestructive, those that allow choice, freedom, and control. Well-structured arts experiences can achieve this. Stinson and Bond (2001) found that for many young people, dance created both a heightened sense of self (feeling fully alive) and a sense of self-forgetfulness (getting lost in the moment, becoming other). Of particular importance was the value young people placed on the freedom they felt and needed when dancing.

37.4.4 Theater

The theatrical arts are prevalent in film, television, and on stage, but they may also occur as part of cultural celebrations and rituals. They constitute a “playing out” of story through the interactions (spoken and enacted) of characters and plot. For Schonmann (2002), the body is the tool of theater. In theater, the play (as a noun) is literally a structure for actual play (as a verb). She notes that “when a person plays, he or she wittingly leaves the everyday world” (p. 140). This sense of temporary displacement creates an opportunity for imagining possibilities, portraying others, and vicariously experiencing what was or what might be. This takes place in a removed yet protected manner.

Involvement in theatrical arts can fulfill important needs for young people. Caillier (2006) identifies the need to attend to the ways young people choose to engage in the arts outside of formal instruction and why they choose to do so. She studied one young man’s engagement with theater arts and the role it played in his life. She notes that the arts are not simply a means to another external end, but they themselves serve primary purposes such as “the expression of identity and the production of cultural symbols” (p. 2), as was evident in her case study.

Holloway and LeCompte (2001) studied the effects of the involvement of middle school girls in a theater arts program for 2 years. They argue that this involvement contributed to positive identity and self-worth:

[T]he arts have these effects because they make it possible for children to imagine themselves out of their current identities and to try on new ways of being . . . the arts let children express themselves in healthful ways, permitting them to try on a variety of alternative identities in relatively risk-free environments. (p. 388)

This is accomplished through the encouragement of “symbolic action” to create alternatives to the accepted socialized norms and to disrupt expectations and transform them. Participation in dramatic arts resulted in transformed identities due to three learned practices: “centering, open-mindedness, and self-expression” (p. 401).

All three performing arts mediums often utilize existing works that are learned and performed by young artists. Sometimes, as in the practice of musical theater, all three of these art forms are integrated into a larger whole. A young person who is dancing, singing, and acting in a musical theater role is learning to perform in all three realms within the specific framework of a script, songs, and choreographed movements. Although the act of staging such a work is a form of reenactment and does not require the generation of original art, the parameters of such a work are open in many ways, and the child performer has the opportunity to inhabit the work and make it his or her own. In choral singing, students often become aware of their contribution to the final version or interpretation of a composition (Silvey 2005). They are part of something bigger than themselves while making valid and unique contributions to it, and often they become cognizant of this.

37.5 What Participation in the Performing Arts Can Provide

I have established that for young children, the act of playing occurs naturally and takes on various forms, one of which is imaginative play. Children appear to benefit from having the opportunity to play in this manner. More methodical instruction in the performing arts can and does begin at any age, even very young ages. As children grow, they often enter some form of structured or formal schooling. It is at this point that arts activities can be and often are pursued through recurring instruction. A parent may enroll his child in music lessons on a particular instrument or have the child participate in dance classes for beginners. A child may audition to be part of a school play. These activities may not be available in every community and in every culture. Perhaps a skill is passed on through parents or relatives in an informal but more culturally traditional manner. Regardless of the mode of transmission, arts activities seem to become more formalized or are transmitted in an intentional manner as children mature.

Formal training in the performing arts has long been associated with schooling and the formalized curriculum. With proper guidance, children are capable of performing with great expertise, yet there are limits to the sophistication of their performances. It is understood by parents and community members that these are young artists in the making. When these young artists perform, the expectations are modified and adults use a different standard than they would for a professional performance. Parents attend these performances not because they expect a professional level of artistry but because “. . . the products [of a performance] are *signs* that our children have acquired something, and at the same time, have made something of themselves” (Menck 2000, p. 78). This “something” is precisely what I would like to explore for the remainder of this chapter.

I propose that engagement in the performing arts contributes to the well-being of young children by giving them four important occupations or identities. These are (1) something to do, (2) somewhere to be, (3) someone to be, (4) and something of their own. These could also be labeled as activity, belonging, identity, and

ownership. At first read, these offerings may seem nondescript undertakings that could be fulfilled by nonarts activities. However, I maintain that pursuits in the performing arts offer unique and important ways to provide these opportunities for children and will yield the developmental and culturally rich benefits that I have outlined earlier. Let me briefly summarize what I mean by each.

Participation in the performing arts gives children something valuable and important to do. They may be faced with numerous options regarding how they will spend their time. Children can find ways to pass time that may have little or no lasting value. "Doing" arts means doing something that is potentially charged with meaning and cultural value. In addition, the doing typically results in outcomes that can be sensed by others, often as formal or informal performances. An activity that is focused toward a goal can supply a rich opportunity for the productive use of time. The temporal dimension of the performing arts provides a meaningful way for children to structure and utilize their time. More importantly, the end result is culturally valued in ways that reinforce that this was time well spent.

The spatial dimension of the performing arts means there must be a designated place for their pursuit. A child who participates in the performing arts has somewhere to be. This means they associate an activity with a place that welcomes them and allows them to feel a sense of belonging. When a child knows that, on a regular basis, s/he will be an expected participant fully included in an activity, this provides a sense of safety and belonging. Providing a location where a child can safely explore and cultivate her artistic capabilities allows the child the needed means to devote energy and time to such pursuits.

A child can also find a sense of self in pursuing a skills-based performing art form. A child who plays the piano is a pianist. The child who acts is an actor. These titles contribute to how a child views himself or herself. The roles children occupy begin to help them form personal identities. Because these pursuits are culturally valued, they enable the child, by association, to also feel culturally valued and see herself as a contributing member of the culture. It is true that we are human *beings* rather than human *doings*, but the actions we take (especially those that are purposeful and role-based) help clarify and define who we are. The social dimension of the performing arts means the child also learns to see herself in relation to others. The arts provide a structured way for children to relate to one another and to adults. The act of collaborating as a performing artist provides a purpose that brings children together. This shared pursuit serves as the joint activity that allows children to build and cultivate relationships.

Finally, children who engage in performing arts have something to call their own. The adult world may not allow them many things they can possess in this manner. The art I generate through movement, singing, or dancing is my own creation. I possess control over it, and it comes from me. Because the art I create or recreate comes from me, it is a unique expression of me. In that way, it is my own. This link between output and identity results in a potential sense of vulnerability and therefore requires a safe, protected environment. The way a child's artistic creation is received reflects upon the child's self-worth.

As stated before, the four functions I have suggested that the arts fulfill can be filled by other pursuits. Perhaps the important difference in artistic pursuits is the potential they have to reflect and contribute to cultural values as they can only be expressed through these artistic mediums. That is, the *kinds* of activities, locations, identities, and possessions that result from engagement with the arts are important and unique in their contributions to the well-being of children involved.

37.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the actions of a playing child embody the genesis of many forms of creative performing that may follow. These kinds of pursuits, even when undertaken on the smallest scale, provide an important means for children to feel secure, happy, and guided by a sense of purpose.

Philosophers and scholars in the fields of philosophy, child psychology, cognitive science, arts, and education support the premise that artistic endeavors offer an important avenue for children to safely venture beyond themselves. This begins with imaginative play, which in turn may develop into artistic play. This kind of expressive and communicative play offers rich rewards for the growing child and often leads to sustained study in one or more of the performing arts. Music, dance, and theater each offer unique opportunities and means for sensory responsiveness and forms of self-expression. The child who is engaged in a performing art has found a meaningful and stylized way to engage with the world and make sense of it, on her own terms, through her own voice. She makes productive use of time in a venue where she feels safe and accepted. She discovers who she is through the practice of her art, and she creates artistic works that only she could create. These rich rewards can be found only in such pursuits.

The old adage that “children must play” may be more than just an aphorism. If a growing child is to move in an outward direction, that is, to express and expand the realm of perception and understanding beyond the immediate and the literal, that child must engage in forms of play. Imaginative, improvisational, and artistic forms of play have the potential to blossom into full-blown artistic pursuits and performances. The value of these endeavors is rich in potential, waiting to be discovered by all who are given the chance to play. As Winnicott (1971) notes, “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers self” (p. 54). The child who plays artistically and pursues one or more of the performing arts has enriched opportunities for activity, belonging, identity, and ownership. Each of these opportunities contributes to the well-being of the child and ultimately to the quality of that child’s life.

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