

## About Children and Adolescents Participating in Performing Arts

Performing arts can play a vital role in promoting children's development and enriching their lives, but adverse experiences can produce negative consequences.

Performing arts include various forms of entertainment, such as acting, dancing, and playing music. Participants in the performing arts range from young to old, from students to professionals, from those with minor to those major involvements, from those who teach to those being taught.

For some participants, the performing arts are viewed as providing a safe space that enables expression of emotions, inspires creativity, fosters a perspective on who they are, and provides exposure to different cultures, traditions, and experiences. Researchers suggest that participation in the performing arts can facilitate positive emotional, social, cognitive, language, and motor development. Among the many positives cited are increases in confidence, competence, self-esteem, compassion, and intrinsic motivation for learning.

“Though it may seem surprising to consider theater education as a means of preventing violence,” said William Braniff, director of the Department of Homeland Security Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships, in a statement, “this creative, multidisciplinary strategy utilizing theater arts to teach conflict resolution skills effectively tackles the underlying systemic issues that contribute to violence, all while enhancing the safety and resilience of local communities.” From: *Can theater help prevent violence in schools?*

At the same time, concerns have been raised. Participants can be overly stressed and anxious; positive feelings about self and other can be undermined. They may become irritable, act in negative ways, and even may develop physical problems.

Our focus here is on framing ways to minimize potential negative impact on children and adolescents from involvement in the performing arts.

### What's Needed?

Maximizing the benefits for young people of performing arts participation involves

- fostering their valuing of performing arts
- preparing them for participation in ways that anticipate ups and downs
- establishing appropriate institutional and personal safeguards
- providing them with continuous personalized guidance and support
- ensuring they learn how to meet challenges and stressors
- responding quickly with supportive interventions when youngsters are unable to cope

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\*The material in this document builds on work done by Siena Hanko as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2024.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

### Special Challenges for Youngsters who Become Famous Performers

Children and adolescents who become well-known performers face some unique mental health challenges. The number is increasing with social media exposure (e.g., Tik Tok, YouTube). Besides performance demands, there are the pressures of early fame, public scrutiny, objectification, limited opportunities for continuous success, and disrupted childhood development and learning experiences. Some experience exploitation and abuse. The impact on mental health can include interferences with some facets of positive development, identity confusion, isolation, loneliness, anxiety, obsession, depression, substance abuse, trust issues, and burnout. For some, success produces a sense of entitlement.

**Whose responsible?** In a op-ed titled *The Toddler to Trainwreck Industrial Complex*, Alyson Stoner writes about her experiences as a child actor and suggests:

Families and young people are not properly educated on the risks, pressures, consequences, and difficult processes and decisions ahead. Simultaneously, there aren't healthy standards or accountability from agencies and production companies. There needs to be mandatory Basic Industry and Media Literacy courses for guardians and representatives and to guide set protocols. This can act as a buffer to check the guardian's motives and level of preparedness. It can reveal negligent and greedy behavior within agencies. And it can establish the best practices for getting the million-dollar shot in the safest, most ethical manner.

### Six Safeguarding Principles for Youngsters Participating in the Performing Arts

In the United Kingdom, the *Care Act* outlines six safeguarding principles to protect those participating in institutional settings. The six principles focus on empowerment, prevention, protection, proportionality, partnerships, and accountability.

Here we adapt and apply these concerns to provide some guidance for maximizing the positives and minimizing the negatives for children and adolescents participating in the performing arts.

1. **Empowerment** – ensuring youngsters have as much freedom and power over decisions made about themselves as reasonably possible. For example:
  - >educating them about their rights
  - >providing appropriate information and involving them in consent processes and decisions related to performances
  - >giving support, guidance, and encouragement that enhances confidence in making choices and decisions
  - >developing coping mechanisms, resilience, ways to resist being pressured into inappropriate situations, and clarifying who to contact if they need to report a problem or get support
2. **Prevention** – taking steps to eliminate or at least minimize adverse and harmful conditions related to performance. For example:
  - >establishing prevention policies, plans, and practices to
    - foster a positive performing environment
    - eliminate or at least minimize known institutional and personal problems
    - establish clear boundaries around “work” hours to ensure youngsters have enough time for rest, play, non-performance-related socialization, and other activities that promote healthy development and feelings of “normalcy”
  - >promoting safe and responsible social media use

3. **Proportionality** – intervening to address risks and problems in the least intrusive and disruptive ways that achieve effective outcomes with respect to institutional changes and personal assistance. For example:
  - >responding to different situations based on the facts and in ways designed to avoid excessive interference
4. **Protection** – ensuring legal remedies exist and are enforced, that effective representation for youngsters is present and effective, and that appropriate assistance is available and readily accessible when needed. For example:
  - >making certain that all stakeholders understand the protections and procedures that must be in place to guarantee effective application and use
  - >designating and authorizing a safeguard lead to take necessary actions
  - >allocating appropriate resources for necessary actions
  - >educating all stakeholders to watch for and report when safeguards are not working
5. **Partnerships** – ensuring that safeguarding involves the engaged efforts of a critical mass of stakeholders. For example:
  - >administrators
  - >family members
  - >performers
  - >teachers
  - >counselors
6. **Accountability** – monitoring to confirm safeguards are in place and effective, being transparent about findings, and reporting and making recommendations to authorities about actions related to those responsible for what is taking place. For example:
  - >gathering data on positive and negative outcomes
  - >doing cost-benefit analyses
  - >determining impact on safeguards of institutional incentives, counter-incentives, and consequences
  - >clarifying the range of engaged stakeholders

## Concluding Comments

Researchers have reported robust findings suggesting the many benefits of participating in the performing arts. The literature also points to long-standing concerns, especially with respect to the development and well-being of children and adolescents. The six safeguarding principles provide a guide for policy, practice, and research designed to improve matters.

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