

Therapeutic Effects of Youth Participation in Free Arts Programs: Demographic Factors

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Objective

The study examined the effects of participation in Free Arts (FA) as it relates to the development of self-esteem and interpersonal problem-solving skills among adolescents. The primary goal of the research was to examine gender and age differences in response to the intervention.



Introduction

Empirical studies have suggested that engagement in art activities facilitates creativity, critical thinking, self-awareness, and more positive social relations. A recent literature review found that participation in arts activities can have a positive effect on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging, qualities which have been linked to cultivation of resilience and mental well-being (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Additionally, engagement in art provides an opportunity to express metaphor via art expression, in a way that can be therapeutic for the child, resulting in improvements in depression, anxiety, mood, trauma, distress, coping, cognition and self-esteem (Uttley et al., 2015).

Free Arts (FA) is a program which has a primary focus on building self-esteem and fostering a sense of hope for children who have experienced abuse, neglect, impoverishment, and/or homelessness. The FA program was established in 1977 and has promoted creative art programs within Los Angeles County through the utilization of adult mentors who promote positive creative art projects within the home community environments of the children. Specifically, one of the cornerstones of the FA program is its mission to promote resilience through their therapeutic art programs which allows children to explore different ways to cope with their traumatic experiences. It is the hope of facilitators and a primary goal of the mentors to use the novelty and creativity within the FA programs to be a guide which allows the children to explore alternative perspectives and means to problem solve many different life challenges. FA aims to restore hope and self-esteem in abused, neglected, homeless, and impoverished children by creating a safe environment where children can express their emotions through art. FA has worked with several organizations in Los Angeles County to provide a variety of creative arts programs. This has been accomplished through adult mentoring in the context of

the environment that promotes a positive creative art venue for children. FA's primary mission is to provide therapeutic art programs focused on enhancing the resilience that is needed to cope with trauma.

Limited research was found on gender and age related to artistic expression. Drake and Winner (2013) conducted research which consisted of two studies of Caucasian middle class younger (6-8) and older (10-12) children. The authors argued that art improved emotional regulation processing in artistic activities utilized as a means of coping. Study 1 outcomes suggested that drawing improves mood for both age groups compared to distraction techniques. Study 2 outcomes suggested improvements in mood for younger children in vent activities. In general, with the limited research currently available, this research team sought out to explore if any these two variables had any effects on artistic expression.

Method

We investigated the effects of Free Arts program on self-esteem and problem solving in a pre-post repeated measure design, looking at age and gender as potential moderating variables. Fifty-three participants were randomly assigned to either the Free arts program condition (n=28) or in the control condition (n=23). Of the 53 participants, 56.6% (n=30) identified as female and 43.3% (n=23) as male; 58% (n=31) participants were between the age of 7 and 12 and 42% (n=22) were between the age of 13 and 17. Most 94.3% (n=50) identified as Hispanic/Latino. Consent/assent was obtained for all participants in compliance with IRB approval. Data collection was conducted by research assistants who conducted the quantitative assessment during their individual pre and post intervention assessment sessions. After the interviews, the students were given a gift card for their participation and their responses were securely stored within the research team's HIPPA compliant secure storage system.

We hypothesized that youth participation in Free Arts mentorship have a positive effect on self-esteem and problem solving over time (pre-post). We also hypothesized a moderating effect of both age and gender on the relationship between Free arts program and self-esteem and problem solving.

The Means-End Problem-Solving procedure (MEPS) assesses interpersonal problem-solving by providing scenarios and asking for strategies (means) that would lead from the beginning to the presented conclusion (Platt & Spivack, 1975). Scores include number of strategies generated and ratings of their appropriateness and effectiveness. Responses were scored by two raters who did not participate in data collection. The Self-Perception Profile for Children-Revised (SPPC-R; Graziano & Ward, 1992) measures global self-worth and self-esteem in children and early adolescents.



Results

A two-way mixed design (MANOVA) was utilized to examine whether there was an intervention effect of the Free Arts program on self-esteem and problem-solving over time (pre, post) among a sample of 53 children aged 7-17, relative to children in the control group. The potential moderating effects of age and gender were analyzed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013).

Prior to analysis, data were evaluated to ensure that the assumptions for multivariate tests were fulfilled. There was no evidence of violations. A high degree of correspondence was found between self-esteem and problem solving. The

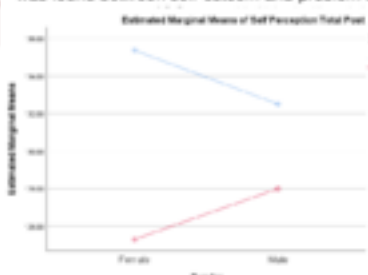


Figure 1. Gender did not moderate the relationship between Free Arts Program and Self-Esteem.

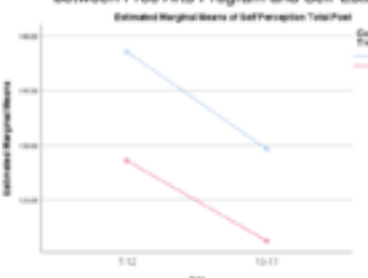


Figure 2. Age did not moderate the relationship between Free Arts Program and Self-Esteem.

Results did not support our hypotheses. Results showed that there was no significant difference between kids who attended the Free Arts program and kids who did not attend the program, on their self-esteem and problem solving (Wilks' lambda = .85, $F(4, 51) = .54$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .22$, 95% CI [.18, .29]). Results of the two-way mixed MANOVA test of within-subjects effects also showed no significant difference between pre and post assessments (Wilks' lambda = 9.64, $F(8, 53) = 1.77$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .18$, 95% CI [.14, .21]).

Our findings indicated that neither age ($p = .8518$), nor gender ($p = .5951$), function as moderators in this model.

Discussion

Within this study, we hypothesized that youth participation in the FA program would have a positive effect on problem solving and self-esteem over time. We also looked at moderating effects related to both age and gender. Outcomes suggested that gender and age did not moderate between FA program and Self-Esteem.

Limitations to this study included the lack of random assignment of participants, which may have resulted in uncontrolled confounding intergroup differences. In addition, a majority of the research participants were of Latin-X/ Hispanic ethnic backgrounds which would need to be considered when considering the generalization of the outcomes.

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