

Refugee Youth & Arts-Based Initiatives



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The benefits of arts activities used with refugee youth lies in their accessibility, their ability to circumvent language and cultural barriers, their expressive potential, and their translatability to social media.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Arts-based initiatives provide important opportunities for validating the diverse experiences of refugee youth, promoting agency and empowerment, fostering resiliency and creativity, and providing safe spaces for youth to express themselves, have fun, and explore and share their cultural identities.

KEY POINTS

Arts-based initiatives:

- Include diverse modalities, such as painting and drawing, dance, music and song, theatre, photography, and digital media;
- Involve different purposes, such as therapeutic, preventative, social, educational, community planning, and research;
- Take place in different contexts, such as schools, youth spaces, community centres, religious organizations, and gender-specific venues;
- Aim for multiple levels of youth engagement, such as youth-led, youth-centred, professionally facilitated, researcher-led, or adult mentored.

Therapeutically-oriented programs can provide opportunities for youth to express and address their challenges in a safe space. Confronting issues through expressive workshop formats can increase self-esteem, and help with emotional and behavioural problems in school. However, there are risks involved when refugee youth are asked to recall and express difficult and potentially traumatic experiences; appropriate training and access to professional help are essential.

Elements important to the success of arts-based programs:

- ensuring that classes or workshops are considered safe spaces;
 - acknowledging, appreciating, and encouraging diversity among youth;
 - establishing continuity between sessions;
 - allowing space for stories of adversity to be re-framed into individual and shared strengths, where possible and appropriate.
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- It is important to address the common barriers to accessing arts-based programs among refugee youth, including environmental (e.g. transportation), sociocultural (e.g. linguistic), and socio-demographic (e.g. financial) challenges.
 - It is also beneficial to remember that cultural gender expectations can dramatically influence the ability and inclination of young refugee women to participate in programs.
 - A strength-based or Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective emphasizes the value of arts-based programs as an opportunity to embrace the strength and resiliency of refugee youth, focus on social inclusion, foster strong peer support networks, and embrace the diverse cultural backgrounds and traditions of participants.

Performing and sharing traditional art-forms can help youth to maintain connections to their homelands, and is associated with positive identity development, a greater sense of collective identity, and improved cohesion within families.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Visual:

Visual modalities such as photography and painting provide opportunities and spaces for refugee youth to reflect, share, and express life changes and aspirations. They can foster dialogue between youth and the wider community.

Theatre:

Theatre provides a ritual framework and sense of playfulness that can prevent youth from being overwhelmed by difficult subject matter and can foster healing from traumatic experiences. Playback theatre, for example, aims to transform participants' stories into empowerment through improvisation. Stories and experiences shared in these contexts can create bonds between program participants, resulting in a strong peer support network.

Music:

Music helps to connect people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Expressing their unique musical traditions can provide an avenue for youth to share their hopes, beliefs, and aspirations. In a therapeutic context, music can be used to validate feelings of anger, frustration, fear, and aggression, while channeling these emotions into creativity and developing emotional mastery.

Youth-led art projects can provide invaluable opportunities for refugee youth to contribute to policy development and implementation in their communities.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is an avenue through which youth can share their experiences with a wider audience, while also improving language and technology skills. Programs that focus on developing linguistic and digital literacy skills through the production of creative autobiographical films, for example, have also seen gains in participant engagement, collaboration, resilience, and confidence.

Arts-based research methods

Community based research often uses arts methods to facilitate youth engagement in data collection and analysis, increasing youth agency in research, helping youth to recognize their strengths and make sense of their experiences. Youth engagement in research facilitates youth participation in community planning and policy development processes.

Social media

Youth spaces or hubs often incubate refugee arts initiatives that radiate into the community locally and internationally through social media.

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