



Editors' Comment

The arts ignite the mind, and each child is an artist in his or her own way. Parents and teachers who aim to find and encourage each child's interests and passions give them the opportunity to dream and hope and to enrich their lives and work. The creativity and vision that arts add to a child's life don't develop magically, however; skill acquisition, task organization, persistence, goal-setting and work habits have to be developed as well.

According to Howard Gardner, a psychologist and educator who has written on the theory of multiple intelligences, a child's curiosity and passion inspire and motivate the search for skills and information, fostering the capacity for analysis and critical thought and leading to a child's desire to learn more.

Participation in the arts provides many other benefits for children, personal and social. In addition to the wonderful experience of having fun, arts spark interests in alternate ways of expression. They open minds to diversity, to new ways of thinking and observing the world, and help children of diverse backgrounds find common ground

In this issue of the NYU CSC Letter, the author writes about the ways in which arts help a child develop a rich inner life and lay the groundwork for life-long creativity and enjoyment. Some of the ways in which teachers and parents can find the right balance for each child's participation in the arts and provide an enriching environment are described.

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The meaning of music and art in the lives of children

Introduction

Music and art have the power to transform the lives of children. Through music and art, children find a voice in an environment that is non-threatening and non-demanding. Away from academics, away from the competitiveness sometimes associated with team athletics, children are in a free-play zone. They can test out their own strengths and preferences in the context of more flexible time and space than the usual 'homework assignment.' In painting or drawing a child starts with a subject or a color scheme or a series of visual patterns. In music a child starts with a tune, or a rhythmic pattern, or words for which a tune can be found. In writing a child starts with an idea for a story, a feeling to be captured, a memory to be treasured, a series of sounds to be arranged, or a picture to be drawn with words. The arts encourage children to use all of their senses and to integrate the images they perceive into a total vision.

A child's inner life

There are issues and experiences that may be tough for some children to discuss in words – such as war and other acts of violence, accidents, death, illness, catastrophic losses, fears of separation, being uprooted. Perhaps the feelings are so intense that no words describe them, but children feel them keenly. Living in frustration, anger and sadness, however, is time and energy-consuming, and for many

children the arts provide an outlet for pent-up feelings. Children who are taught alternative ways of coping can channel their energies more productively and may feel encouraged and freer to follow their dreams. These are the children who feel empowered to control their environment and lead more productive lives. The arts provide, in the words of a nine-year-old, "a safe place to explore my feelings."

Access to a child's inner life comes through thinking, dreaming, and creating. In order to reach that place a child needs time and space to be 'still,' and to let the ideas flow from within and without. It is probably impossible to talk about inner lives without mentioning 'soul' or 'spirit.' As parents and teachers we may choose to surround children with elements of beauty in the experiences we share with them and to encourage and validate their explorations through thinking, creating, and dreaming. To make this possible we have to create and protect a certain amount of space and stillness. Sometimes children's lives are so filled with scheduled activities that there is no room for the stillness and contemplation that are necessary for creation. It is also entirely possible that a certain amount of emptiness or guided 'boredom' may be necessary to mobilize a child's creativity. Unguided 'boredom' could be potentially dangerous, since children

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can turn to dangerous experimental activities, but if their environment allows and nurtures creative activity, especially if they are guided to turn their thoughts or imagination towards recording thoughts and feelings on paper, on canvas, in a song, they can discover an inexhaustible source of comfort for themselves and others.

When violist Sherry Chow, on graduating from the Children's Orchestra Society was asked "What effect has music had on your life?" she replied "Instead of considering music a separate entity affecting my life, the music has become part of myself." Tenth-grader flutist Kenneth Chia, said: "Music affects my life a great deal, almost like a second life in itself. If only life were this easy and pleasurable."

Different cultural values, temperament, learning and coping styles all play a role in nurturing a child's inner spirit. People from different cultures respond to different aspects of the same music, art or writing, and these different interpretations broaden each child's experience. Exposure to diversity encourages tolerance and respect for the values of different cultures, helps children develop cooperative strategies, build strong friendships, and acquire team-work and leadership skills.

The teacher as guide

The arts can tap into the essence of a child who is exploring personal expression through various media. A wise teacher seizes that opportunity and teases out a child's creative strands and nurtures them to become the very fabric on which the child weaves his or her story. Teachers give children permission and courage to be true to themselves. This may even include permission to make mistakes. Hockey player Wayne Gretsky stated that "You miss 100% of the shots you never take." Making mistakes in the context of an art form is not life-threatening, nor does it put the child at risk of physical harm. But receiving support in making risky choices gives students

a level of comfort that enables them to feel free to experiment.

Training in the arts involves a subtle balance between creativity and discipline. Along with nurturing the child's sense of wonder and self-confidence, some basic skills should also be nurtured. Teachers work on pattern recognition (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and memory training, in a climate which furthers patience and endurance training. The art of pattern recognition can start anywhere – from the natural world to the various artistic mediums chosen by the child. Memory work can start very early and pays off in any field. Young children can memorize a large amount of information a little bit at a time, but memory work is most effective if it has some significance for the child. The more memory connections formed early, the larger the memory network develops for future use.

The tasks for teachers in the arts are manifold; they aim to:

- encourage participation and getting started on a task
- develop innovative thinking and self-knowledge
- give children a set of skills
- help them make a plan and draw a map towards the goal or quest
- identify reasonable short-term milestones, encourage persistence and monitor progress, make the changes necessary to complete the quest.
- cheer the students on and provide opportunities to reach an "aha" moment.

The first step is getting started. Mark Twain offered some practical advice: "The secret of getting started is breaking complex, overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one."

Violinist Ngina Duckett remarked that she discovered "practicing 6-8 hours in one day doesn't have the same effect as practicing 1 hour daily.... the significance of any challenge is not the moment you achieve your objective but in the

hours of work that brought you there. It is the growth and development gained from perseverance that makes one a better person... anxious to take on the challenges and take in the beauty that life has to offer."

One of the most precious gifts that a teacher in the arts can offer to their students is giving them "a glimpse of infinity, or a whiff of the divine." Music teacher Sheila Reinhold describes an instance in which an assorted group of students with varying levels of competence gathered for a series of coaching sessions. During the third session came that breathtaking moment when the group "*glimpsed the shadow of divinity,*" and reached a level of communication within the group, and level of performance they thought was beyond their reach. Moments such as these keep teachers returning to replenish the younger generation of budding artists, leading them to carry on the creative work into future generations.

Expanding the benefits of the arts to other areas

Character-building habits such as planning, persistence, overcoming obstacles and achieving a goal in music carry over to other activities. Much ado has been made about the effect that music has on children's performance in other areas.¹ Some researchers have tried to find a correlation between study in the arts and improvement in academic performance. In a comprehensive guide of published and unpublished studies on this topic Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland² found a positive correlation, but not a causal one, between the number of years studying the arts and SAT scores. The authors give a strong caveat within the report that "*the existing research is limited in its exclusive focus on outcome rather than process.*" They also stress the need for stronger experimental studies and suggest future avenues of research.

At the very least, delving, exploring, and studying in a medium other than academics enrich a child's life, and may well provide another venue along which a child's developing brain can expand its frontiers. In addition, a sense of 'belonging' is cultivated through a child's participation in group experiences, in performances, exhibitions, or working on a team project. This invaluable feeling carries over in a child's increased confidence in his or her accomplishments, and the formation of a network of "soul-mates" that can bolster a person's creative work through an entire life span. Through the arts, many children have integrated the various parts of their lives and found alternative and complementary approaches to their academic studies.

The family as guide

Parents are children's first 'bouncing board,' as they make their first attempts in walking, talking, creating, and testing their ideas. An important function of parents is to reflect back to the child their words, ideas and thoughts, sometimes in their original form, other times in slightly modified form, gently directing the child towards goals. Parents who are sensitive to their children's inner needs give them a head start in their development as caring human beings. They nurture children's creativity and encourage thinking along non-linear, non-conventional ways, stimulating a flexibility of thought not easily acquired through many academic subjects. Parents create an entirely different arena for children to test out their talents and skills. Children find a voice through their work in art and/or music while they explore issues that are larger than themselves. They learn the subtleties of blending colors and textures, exploring perspective and projection, and joy in the pride of creation which they can share with others. By helping children develop a 'vocabulary' (verbal, artistic or musical), parents give children the tools to redefine their own inner

world and gain some control over it.

Children vary in their interests and capabilities, and it takes an astute parent to tease out and choose which of the child's natural talents to cultivate. The wise parent will know how far to push a child towards a given goal and yet leave room for other aspects of the child to grow towards the making of an integrated and fulfilled adult. For an extroverted child with a wild streak, the challenge is not necessarily to train the wildness out of the child, but to tame it and direct the boldness towards exploring the furthest boundaries without falling off cliffs. Such a child may find a powerful voice in the performing arts. A child with athletic inclination might pursue dance and the dramatic arts. For a timid or introverted child, the arts may prove to be a nurturing medium to explore feelings and thoughts, allowing the development of risk-taking in graduated and safe increments. Such a child may find a voice in writing, painting, or composing music. Although these are solitary activities, the child may discover the joy of sharing them in a group, lessening the fear of entering an unknown field. Somehow the art form may become the child's guide through life's journey.

Summary

There is a delicate balance between nature and nurture for the optimal cultivation of a child's mind and spirit. On the side of nature are each child's gift and innate temperament. One highly valued gift is that of intelligence, which is no longer considered one single entity, but one which includes multiple facets. Another is the child's temperament and the 'goodness of fit' between parent and child. On the side of nurture are the benefits of a supportive family, a rich educational environment, and the network of support developed throughout a child's entire life. But the bulk of what makes up a life is the interaction between the environment and the unique package that is a

person. Some are blessed with gifts in specific fields, while others are blessed with talents that adapt to many fields. Some have performed miracles with their few talents, while others have let their many talents lie fallow, for lack of encouragement, courage, or persistence. If we consider the cellist Yo-Yo Ma's quote "think of your voice as your life, and live your life as your art form" it seems that finding your voice and finding your life are almost the same. The arts provide a medium in which children can explore the universe. They can luxuriate in the freedom the arts provide, while learning the routines required to progress within them. For each child, timing and balance are everything. Parents do not have to follow a prescribed sequence of activities for their children, but can take the lead from the child. Finding the balance or the right mix for each child becomes a challenge and a reward when it happens. Allowing nature to take its course with guidance, parents and teachers can bring a child from a dream through a process of guided exploration and growth towards personal peace and productivity.

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About the Author

Yeou-Cheng Ma, M. D., a developmental pediatrician, works with children with developmental disorders at the Rose F. Kennedy Center of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. A Fellow of Rusk Without Walls, she is a consultant to the Department of Rehabilitation at Rusk Institute, NYU School of Medicine. Dr. Ma also performs as a chamber musician, teaches violin, viola and chamber music and is the Executive Director of the Children's Orchestra in Manhasset,

N.Y. Known as the "Music Doctor," Dr. Ma's interests include optimizing communication in all children, exploring the relationship of music to young children's temperament, and using music as a means to find the "inner language" of children who have difficulties in verbal communication. She has lectured internationally, presented at scientific conferences and has received numerous awards. With her husband, guitarist Michael Dadap, she has concertized in the U.S., Europe & Asia.

Since 1984, the Children's Orchestra Society has flourished under the leadership of Music Director and Conductor Michael Dadap and Executive Director Dr. Yeou-Cheng Ma, daughter of the orchestra's late founder, Dr. H. T. Ma, and sister of cellist Yo-Yo Ma. COS is a non-profit organization whose primary goals are to sustain and strengthen performance programs such as a concert series, regularly scheduled classes in chamber music, musicianship, private instruction, master classes, music literacy for 3-5 year-olds, and a summer program. COS believes in children's innate capacity to learn and develop their musical talents to the highest level when nurtured in a friendly, supportive and cooperative environment. The COS has a current membership of over two hundred forty students, with three orchestras and 20+ chamber groups.

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