

Circus Works!

American Youth Circus Organization: A case for using circus arts as a tool for social change

Across the US, dedicated people engage in the difficult work of improving lives. Some are building hope and harmony in shattered communities like Ferguson, MO¹. Others work to help address systematic oppression and body image challenges for women, girls, and transgender people.² Some work with youth whose lives have been disrupted by trauma³, helping to build self-esteem, connection, and confidence. Therapists help those with physical or emotional challenges to meet their occupational therapy, physical therapy, and individual education plan goals^{4,5}. The list of examples reaches into every realm of social change.

The common thread? These people are harnessing the power of circus arts to accelerate social change. Why? Because **circus works**.

“Social circus” offers a unique combination of characteristics⁶ for positive, creative⁷ youth and community development.

A 2017 study of eight social circuses⁸ showed that these programs have as good or better impact on social and emotional learning among youth participants than other youth programs.

Here’s why:

Circus arts promotes physical and mental health and wellness

Circus represents not one physical or artistic discipline, but the practice of creating wonder with the human body. Students of circus learn a multitude of physically

¹ Circus Harmony Peace Through Pyramids <http://circusharmony.org/peace-through-pyramids> ; Prescott Circus Theater, Oakland <http://www.prescottcircus.org/about-us/mission-and-vision/> ;

² Wise Fool New Mexico <http://www.wisefoolnewmexico.org/about.html>

³ The Circus Project, Portland <http://www.thecircusproject.org/outreach/>

⁴ Circus Arts Therapy, Atlanta <https://www.circusartsinstitute.com/circus-arts-therapy>

⁵ Circus for Survivors research (S. Rappaport): http://circusforsurvivors.com/?page_id=68 ; Jill Maglio research http://holisticcircustherapy.com/ufiles/library/Publication_OT_journal.pdf <http://holisticcircustherapy.com/about/holistic-circus-therapy>

⁶ Community worker’s guide : when circus lessons become life lessons

<http://sccw.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Community-Workers-Guide.pdf>

⁷ Davis, J. (2009), Toward best practices in youth worker training for developmental circus arts programs, Harvard Graduate School of Education; see also links in sources document on Positive Youth Development/Developmental Assets (e.g., Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets/Sparks) and Creative Youth Development (e.g., NAHYP, Arts USA, Mosaic Model) (corresponding U.S. program evaluation in progress at Circus Harmony, theory model at CircEsteem)

⁸ David P Weikart Center for Youth Program Effectiveness 2017 Study of the Impact of Social Circus Programming on Social and Emotional Learning among School-aged Youth (to be published Nov 2017)

expressive skills: juggling promotes cross-body and hand-eye coordination; unicycling and wire walking promote core strength and balancing skills; acrobatics and aerials foster strength and motor control.

Circus offers a range of fun new things to try, and presents fascinating, adaptable challenges for everyone, so that people with many different body types and physical abilities are drawn to a sustainable, varied physical practice, key to physical literacy.⁹ The central aspect of playfulness in circus not only makes it appealing and accessible, but contributes to cognitive, emotional, and physical development.¹⁰ Circus, partnered with occupational, physical and other health therapies, can accelerate progress toward specific therapeutic goals for individuals with disabilities.¹¹

Children¹² who train in the circus can become physically confident, healthy, capable adults who understand the capabilities and limits of their bodies.

Circus arts fosters human connection and belonging

Circus feeds the basic human need for love and belonging. Circus performers must rely on connections with both trusted adults and their peers to keep them safe and physically and emotionally supported through challenging assignments.

Children who train in the circus learn to ask for and give help, developing positive relationships and communication skills.

In circus, success is not limited only to those capable of certain skills. Instead, circus adapts to the capabilities of its members. Circus allows everyone to identify and work toward realistic, ambitious goals and to participate in a valued role at a level they can handle. The wide variety of circus arts allow participants to remain part of their circus “family” as their capabilities and interests change. As a result, circus offers a consistent and sustainable setting for youth development.

⁹ Dean Kriellars, <http://www.physicalliteracy.ca/node/48> : “Movement vocabulary is the repertoire of movement skills someone has. The more movement vocabulary they have, the more opportunity they have to participate in things. Movement fluency is the ability to execute a component of movement vocabulary with expertise. Physical proficiency refers to the ability to select the right type of movement repertoire and sequence it correctly in a certain environment. Finally, physical literacy is the ability to demonstrate multiple proficiencies in many environments.”

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/how-to-build-a-better-athlete-starting-in-kindergarten/article20710040/>: “It’s an injury-prevention technique embraced by Cirque du Soleil, which has its acrobats learn all the parts in a given performance.”

¹⁰ The Science of Play: <http://www.nifplay.org/science/overview/> “The existing research describes patterns and states of play and explains how play shapes our brains, creates our competencies, and ballasts our emotions.”

¹¹ Maglio & McKinstry, Sahli et al; Forthcoming US research: C. Heller, S. Rappaport

¹² AYCO is focused on youth but many of our practitioners may serve adults through social circus as well; in most cases, these statements which begin with “Children” could be equally valid if started with “Participants” or “People”.

Circus students experience nurturing physical touch in a safe environment and learn to be physical with others in a safe way. Students of social circus programs often describe their circus as “like a real family”.

Children learn to feel safe and to recognize and help create safe environments.

Circus encourages civic engagement, citizenship, cultural & socioeconomic integration

Circus calls for humans to work on an even footing, where everyone has a voice, diversity is affirmed, and everyone has an important job to do. The work of creating circus mirrors constructive engagement in community. Circus values, integrates, and celebrates participants’ own cultural traditions and provides a safe platform for bridging across cultures¹³. Participants learn how the group succeeds or fails by the actions of each person. The experience of performing, of being seen, of giving of themselves for their troupe and audience, raises children’s understanding of their own power to do good, as well as the community’s perception of these youth as contributors of unique gifts. Social circus can generate real career paths, as well as transferrable assets toward socioeconomic integration.

Children who study circus learn how to effect change in their lives and the world around them.

Circus builds tenacity and resilience

Circus provides a safe container for the repeated practice of risk taking, failure and ¹⁴ recovery. By supporting ongoing creativity, invention, and effort, circus teaches children to reach beyond what they thought possible. Circus presents the student with challenging tasks that can only be mastered through repeated practice.

Children experience the rewards of focused work towards a personal goal. *Children in the circus learn perseverance and resilience, enabling them to transcend their own and society’s assumptions.*

Circus arts offers a powerful combination of diverse, integrated, physically expressive arts. Social circus harnesses this power to accelerate progress toward social, educational and health goals, “making possible what seemed impossible.” As a result, Social Circus is attracting researchers, funders and other community partners to help build an effective social change movement.

The American Youth Circus Organization supports the development of effective social circus programs through convening, training, capacity building, and advocacy.

¹³ Prescott Circus Theatre, Picaro (Carlos Cruz), Circus Harmony/Peace Through Pyramids, CircEsteem

¹⁴ CircEsteem <http://circesteem.org/history/> : “When we found our kids were struggling in school we created HomeWork & CircusWork, a free after school program that provides academic support 3 days a week. This program lead to youth employment opportunities and scholarship money for college.” Circus Harmony has many youth going on to be professional circus performers and teachers.

Support social circus. Because Circus Works.

Examples of Social Circus Programs

1. Circus Arts Institute, Atlanta Georgia offers Circus Arts Therapy[®]



Photo: Nick Arroyo

The Circus Arts Therapy program benefits children with

- Learning differences
- Behavioral issues
- Sensory and processing issues
- ADD, ADHD, Autism spectrum disorder, PDD
- Emotional and physical challenges
- Self-esteem issues

Classes are taught by a team of instructors including a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and Registered Play Therapist (RPT) along with adult circus professionals.

Circus Arts Therapy helps clients by stimulating their imagination and creativity in a playful, social setting. The experience of working with circus equipment helps participants overcome the fear of everyday challenges such as managing anger, communicating, cooperating and compromising, making and maintaining friendships.

Therapeutic benefits gained include:

- Bilateral coordination skills
- Muscle strength, including using the core
- Ability to cross the body's midline
- Brain and body balancing
- Self esteem
- Teamwork
- Overcoming fears
- Improved communication with peers
- Balance, flexibility and coordination
- Focus and attention

“Carrie’s ‘no-such-thing-as-can’t’ philosophy quickly overcame G’s typical reluctance to try new experiences. He’s eager to see what he’ll get to do each week, and proud to demonstrate each new skill he learns. Based on our family’s experience, I firmly believe that Circus Arts is a worthwhile experience for any child with sensory challenges.” – Parent

2. Circus Harmony, St Louis, MO



Circus Harmony uses circus arts to motivate social change in communities. By inspiring individuals and connecting communities with circus education and entertainment programs, Circus Harmony has a positive impact on the St. Louis community. In the last ten years, Circus Harmony has developed youth circus troupes with Jewish, Christian, Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American and Asian children from inner city and suburban areas throughout St. Louis.

After 15 years in operation, Circus Harmony now serves over 600 students and presents over 400 shows a year. Over 70% of the population served are from low-income families.

Circus Harmony's programs teach valuable life skills like perseverance, focus, and teamwork. Learning circus skills with others teaches trust, responsibility and cooperation. Most importantly, participants have the opportunity to meet and interact with children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds than their own.

Circus Harmony believes that the path to peace is a path of cooperation and communication. Teaching children from different neighborhoods how to stand on each other's shoulders promotes understanding and creates strong bonds. The children learn to overlook differences and focus on similarities, to focus on working together to fix something rather than abdicating responsibility and blaming others. Ultimately, these children reach adulthood knowing how to make peace.

3. Prescott Circus Theatre, Oakland, CA



The heart of Prescott Circus Theatre's work is the Prescott Circus Performing Company from Prescott Elementary School in West Oakland. Each year, approximately 25 -30 3rd-5th graders commit themselves to a minimum of 9 hours per week of training. They also receive homework tutoring and an academic summer school session. Training programs are offered free of charge and almost exclusively to low income children.

This group is well known and loved throughout the community as the "Prescott Clowns." Through hard work, practice, and careful coaching, they develop the necessary skills to appear at over 50 community events for over 25,000 fans

annually. The group develops an hour-long show that is known for its educational and motivational themes.

Each year at Prescott Circus Theatre, over 170 youth work with professional artists to develop physical circus skills such as juggling, acrobatics, improvisation, balancing, unicycling, stilting, hip hop dance, hambone body percussion, and clowning. The program design places emphasis on cultural connections. Students also learn about performance art, including creative expression, stage presence, production, and theatre vocabulary.

Through this work, participants increase their confidence while developing essential life skills including teamwork, cooperation, punctuality, and grace under pressure — the ability to smile when “the show must go on!”. Prescott Theatre provides arts education that truly promotes school and life success.

4. The Circus Project, Portland, OR



The Circus Project’s social circus programs provide specialized training to homeless and at-risk youth. They offer a therapeutic approach, by utilizing the unique appeal

of circus arts to impart essential life skills such as self-care, discipline, communication, and accountability. Programs are free of cost.

Programs address the diverse spectrum of needs and abilities within the population of homeless and at-risk youth, and provide opportunities for continued engagement and advancement.

Partnerships with human services agencies enable the Circus Project to reach a wide range of youth at risk, including homeless/parentless youth, foster children, victims of domestic violence, victims of sexual and physical abuse, and youth suffering from mental and emotional disorders.

“I’m grateful to the Circus Project for igniting a passion in me that I didn’t know I had. Giving me hope for a future better than the streets.”

—*Josh Davis, High Flyers Student*

“The Circus Project has been the turning point in my life. It gave me a sense of hope and purpose and wonder again. I turned everything around in a matter of months: I moved inside after 4 years of living on the streets. I quit drinking and smoking. When I’m on the trapeze, it’s the place where all my scattered pieces come together; the meeting place of body, mind and spirit.”

—*Jessica Coshatt, High Flyers Student*