

Circus - Create - Collaborate

Kaleido Company is a Perth-based arts and health business that seeks to improve mental health through increasing engagement in the arts. Founder, Sarah Green, comes from a background in psychological sciences and public health. The overarching vision and driving force stems from a desire to decrease suicide rates through a means that tackles mental health issues at their core, rather than via a bandaid approach which masks underling issues. Day-to-day activities follow a simple philosophy; "If it touches just one life, then it is worth doing."

Engaging in the arts recreationally for enjoyment, entertainment or as a hobby, is important for mental well-being. Engagement can be both active (physical involvement) and receptive (non-physical involvement). Recent research by local population health professor, Dr. Christina Davies, found that those who engage in the arts for two or more hours per week, report significantly better mental well-being than those with lower levels of engagement (Davies, Knuiman & Rosenberg, 2016).

Engagement in Social Circus Workshops: Mental Well-being and Skill Transferability

Circus can be taught in a way that promotes overall health and well-being. As a standalone practice it is instrumental in creating enjoyment while developing physical and social skills. Researchers have delved further into this and looked at various individual health outcomes (self-esteem, depression, anxiety), physical attributes (coordination, motor skills), and quantifiable outcomes such as school drop-out rates, drug abuse and crime (Spiegel, Breilh, Campana, Marcuse & Yassi, 2014). The following summarises the benefits of engagement in social circus workshops on mental health and transferability of skills to music.

Social Circus and Mental Health in Children and Youth

The positive benefits of active engagement in the arts have been found to be particularly evident in young people. Through sharing elements of both sports and arts it acts as a unique tool for children's development and empowerment for youth at risk of negative health and well-being (Aubertin, 2013). At its core lies physical activity, gross motor skills, social awareness and connectivity, hard work, experiences of risk, trust building, goal setting, aspirations and enjoyment (Bolton, 2004; Seymour, 2012).

The development of life skills (physical, personal, social) in early childhood is important for successful independent functioning later in life. Those who lack development in these areas may struggle with cognitive development throughout life. Participation in play is an important part of life skill development. Children with higher anxiety levels are less likely to engage in unstructured play. Circus offers a unique means of increasing engagement,

through creating an environment in which play is at the core of the activity (McGrath & Stevens, 2019).

A recent study by McGrath and Stevens (2019) looked at the impact of a circus program on mental health and well-being. They found a positive impact across four key areas; stress relief, self-esteem, confidence and socialisation. Improvements in these areas have been clearly linked to a lower prevalence of associated illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

“Community circus provides an environment of personal artistic expression and group solidarity, creating opportunities for young people to forge new ties with society.”

- Maglio & McKinstry, 2008

Object Manipulation and Music

Object manipulation such as juggling, hula hooping, devil sticks and diabolo, provides opportunities to improve coordination, gross motor skills and fine motor skills. They also help to develop life skills such as persistence, rapid thinking, reaction, practice and persistence (Maglio & McKinstry, 2008).

The transferability of these skills can be clearly seen in music. Sharing conceptual skills including timing and subdivision, coordination, and dynamics; music and juggling are intrinsically linked. A musical approach to juggling has potential to streamline the learning process into simple rhythmic processes which can be applied to the physical skills required of juggling. In turn, juggling has the potential to reinforce rhythmic and physical sensibilities in a practitioner. Juggling and music also have positive impacts on more general cognitive mechanisms such as visual attention and processing speeds (Roden, Konen, Bongard, Frankenberg, Friedrich & Kreutz, 2014).

At the core, both juggling and music combine abstract patterns and mind-body coordination. Throws are rhythmic in nature and as the juggler progresses they learn more complicated movements and patterns. In each instance, mathematical and scientific applications are made; such as the ball being thrown at a constant rhythm, in equally spaced moments in time. It should therefore hold true that accuracy and coordination developed from juggling should be transferable to music, and vice versa (Buhler, Eisenbud, Graham & Wright, 1994).

The benefits of engaging in social circus are multidimensional and continuously evolving. Whether challenging fears by hanging from a trapeze, redeveloping sensorimotor skills lost through disease or illness, or applying creativity to elite athleticism, the broad range of skills taught make it universally applicable.

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