



Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing

An early childhood sector perspective from Sally-Anne Donaldson, Director of Creative Homes



Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing

An early childhood sector perspective from Sally-Anne Donaldson, Director of Creative Homes

Introduction

In July 2017, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) published a report outlining the case for the role of arts in health and wellbeing entitled [Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing](#). Commissioned to improve awareness of the benefits that the arts can bring, this two-year inquiry captures evidence, conversation and practice with patients, arts and cultural organisations, academics, health care professionals and policy makers. It makes possibly the strongest case yet that arts have a significant and positive impact on health and wellbeing. What is particularly interesting to see is evidence captured around the impact that early arts intervention can have on wellbeing of children in **early childhood** and the whole family; and the vital role that **individual practitioners** play in contributing to health and wellbeing of communities at a grassroots level. To draw out these themes in more detail, Sound Connections commissioned Sally-Anne Donaldson from [Creative Homes](#), one of the organisations cited, to reflect and respond to the report.

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Well-being An early childhood sector perspective

This could be the most influential policy document since the **Marmot Review: Fair Society, Fair Lives (2010)** especially in making the case for early intervention and giving children the best start. However, it does more than this; it advocates and defines the arts as robust health intervention. The arts can no longer stand alone outside social policy and the future of a healthy society.

“The essential need we identify is culture change: change in conventional thinking leading to change in conventional practice [...] to balance technical innovation with social innovation”
(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

As Director of a third sector arts and health service - Creative Homes - that focuses on families and young children, I am heartened by a report that puts into words the frustrations I've felt trying to stay functioning as a business that struggles with long-term commissioning and recognition for artists as professional workers in early intervention. This report highlights these struggles and offers concise definitions, a common language for all sectors. This is a good place from where we can begin cross-sector cultural thinking.

Key Points:

- 1) Firstly the fact that early and **upstreaming intervention** is proved to be cost effective and the arts are an accessible tool for tackling health inequalities and well-being of the whole family early.

“The savings that can be achieved through participatory arts programme, as a form of upstream early years intervention should be recognised and acted upon more extensively. We urge DH and DfE to recognize the arts as a form of evidence-based and cost-effective treatment of childhood behavioral problems and conduct disorders and make provision accordingly.”
(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

- 2) **Arts participation** is currently still relative to the **social gradient** and until diversity is tackled in leadership and the workforce of the cultural sectors we are not going to be able to change behaviour on the ground.
- 3) Evidence and how the arts have always struggled with the burden of proof. This forces us to justify the impact of creative approaches as compared to biomedical alternatives. I would advocate that this has had to make us work hard and consider a new way of communicating evidence or ‘impact’, as we call it in the third sector. Evidence demonstrates that the arts can save money in health and social care by strengthening prevention yet CCG funding for innovative arts interventions are still exceptional. There is a direct request for CCG’s to address this.

“Health inequalities result from social inequalities [...] no action is taken the cost of treating the various illnesses that result from inequalities in the level of obesity alone will rise from £2 billion per year to nearly £5 billion per year in 2025”
(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

- 4) The issue of **re-commissioning** for the arts and the disruptive and added expense this costs the third sector. It affects our stability, limits public awareness, and leads to temporary solutions that frustratingly can’t change behaviour in time. The future is embedding arts approaches into the mainstream care landscape rather than re-commissioning. The answer for the arts sector probably lies in a mixed economy approach.

The arts play an indispensable part in healthy life expectancy and can intervene at key development stages. It is so empowering to see, in the opening summary, the highlighted inextricable link between childhood and the influencing factor of mental health of parents.

“The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are laid in early childhood...let us look at how the conditions in which we are born and grow affect our health and how the arts contribute to the betterment of both”.
(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

Key impacts:

Gestation and Birth:

It highlights the importance of the mother's actions before and after the birth of their child and recognises the power of music in pregnancy and on the heart rate of new babies.

Perinatal Mental Health:

It raises awareness of how linked the mental health of mothers is to the adverse impact on their child and how stress and social isolation, related to low income, affect parent/child bonding and ultimately long-term development. It highlights the success of the arts on clinically reducing cortisol, the stress hormone, faster recovery from post-natal depression and in reaching BAME communities. Importantly the arts and artists can help reduce the stigma around mental health and bridge the route to accessing support services.

Early Childhood Development:

From Creative Homes and my perspective, this correlation between family income and housing on child development is paramount to our work. Most importantly the social gradient may be inevitable but its **not fixed** and engagement with the arts can aid physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development of the child as well as the mental wellbeing of the primary carer.

"Creative Homes (CH) acknowledges the household environment to be one of the paramount influences on a child's healthy brain development. With 25 percent of children in London living in overcrowded conditions, rising to 43 percent in the social rented sector, and low incomes putting a strain on family relationships, CH identifies the need to avert consequential health and care challenges. An analysis of CH showed a 64 percent improvement in the quality of household routines, a 23 percent increase in play at home and a 27 percent increase in singing with children. This type of environmental improvement can be expected to reduce future demand on health services"

(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

School Readiness

In my experience, artists and researchers are a little tired of this term, yet still it is one of our best indicators of child development and a child's entrance into formal education is one of the primary influences on their future life outcomes.

Two out of five children in London are not ready for school increasing to 4 out of 5 in poorer boroughs.

"£1 spent on early care and education has been calculated to save up to £13 in future costs."
(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

Professor Susan Hallam and her research on the impact of music making on the intellectual social and personal development of children and young people is highlighted. **Learning an instrument** for life is used to show how improved motor skills and speech perception from a young age sharpen the brains through early encoding of sound. Later on all the formal music practice, sustained attention, memory testing, playing in an ensemble and performing to an audience heightens self-belief. People who play an instrument score better on tests across subjects and have enhanced emotional intelligence.

Recommendations and next steps

Most importantly for the early years arts sector is Point 8:

“We recommend that the education of clinicians, public health specialists and other health and care professionals includes accredited modules on the evidence base and practical use of the arts for health and wellbeing outcomes

(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

This is so important for our early intervention work. We need to build a diverse workforce and leadership if we want to instigate change. It’s a key role of the Local Authorities, in partnership with the cultural sector, to raise the profile of the impact of the arts to health workers, to showcase successful models and restructure for cross-service delivery.

We need to let go of the “evidence-base” being the be all and end all of success and put it in to context:

“Education must underpin cultural change...more than an evidence base, policy- making and commissioning is underwritten by a belief system: some change of belief is needed....a social process rather than a scientific process”

(APPGAHW Inquiry Report, July 2017)

Proportional investment needs to be made across the social gradient and we need to break the cycle of re-commissioning for the arts and third sector. The APPG recommend the creation of a **National Strategic Centre** to implement the suggestions here of improving practice, research and funding.

The warming, human message here is that change will happen by joining forces, increasing the tempo and volume as we speak out about the arts, health and wellbeing.

“This report is about the life of the mind. It provides a substantial body of evidence showing how the arts, enriching the mind through creative and cultural activity, can mitigate the negative effects of social disadvantage. Creative Health should be studied by all those commissioning services”

(Professor Sir Michael Marmot)

This is why we do what we do as artists working for social change and let’s hope that the right people we need to read it – read it!

Sally-Anne Donaldson

www.creativehomes.co.uk

www.tdlp.co.uk