

Top 10 Skills Children Learn from the Arts

by Lisa Phillips

1. Creativity – Being able to think on your feet, approach tasks from different perspectives and think ‘outside of the box’ will distinguish your child from others. In an arts program, your child will be asked to recite a monologue in 6 different ways, create a painting that represents a memory, or compose a new rhythm to enhance a piece of music. If children have practice thinking creatively, it will come naturally to them now and in their future career.

2. Confidence – The skills developed through theater, not only train you how to convincingly deliver a message, but also build the confidence you need to take command of the stage. Theater training gives children practice stepping out of their comfort zone and allows them to make mistakes and learn from them in rehearsal. This process gives children the confidence to perform in front of large audiences.

3. Problem Solving – Artistic creations are born through the solving of problems. How do I turn this clay into a sculpture? How do I portray a particular emotion through dance? How will my character react in this situation? Without even realizing it kids that participate in the arts are consistently being challenged to solve problems. All this practice problem solving develops children’s skills in reasoning and understanding. This will help develop important problem-solving skills necessary for success in any career.

4. Perseverance – When a child picks up a violin for the first time, she/he knows that playing Bach right away is not an option; however, when that child practices, learns the skills and techniques and doesn’t give up, that Bach concerto is that much closer. In an increasingly competitive world, where people are being asked to continually develop new skills, perseverance is essential to achieving success.

5. Focus – The ability to focus is a key skill developed through ensemble work. Keeping a balance between listening and contributing involves a great deal of concentration and focus. It requires each participant to not only think about their role, but how their role contributes to the big picture of what is being created. Recent research has shown that participation in the arts improves children’s abilities to concentrate and focus in other aspects of their lives.

6. Non-Verbal Communication – Through experiences in theater and dance education, children learn to breakdown the mechanics of body language. They experience different ways of moving and how those movements communicate different emotions. They are then coached in performance skills to ensure they are portraying their character effectively to the audience.

7. Receiving Constructive Feedback – Receiving constructive feedback about a performance or visual art piece is a regular part of any arts instruction. Children learn that feedback is part of learning and it is not something to be offended by or to be taken personally. It is something helpful. The goal is the improvement of skills and evaluation is incorporated at every step of the process. Each arts discipline has built in parameters to ensure that critique is a valuable experience and greatly contributes to the success of the final piece.

8. Collaboration – Most arts disciplines are collaborative in nature. Through the arts, children practice working together, sharing responsibility, and compromising with others to accomplish a common goal. When a child has a part to play in a music ensemble, or a theater or dance production, they begin to understand that their contribution is necessary for the success of the group. Through these experiences children gain confidence and start to learn that their contributions have value even if they don’t have the biggest role.

9. Dedication – When kids get to practice following through with artistic endeavors that result in a finished product or performance, they learn to associate dedication with a feeling of accomplishment. They practice developing healthy work habits of being on time for rehearsals and performances, respecting the contributions of others, and putting effort into the success of the final piece. In the performing arts, the reward for dedication is the warm feeling of an audience’s applause that comes rushing over you, making all your efforts worthwhile.

10. Accountability – When children practice creating something collaboratively they get used to the idea that their actions affect other people. They learn that when they are not prepared or on-time, that other people suffer. Through the arts, children also learn that it is important to admit that you made a mistake and take responsibility for it. Because mistakes are a regular part of the process of learning in the arts, children begin to see that mistakes happen. We acknowledge them, learn from them and move on.

What Theater Can Teach Your Child

Theater addresses the skills which benefit children's education and development in five general areas: physical development/kinesthetic skills, artistic development/drama and theater skills, mental development/thinking skills, personal development/intra-personal skills, and social development/interpersonal skills.

While many parents fear participation in drama will damage their child's academic progress, a UCLA study concluded that students involved in the arts tend to have higher academic performance and better standardized test scores – nearly 100 points better on the SAT, according to a separate study by The College Board.

Academic gains aren't the only benefits. There are the obvious ones: improved self-confidence and better public speaking skills, but students show other gains as well, such as the ability to work with an ensemble in cooperative ventures and the ability to work through consensus and differences or obstacles to achieve a goal.

A play requires students to follow a time line, to use self-discipline, and to accept feedback. Studying theater can be a great starting point for careers such as teaching, law, and politics, not to mention broadcasting and performing. And the ability to speak confidently in front of a group is a boon for any career.

Sometimes, disappointment can lead to growth. Not everyone can get a plum part in the school play. If your child comes home sad that they didn't get the role they wanted, encourage them to politely ask the director why. Most teachers will give specific, constructive suggestions. Learning to absorb and accept critique is a key life skill – whether on the stage or off of it.

Be prepared for a time commitment. A production is a lot of work, and your child will have to attend lots of rehearsals. Make room in your schedule – once your child is in the show, practice isn't really an "optional" activity. Many parents think they can take their kids out early, drop them off late, or skip rehearsals entirely, which causes serious problems for the rest of the cast.

Keep your perspective – and help your child keep theirs. One of drama's greatest gifts is that it encourages children to work together as a team, even if they don't know or like each other. Your child needs to see him or herself as part of something bigger than themselves, which means showing up for rehearsals even when they would rather do something else.

Get involved. The typical drama teacher's responsibilities would be divided between five or six different people in the professional theater world. Any help you offer will be greatly appreciated, whether you donate goods, build sets, sew costumes, or hand out programs during the performance. Your contribution can really make a difference.

Advocate for theater education. Unfortunately, in today's world of No Child Left Behind, arts programs can be one of the first things cut from the school budget. Having a regular creative outlet is not just part of a well-rounded education – it is essential for a child's emotional health and well-being.