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Home Is Where the Arts Are, Too Implications of Arts Learning for Families and Parents

By Susan Magsamen
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Susan Magsamen

Throughout the Learning, Arts, and the Brain Summit, we saw that educators are eager to incorporate the arts in learning, but are perplexed about research findings. Both educators and researchers are worried that information is overstated or over-interpreted. This confusion and uncertainty is even more the case for families and parents. Lack of clarity and intimidation

about research, usable practical applications, and reasons why the arts are important for cognitive development permeated conversations at the summit with parents and key stakeholders, who represent critical partners in children's learning.

Media, for the most part, provide quick and sometimes shallow interpretations of research with little practical application for at home and community use. Summit participants reiterated again and again that parents feel they haven't had a strong voice in the growing and important conversation. They haven't been included in discussions among researchers and educators to better understand what is known; they haven't been participants in shaping new research and practices.

Andrew Ackerman, executive director of the Children's Museum of Manhattan said at the summit, "We have parents coming to the museum all the time [who] want to provide environments and opportunities for their children in the arts, but are not sure what to do, what is age appropriate, or what is important for their child's development. We need to be educating parents to be good consumers of arts and learning. Without this, they are at the mercy of the latest educational fads. We have seen this with the Mozart Effect, and with changes in policies and priorities in schools that limit or eliminate the arts to make more time for testing."

The reduction and loss of arts programs in the schools puts more responsibility on families and the community to provide quality arts experiences. The loss of the arts in schools also robs many children of much of their access to music, dance, theater, creative writing, and visual arts—the very vehicles through which motivation, problem solving, self-discovery, context, and meaningful learning may be gained.

Families need to be strong educational partners with schools on behalf of their children. As the most influential people in a child's life, families have a tremendous opportunity to support, enhance, and promote the arts at school, at home, and in the community. As Kurt Fischer, director of Harvard's Mind, Brain, and Education program, said at the summit, "Everything points to the critical link between schools and home that bridges performance arts, arts appreciation, and arts integration.

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This free publication is the culmination of a summit sponsored by The Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Neuro-Education Initiative, and focuses on the convergence of neuroscientific research and teaching and learning, with an emphasis on the arts. It features a prolegomenon by the late Dana Chairman William Safire and full text of the keynote address given by Jerome Kagan, Ph.D., Harvard University, at the Hopkins summit. Highlights of the symposium are featured in an executive summary, edited transcripts of panel presentations, and a synthesis of roundtable discussions. [available as PDF and print]

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This link needs to be nurtured so that the arts can contribute fully to the development of future skills, including collaboration and creativity.” He continued, “Without this consistency and integrated support between school and home, it is very difficult for children to succeed in learning the many skills and strategies that they naturally learn from the arts.”

Home is where the arts are typically introduced to children. From lullabies to bedtime stories, finger painting to bucket bands, home is where the arts are used to translate values, ethics, habits, and cultural rituals and traditions. Home is where safe, rich environments are created to allow children to explore, create, and make mistakes. Families and parents bring art experiences to their children through endless interpretations. If parents could be informed how the arts can enhance learning, then researchers, families, and community educators could join together to expand the impact of the arts in the community.

It is the everyday moments at home that offer golden opportunities for parents and families to employ the arts to enhance learning, support homework, gain valuable insight, develop perseverance, reduce stress, and more. A parent quietly points out the range of colors in the sky as golden leaves float to the ground. The lesson: Art is everywhere and it is through observation that we see new things. A teenager raps about life and a lost girlfriend at a coffee house. The lesson: Communications, creativity, and emotional development happen through self-expression. Kids and parents play music together on a pots and pan band: The lesson: Collaboration and creativity are fun and lead to learning.

But, as reported at the summit, parents on the whole know little about arts, learning, and the brain. Parents don’t naturally make these connections and science is just beginning to explore them. “Providing parents with accurate and reliable information is essential if we are going to help kids meet their potential using the arts,” said Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute. “Schools, home, the workplace, and community must work together to use what we know about the importance of the arts everyday.”

Most parents do not understand the potential impact of the arts on cognition, social and emotional development, executive function, or memory development. Summit participants expressed a strong belief that while the issues of communicating to parents and families is difficult, it is essential to the long-term growth and healthy development of children. “Many parents resort to the ‘because I said so’ school of parenting because they don’t have the answer to why the arts matter” said a summit educator. “It might seem like the right thing to do, but parents need to know why.” Whether it is encouraging a child to practice a musical instrument or paint a picture, understanding this information will influence how parents support and guide their children’s artistic decisions.

Educators, policy makers, and researchers agree that bringing parents into this conversation has the potential to change children’s skills, attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Some of this dialogue is already happening through back-to-school arts nights, portfolio assessments, free museum admissions, and access to other cultural arts programs.

Over the last ten years, researchers have also been reaching out to families to share information about the science of the arts and learning. This has been a challenging task. Communications channels to parents are diverse and scattered, and parents and researchers do not share a common language. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of finding have often caused researchers to retract from the discussion. It is hard to find a way to have an ongoing, sustainable conversation with parents, educators, and researchers about the role the arts can play in learning because there are so many issues by age, art form, and area of interest.

Several initiatives were shared at the summit that showed promise in

addressing these issues. One is a proposed communications Internet portal tentatively called *Learn*. *Learn* is being sponsored by a consortium of institutions, including Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Harvard University Mind Brain and Education, Temple University's CiRCLE program (Center for Reimaging Children's Learning and Education), the International Mind, Brain and Education Society, and Bloomberg School of Public Health. It will apply the science of learning to topics such as arts, play, stress, and more, and will provide practical applications and a place for ongoing communications.

The Ultimate Block Party: The Arts and Science of Play is another promising initiative. Scheduled for the fall of 2010, this Central Park event will marry arts, play, and learning. The Ultimate Block Party will reach over a million American families with strong messages about the value and science of the arts and play.

Finally, the Families and Work Institute is developing *Mind in the Making*, a collaborative effort that communicates the science of early learning to the general public, families, and professionals.

Families and communities are vital to a child's achievement. Social, behavioral, and brain science research are beginning to demonstrate that the ways parents approach the role of the arts at home can have a profound influence on their children's lives. The positive implications of having families and parents more informed about arts and learning are enormous.

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