

Using the Arts to Address Adverse Childhood Experiences

Creative Coping Skills Build Resilience, Grit, and Self-Identity

Written by Nancy L. Meyer

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are real, and students are suffering. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), ACE is “the term used to describe all types of abuse, neglect, and other potentially traumatic experiences that occur to people under the age of 18.” A joint study by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente broke ACEs into three main categories: Abuse (emotional, physical, sexual); Household Challenges (threats, substance abuse, mental health, separation/divorce, incarceration of a household member); and Neglect (emotional and physical).

ACE scores are measures of the severity and duration of child and youth trauma. The CDC study found that people who experience two or more ACEs in their youth are more likely to suffer long-term complications in their adult lives than their peers who do not experience ACEs, and the impact is tremendous. These include cancer; obesity; heart, lung, and liver disease; depression; anxiety; and suicide. High ACE scores often lead to alcohol and drug abuse and risky sexual behaviors.

The National Association of School Psychologists reports that high levels of stress and trauma associated with ACEs often manifest themselves in behaviors such as:

- Increased agitation and irritability;
- Less self-control, impulsively shouting or talking back;
- Shorter-than-normal fuse with anger flaring into temper explosions;
- Less energy or interest in previously enjoyed activities;
- Apathy and noticeable withdrawal from relationships;
- Violence against humans, objects, or animals;
- Negative talk about self or threatening others in person or on social media; and/or
- Physical complaints with no apparent cause.

There are myriad other reasons why students might exhibit these types of behaviors. However, these warning signs warrant a deeper look into the child’s situation.



Support Programs Help Reduce or Prevent ACEs

When students walk through school doors, they bring with them whatever issues their families are dealing with—incarceration, poverty, suicide, addiction, homelessness, and other fragile circumstances. As Kara Powell, principal of Hilltop Middle School in Ilwaco, Washington, explains, “Often our students are caring for

Experiences



"Art bridges the gaps between emotions and words. In this way, the act of making art becomes the language of healing."

— Dana Suppa, Principal of McKinley Elementary School, Erie, Pennsylvania

their parents whose lives have been disrupted by opioids. All youth need positive relationships with caring adults. These kids need an extra dose of trust-building, problem-solving, [and] self-expression opportunities."

Schools must prepare strategies for identifying ACEs and develop interventions to help students who are suffering from the stress of trauma. The power of the arts to uplift students and help them build resiliency becomes an invaluable intervention tool for the entire learning community.

The Arts Address ACEs

The arts teach the skills and cultivate the dispositions needed to address adverse childhood experiences. Creating art builds resilience, celebrates identities, hones problem-solving skills, and helps form personal identities. In her article "Expressive Arts as a Means to Heal Trauma," Andrea Schneider talks about how participating in the arts helps those who have suffered trauma tell their stories when words do not suffice. Creating a silent narrative through art unlocks the parts of the brain that keep hold of the pain, helping the person to take control and master the trauma.

Josephine Ilarraza is the school social worker at P.S. 54 in the Bronx, New York. She wanted to help students "cement the idea of what a coping skill is," so she used the Champion Creatively Alive Children grant to design the Creative Coping Skills program. With her input, teachers guide students as they design journals, make stress balls, and paint places that help calm them. Teachers report overhearing children talking about how they have used these coping skills at home and cueing each other to "remember the calm."

Marybelle Ferreira, P.S. 54 principal, witnessed the success of the program with students and decided

to expand the use of art in the school's parent group, the Women's Book Club. Many of this school's families have fears that range from immigration issues to their constant teetering on the edge of homelessness. "Many of these women have refused to talk about the horrific things they've been through. Drawing makes it easier for them to tell their stories and self-heal. Using art as a way to express yourself gives everyone a voice—even the parents who are not yet comfortable with their English skills. Families who have been here for a decade still have deep scars. They are able to address their traumatic experiences through art."

It's Not What; It's How

Principal Dana Suppa at McKinley Elementary School in Erie, Pennsylvania, made trauma-based art therapy a priority for his faculty and staff when he realized large portions of their population suffer from ACEs. Teachers were taught to observe not only *what* students draw but also *how* they create artwork. Often, those

Be Who you Want
to be



Not Who you expected
to be!

affected by ACEs have difficulty talking. They find comfort in drawing or intensely scribbling. Suppa reports, “We have lots of nonverbal kids here. Even those with words can’t find the right vocabulary in stressful times. They don’t know exactly how to say what happened to them. But when they draw, they’re not betraying loved ones or someone else; they are expressing their feelings. Art bridges the gaps between emotions and words. In this way, the act of making art becomes the language of healing.”

The Arts Build Relationships

Charles W. Appelstein, MSW, author of *No Such Thing as a Bad Kid*, encourages schools to use a strengths-based approach to build resiliency, prevention and coping strategies, and relationships. When adults acknowledge students’ strengths, help students identify what they can do to help themselves, and listen before providing guidance for solving problems, hope and optimism are fostered. These are key factors in coping with ACEs.

Building relationships and healing the mind through the arts is the purpose of the Arts, Identify, and Mindfulness (AIM) class—a course designed to support students with high ACE scores—at Hilltop Middle School. Students are selected based on either their ACE scores or the resilience that they have demonstrated as role models for other students. The group starts the year by finding a piece of driftwood



Cheri Lloyd holds the “talking stick” carved with the names of AIM students.

on the nearby Pacific Ocean beach. Class members burn their names into the driftwood along with the Japanese symbols for “ears,” “eyes,” “mind,” “heart,” and “undivided attention.”

Throughout the year, this carved wood is used as a traditional “talking stick,” which guides the civility and pacing of discussions, assuring that each participant has time to speak and that others listen as the stick moves among them. Cheri Lloyd, Dean of Students (who, as Hilltop’s former art teacher, continues to co-teach the AIM class), explains that this class provides “a safe place to voice opinions about many different aspects of the school and their lives. Students abide by their Core Covenants (a set of norms that students establish) with the understanding that their community

encompasses not only the AIM class but also the entire school.”

Lloyd explains that AIM sessions are based on relevant issues and events happening “right now in the school. Big, difficult issues. Topics that I, as an adult, am not adequately prepared to face, and yet our middle schoolers are dealing with.”

After deep discussion and exploration, students self-select the art medium they will use to “design an uplifting project to deal with the topic that expresses what they are feeling. They create something that tells a story or heals their minds.”

For example, the class studies masks as identity art, discussing the multiple figurative masks they wear at school, with family, and with friends. They design their artistic masks with



Richard L., Paramus, New Jersey





the front representing what others see and then add words and symbols that represent who they really are on the interior of the mask. Students are asked to identify an adult whom they trust to support them, someone who “has their back.” They create a work of art of their own choosing and share the handcrafted gift with this person to express appreciation for and demonstrate a personal commitment to the relationship.

Powell speaks with passion about how trauma and stress rewire students’ brains and affect their behaviors. “Kids need to *know* and *see* support and follow-through from adults. [In this school], the kids build self-esteem knowing there are adults here who know and trust them.”

Lloyd explains that some projects aren’t preplanned; they emerge from a critical need. For example, when she noticed the acronym “KYS” scribbled in multiple places and she

deduced that it meant “Kill Your Self,” Lloyd asked, “Who’s seen this? Who’s heard it? Who’s said it? And what are we going to do about it?” The students designed projects to express powerful thoughts and feelings about societal pressure and suicide.

Powell recommends that other schools implement a course like AIM. To start, “the staff must know about ACEs and how they affect kids in schools. When you focus on positive relationships with adults, that’s where you’ll see growth. The work of Rick Miller, author of *The Soul, Science, and Culture of Hope*, resonates deeply with me. He tells us it takes changing the way you speak and relate to kids, flipping to ‘Kids at Hope’ instead of ‘Kids at Risk’ so there is a goal. The kids can say, ‘I may have struggles, but that’s the way it is, so how are *we* going to get through that?’”

Powell challenges other principals to use the arts to “turn

the tables—make it positive and don’t let [kids] be belittled by the things they do not do well. Look at it in a different perspective. Change the approach.”

What’s in a Name? Celebrating Self Through the Arts

Gloria Ladson-Billings, spokesperson and author on equity in education, warns educators about using deficit labeling such as “bad kids” or “kids at risk” for students who exhibit ACE behaviors. “What you call something matters. Language matters.” She encourages teachers and administrators to identify kids according to their strengths and help them identify themselves in a positive light so they can build a positive self-identity and resiliency.

Walking through the halls of The FAIR School Crystal in the Robbinsdale School District in Minnesota, one sees evidence of Ladson-Billings’ words reflected in the art galleries, on the walls, on the stage, in the rehearsal halls, and in the studios. The school made a commitment to infusing arts-integration strategies in every class and subject area. All teachers participated in Crayola creatED professional development, including the course on using Art as a Personal Identity Narrative.

Under the guidance of arts-integration specialist Allison Thielen, every fourth- through eighth-grade teacher helps students see themselves in the visual art they create and express their identities through their performances. Principal Zoraba Ross says, “When you see yourself reflected in art, you feel celebrated. Self-expression through the arts helps you find who you are. Art helps identify what talents lie inside. Some [talents] are dormant now but will serve us later in life.” For all students, particularly those who face adverse childhood experiences, the arts provide positive ways to celebrate self-identity. 🌈

Nancy L. Meyer is a Crayola innovative teaching and learning manager.