



THE BENEFITS OF CIRCUS IN OUR CHANGING WORLD

Researched by; Jaine Mieka, Carlene Newall de Jesus, Nick Davies, Ariel Cronin, James Clement, Geoff Gilson, Eve Gordon

Prepared by; Jaine Mieka, with support by Geoff Gilson, Eve Gordon

Circus nourishes the physical and emotional well-being of everyone it touches in meaningful and multifaceted ways. Research shows that it holds a unique place as a non-competitive, highly physical, extremely playful and expressive medium which improves the lives of individuals through fitness, confidence, emotional intelligence, and artistic outlet. When we practice circus we create inclusive communities in real time, coming together to create art that tells important shared stories, and fosters connection and communication.

As individuals, our sense of self stems from a constant connection with our bodies. Our physical and mental health are intrinsically linked and many people have found their personal circus practice akin to a form of therapy.

Circus provides patterned, repetitive, somatosensory, and relational activity that is regulating and healing for our lower brain. In turn, having a regulated lower brain impacts our overall regulation and the way that we organize, understand, and interpret our internal system as we move through the world. Circus provides us with a unique opportunity to expand our window of tolerance by providing us with safe and progressive opportunities to practice shifting between states. In circus, we're faced with the physiological and emotional impact (arousal) of encountering activities that can feel scary or initially out of reach. As we ultimately find mastery of these skills within a safe and supportive context, we experience regulation and a physiological and emotional return to calm. (Alana, 2019)^[1]

In addition to helping us to regulate our own brains, much of circus is taught and learned through play. Elkind (2007)^[2] suggests that "Play is not a luxury we should ration, but rather a crucial dynamic of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development for children of all ages." Play develops our vocabulary, problem solving, self-confidence and motivation through childhood and bolsters these skills in adulthood. There are many consequences to a deprivation of adult play such as diminished optimism and a lack of curiosity or exploratory imagination. Brown (2014)^[3] talks to the importance of play as follows: "At any age, assessment of play adequacy and the recognition of its deficiency, along with the provision of the conditions necessary for its sustenance are basic requirements for health, wellness and full expression of what it means to be human."

Play through circus reduces the likelihood of anti-social behaviours, improving children's ability to develop strong, trusting relationships with other children and adults, and through this play, circus builds both our general physical fitness and specific motor skills.

Studies on physical fitness through the playful yet rigorous practice of circus show how as our fitness improves, so does the function of our blood vessels affecting the number of antibody-producing T cells, boosting the effectiveness of our immune systems and offering long term health benefits. In terms of physical education in mainstream schooling, an Australian study compared regular PE classes to PE Circus classes. There were significant improvements in motor competence in movement skills over time for both school settings, but with substantial endpoint differences in favour of PE CIRCUS. Children in the PE

[1] Alana, L (2019) Circus as a Healing Art: What Polyvagal Theory Teaches us About Why Circus Works, LCSW, RSW, MSSW

[2] Elkind, D. (2007). The power of play: How spontaneous imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children.

[3] Brown, S.L (2014), Consequences of Play Deprivation, National Institute for Play, Carmel Valley, CA, USA

[4] Kriellaars, Dean & Cairney, John & Bortoleto, Marco & Kiez, Tia & Dudley, Dean & Aubertin, Patrice. (2019). The Impact of Circus Arts Instruction in Physical Education on the Physical Literacy of Children in Grades 4 and 5. Journal of Teaching in Physical Education.



CIRCUS schools revealed greater movement terminology comprehension and higher confidence in execution. Children in the PE CIRCUS schools reported greater confidence, felt more talented, were more eager to participate” (Kriellaars, Dean & Cairney, et al 2019)^[4]

We start to see the multifaceted ways in which circus can be tool to strengthen our bodies and build mental and emotional resilience, allowing us to be more fulfilled, healthy, and connected members of the community.

In the social context, circus builds a culture of inclusion; supporting diversity, and striving for increased accessibility. People who practice circus form strong communities and build lifelong friendships; supporting each other in training, creation, and in all elements of their lives. Again we see the merit of practicing through overcoming mental and physical challenges in a safe environment. On a community level, this creates unique opportunities for bonding and group problem solving. “In time, the highs, lows and continual exposure within a supportive environment created a trust within oneself and each other. As trust grew, so did students willingness to try new things socially, physically and emotionally. Guards were relinquished and trust developed into confidence. Confidence in each other, and in oneself gave rise to camaraderie, friendship and community.” (Baumgold 2017)^[5]

The non-competitive nature of circus reduces the anxiety of trying new things and the variety of physical disciplines that fall under the umbrella of “circus” mean that there are many areas where we can find our own challenges and successes with less direct comparisons to others. “Non-competitive activities shift the power from the outside (teacher, coach, referee) to the inside (participant) and in doing so the participant constantly determines the level and type of engagement.” (Baumgold, 2017) In this way circus can draw in people who would often feel alienated from mainstream sports and gyms, as these spaces of physical culture can feel inhibitive for those from outside the mainstream.

Circus is a powerful tool being used in outreach programs for at risk youth, LGBTQIA+ identifying people, indigenous communities, those with disabilities, refugees, neurodivergent people and lower socio-economic communities. All people can be welcomed, and often the very things that made them feel like outsiders in other spaces can shine and be celebrated. A young participant know as “Sam” in Baumgolds study shared their thoughts- “(It’s) not just inclusion, in like an “everybody’s welcome” way but more like, “No, because you are different, you are important”” (Baumgold 2017)

Circus has the power to break down gender stereotypes and binaries. Women can be strong and powerful, men can be graceful and emotionally expressive and the pressure to fit oneself in to a binary role lessens. In terms of the PE and PE CIRCUS comparison in schools, “the gender gap in motor competence in the PE CIRCUS group was smaller than that in the PE group and girls associated physical activity with happiness more than those in the PE schools.” (Kriellaars, Dean & Cairney, et al, 2019)

Furthermore, the circus industry employs many LGBTQIA and gender diverse individuals, meaning students in the community have a range of relatable and positive role models. The way circus helps us self regulate is especially helpful for neurodivergent individuals and those suffering mental illness. “(Circus) encourages “rules” and expectations to be bent and broken in order to create a dynamic space that changes the way we see and experience the human form, and reorganises our ideas of what bodies are capable of doing.” (Seymour 2012). This can create huge positive shifts in how people view themselves. KD Seymour explores the impacts on young people with autism and their families- “Social circus allows the children to amaze themselves. This is especially important for children too often seen as problems, who can come to see themselves that way too” (Seymour 2012)^[6]

An example of circus as a positive inclusive community force is The Flying Seagull project. Established in 2007, they bring circus workshops, music and arts to children in hospitals, orphanages, deaf/blind schools, marginalized communities and refugee camps around the world. Youdell (2015)^[7] succinctly says “The Flying Seagulls’ work reflects powerful current evidence from social science, neuroscience and

[5] Baumgold, J (2017), Exploring The Experiences Of Adults Participating In Community Circus Classes: The Synergistic Relationship Between Circus And Occupational Therapy

[6] Seymour, KD (2012), How circus training can enhance the well-being of autistic children and their families.

[7] Youdell, D. (2015). *Join the Laugh-olution: the work of the Flying Seagull project*. Birmingham: Public Service Academy University of Birmingham.

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biochemistry of the importance of laughter, collective physical play and trusting relationships for building social bonds, resolving conflict, creating cohesive communities, developing resilience and securing personal and social wellbeing.”

Circus benefits are many and profound, allowing both the marginalized and the mainstream to express themselves, tell stories, enhance self-worth, and develop motor dexterity and competency, as well as maintain lifelong health benefits. Circus has intrinsically positive and inclusive qualities which can draw communities together in these rapidly changing times, and the feedback loops from individual to community can exponentially expand these benefits through the community. These benefits reach participants, audience- goers, children and parents alike; Circus has an importance, and a feeling of inclusion that those who practice and experience it feel, and they are we, and we wish to share these benefits far and wide with all those ready to learn with us.