

## **Circus Works!**

### **American Youth Circus Organization: A case for using circus arts as a tool for social change**

Across the US, dedicated people engage in the difficult work of improving lives. Some are building hope and harmony in shattered communities like Ferguson, MO<sup>1</sup>. Others work to help address systematic oppression and body image challenges for women, girls, and transgendered.<sup>2</sup> Some work with youth whose lives have been disrupted by trauma<sup>3</sup>, helping to build self-esteem, connection, and confidence. Therapists help those with physical or emotional challenges to meet their occupational therapy, physical therapy, and individual education plan goals<sup>4,5</sup>. The list of examples reaches into every realm of social change.

The common thread? These people are harnessing the power of circus arts to accelerate social change. Why? Because **circus works**.

“Social circus” offers a unique combination of characteristics<sup>6</sup> for positive, creative youth and community development. Here’s why:

#### **Circus arts promotes physical and mental health and wellness**

Circus represents not one physical or artistic discipline, but the practice of creating wonder with the human body. Students of circus learn a multitude of physically expressive skills: juggling promotes cross-body and hand-eye coordination; unicycling and wire walking promote core strength and balancing skills; acrobatics and aerials foster strength and motor control.

Circus offers a range of fun new things to try, and presents fascinating, adaptable challenges for everyone, so that people with many different body types and physical abilities are drawn to a sustainable, varied physical practice, key to physical

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<sup>1</sup> Circus Harmony Peace Through Pyramids <http://circusharmony.org/peace-through-pyramids> ; Prescott Circus Theater, Oakland <http://www.prescottcircus.org/about-us/mission-and-vision/> ;

<sup>2</sup> Wise Fool New Mexico <http://www.wisefoolnewmexico.org/about.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Circus Project, Portland <http://www.thecircusproject.org/outreach/>

<sup>4</sup> Circus Arts Therapy, Atlanta <https://www.circusartsinstitute.com/circus-arts-therapy>

<sup>5</sup> Circus for Survivors research (S. Rappaport): [http://circusforsurvivors.com/?page\\_id=68](http://circusforsurvivors.com/?page_id=68) ; Jill Maglio research [http://holisticcircustherapy.com/ufiles/library/Publication\\_OT\\_journal.pdf](http://holisticcircustherapy.com/ufiles/library/Publication_OT_journal.pdf) <http://holisticcircustherapy.com/about/holistic-circus-therapy>

<sup>6</sup> Community worker's guide : when circus lessons become life lessons <http://sccw.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Community-Workers-Guide.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Davis, J. (2009), Toward best practices in youth worker training for developmental circus arts programs, Harvard Graduate School of Education; see also links in sources document on Positive Youth Development/Developmental Assets (e.g., Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets/Sparks) and Creative Youth Development (e.g., NAHYP, Arts USA, Mosaic Model) (corresponding U.S. program evaluation in progress at Circus Harmony, theory model at CircEsteem)

literacy.<sup>8</sup> The central aspect of playfulness in circus not only makes it appealing and accessible, but contributes to cognitive, emotional, and physical development.<sup>9</sup> Circus, partnered with occupational, physical and other health therapies, can accelerate progress toward specific therapeutic goals for individuals with disabilities.<sup>10</sup>

*Children<sup>11</sup> who train in the circus can become physically confident, healthy, capable adults who understand the capabilities and limits of their bodies.*

### **Circus arts fosters human connection and belonging**

Circus feeds the basic human need for love and belonging. Circus performers must rely on connections with both trusted adults and their peers to keep them safe and physically and emotionally supported through challenging assignments.

*Children who train in the circus learn to ask for and give help, developing positive relationships and communication skills.*

In circus, success is not limited only to those capable of certain skills. Instead, circus adapts to the capabilities of its members. Circus allows everyone to identify and work toward realistic, ambitious goals and to participate in a valued role at a level they can handle. The wide variety of circus arts allow participants to remain part of their circus “family” as their capabilities and interests change. As a result, circus offers a consistent and sustainable setting for youth development.

Circus students experience nurturing physical touch in a safe environment and learn to be physical with others in a safe way. Students of social circus programs often describe their circus as “like a real family”.

*Children learn to feel safe and to recognize and help create safe environments.*

### **Circus encourages civic engagement, citizenship, cultural & socioeconomic integration**

Circus calls for humans to work on an even footing, where everyone has a voice, diversity is affirmed, and everyone has an important job to do. The work of creating

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<sup>8</sup> Dean Kriellars, <http://www.physicalliteracy.ca/node/48> : “Movement vocabulary is the repertoire of movement skills someone has. The more movement vocabulary they have, the more opportunity they have to participate in things. Movement fluency is the ability to execute a component of movement vocabulary with expertise. Physical proficiency refers to the ability to select the right type of movement repertoire and sequence it correctly in a certain environment. Finally, physical literacy is the ability to demonstrate multiple proficiencies in many environments.”

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/how-to-build-a-better-athlete-starting-in-kindergarten/article20710040/>: “It’s an injury-prevention technique embraced by Cirque du Soleil, which has its acrobats learn all the parts in a given performance.”

<sup>9</sup> The Science of Play: <http://www.nifplay.org/science/overview/> “The existing research describes patterns and states of play and explains how play shapes our brains, creates our competencies, and ballasts our emotions.

<sup>10</sup> Maglio & McKinstry, Sahli et al; Forthcoming US research: C. Heller, S. Rappaport

<sup>11</sup> AYCO is focused on youth but many of our practitioners may serve adults through social circus as well; in most cases, these statements which begin with “Children” could be equally valid if started with “Participants” or “People”.

circus mirrors constructive engagement in community. Circus values, integrates, and celebrates participants' own cultural traditions and provides a safe platform for bridging across cultures<sup>12</sup>. Participants learn how the group succeeds or fails by the actions of each person. The experience of performing, of being seen, of giving of themselves for their troupe and audience, raises children's understanding of their own power to do good, as well as the community's perception of these youth as contributors of unique gifts. Social circus can generate real career paths, as well as transferrable assets toward socioeconomic integration.

*Children who study circus learn how to effect change in their lives and the world around them.*

### **Circus builds tenacity and resilience**

Circus provides a safe container for the repeated practice of risk taking, failure and <sup>13</sup>recovery. By supporting ongoing creativity, invention, and effort, circus teaches children to reach beyond what they thought possible. Circus presents the student with challenging tasks that can only be mastered through repeated practice. Children experience the rewards of focused work towards a personal goal. *Children in the circus learn perseverance and resilience, enabling them to transcend their own and society's assumptions.*

**Circus arts offers a powerful combination of diverse, integrated, physically expressive arts. Social circus harnesses this power to accelerate progress toward social, educational and health goals, "making possible what seemed impossible." As a result, Social Circus is attracting researchers, funders and other community partners to help build an effective social change movement.**

**The American Youth Circus Organization supports the development of effective social circus programs through convening, training, capacity building, and advocacy.**

*Support social circus. Because Circus Works.*

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<sup>12</sup> Prescott Circus Theatre, Picaro (Carlos Cruz), Circus Harmony/Peace Through Pyramids, CircEsteem

<sup>13</sup> CircEsteem <http://circesteem.org/history/> : "When we found our kids were struggling in school we created HomeWork & CircusWork, a free after school program that provides academic support 3 days a week. This program lead to youth employment opportunities and scholarship money for college." Circus Harmony has many youth going on to be professional circus performers and teachers.

## NOTES

In a PR/brochure (on-line or otherwise), I would propose adding a case example and photo in a sidebar highlighting each of these examples and we could write these up with the highlighted program having an opportunity to review and provide illustrative photo. For health/therapeutic benefits I propose Circus Arts Institute; for Human Connection/belonging Circus Harmony; for Civic Engagement, Citizenship, Cultural/Socioeconomic Integration either CircEsteem or Prescott Circus Theatre; and for Tenacity/Resilience, Circus Project. We can also make these sidebars customizable so individual programs can put in their own examples.

Keep working, even when it's hard.  
The more you practice the better you get.