



Helping Children “Act Out”
Their Good Character

One of the most often overlooked vehicles for helping children achieve their optimum human potential is the performing arts. Something magical happens onstage when children face down their anxieties and bravely step in front of an audience to don a new persona. By the time the curtain falls, they have become more confident, more resilient, more comfortable in their skin. And with enough time and practice, they will take those character gains with them into a more hopeful future.

Founded in 1996, Oklahoma Performing Arts offers developmentally sensitive programs for children ages three to 19 featuring ballet, tap, jazz, acrobatics, music, voice, acting, and technical theater, as well as public performances in diverse theatrical genres. Unlike many other arts organizations that serve youth, however, Oklahoma Performing Arts teaches more than just how to dance, sing, or perform onstage. Through the vehicle of performing arts, students develop the emotional intelligence, tenacity, and grit they need to truly succeed in life.

At Oklahoma Performing Arts, we teach character through performance.

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Social-Emotional Learning: The Cornerstone Of Child Development

Children are little people with big emotions. Their inner world is rich but chaotic, as they wrestle to incorporate a daily barrage of new information about their environment alongside constant changes within themselves. They're developing rapidly on all fronts—mind, body, and spirit—and while it can be easier for caregivers to identify delays in their physical development, lags in social-emotional development are less obvious.

Social-emotional development is the process by which children develop competencies necessary for overall success in life. These include understanding and managing emotions, setting and achieving goals, feeling and expressing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. For children, the struggle is real; social-emotional development is an arduous, nonlinear process that isn't comfortable or easy for them. It's also challenging to even the most patient adults in their lives, who must contend with the child's "acting out" – the external manifestations of that messy, inner growth.

Yet social-emotional development is the cornerstone upon which all of a child's development as a human being hinges. Copious behavioral science research, as well as emerging research into neuroscience and molecular biology, have confirmed there is a dynamic, interdependent relationship between children's physical development and their social-emotional development. The human brain requires social experiences to develop its increasingly complex circuitry, and the engine that drives that development is the positive, reciprocal relationship between children and their adults.

In the words of Frederick Douglass: It's easier to build strong children than repair broken men.

But what happens when children don't have access to stable, nurturing relationships? Or are genetically predisposed to biochemical imbalances that make it challenging to bond with others? The result, of course, is a brain architecture that's damaged as it's being built. A negative feedback loop occurs, with stress hindering the brain's ability to develop the very connections it needs for higher-level cognitive functions and social bonding. Over time, this "emotional interference" has a wear-and-tear effect on a child's body and mind, increasing the likelihood of learning disabilities, developmental delays, and behavioral problems, followed by mental health struggles and compromised physical health as an adult.

Fortunately, the human brain is a remarkably flexible organ that has demonstrated the ability to alter its architecture even after it's been built...again, in response to social experiences. While this plasticity exists throughout life, it diminishes as a person ages. Younger brains are more sensitive and responsive to positive social experiences, which is why early intervention is critical. When it comes to brain circuitry, it is just better to get it right the first time than to try to fix it later.



Why Performing Arts?

One of the most powerful, effective vehicles to help children achieve social-emotional learning (SEL) is the performing arts. Drama-based SEL programs like Oklahoma Performing Arts strengthen children's emotional control, improve their self-concept, and empower them to establish and maintain healthy relationships. The result is an emotionally secure and socially competent child who is primed to be successful in all areas of life.



Strengthening Emotional Control

Through the practice and performance of plays, musicals, and presentations (even operas!), Oklahoma Performing Arts gives children the opportunity to process and understand their thoughts and feelings, then express them externally in a constructive way. Role-playing allows them to express uncomfortable emotions such as anger or sadness in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. They learn not only to identify their emotions, but that some ways of expressing them are productive while others are harmful to their goals and relationships. They practice expressing emotions in different situations, too, preparing them to make good choices when faced with more complex parallels in real life. In other words, performing arts teaches children emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation is the ability to monitor and modulate one's emotions, then choose how to express them constructively to achieve a goal. The goal can be simple: maintaining a friendship or getting along with siblings. Or it may be complex, like mastering a foreign language or landing a job. Good emotional regulation is associated with higher academic achievement and is even a strong predictor of economic success later in life. For children, learning to control their emotions is a high-stakes game, one that performing arts can help them win.

At Oklahoma Performing Arts, children are challenged through dramatic training and performances to take emotional risks, then patiently taught to self-regulate when their feelings threaten to overwhelm them. The environment is structured to make self-regulation manageable, with staff providing encouragement, positive discipline, and natural consequences for poor decisions. Unlike home or school, where emotional dysregulation can have negative consequences, Oklahoma Performing Arts is a "safe place to fail" as children learn emotional self-control. Staff facilitate this important competency by actively coaching frustrated, fearful, or angry children to slow down, be attentive to their feelings, and make intentional, positive choices about how to respond to the situation.



Strengthening Self-Concept

Oklahoma Performing Arts also helps children strengthen their self-concept. Self-concept refers to the attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values people believe define them. Children form an image of themselves over time, crafting it from a combination of personal experiences with success and failure; vicariously, through seeing others like them be successful; and social persuasion, or the opinions of others about who they are.

Self-concept is important because it shapes children's beliefs about their ability to succeed. Poor self-concept limits children by convincing them they aren't capable of great things. So why try? A strong self-concept, however, expands children's horizons, empowering them to take risks and work toward goals, even those that appear to exceed their natural limits. "Why opera?" evolves into the rallying cry of, "Why NOT opera?"

Drama programs like Oklahoma Performing Arts are uniquely suited to developing self-concept because they provide consistent opportunities for children to overcome their fears, thus fostering a growing sense of personal competency. Students are taught to reimagine dramatic challenges and the acquisition of new skills – such as singing in a musical or learning French to perform an opera – as a chance to prove they really do have what it takes to succeed. Private and public performances also provide children with a powerful dose of external, social validation.



Improving Social Skills

Positive social skills are among the most important attributes of the human experience. Today, technology has resulted in more isolated children with fewer opportunities for interpersonal social interactions. The situation has only been exacerbated by the quarantines, social distancing, and distance learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At Oklahoma Performing Arts, however, children have robust opportunities to develop critical social skills. They step away from screens and devices and interact with others on a personal level, experiences their brains need to properly develop. They learn to listen to others, take turns, and respect personal space. They also learn to be aware of others' needs and to accept feedback that helps them change their behavior to achieve a goal or build a relationship.

The goal of drama-based SEL – and the mission of Oklahoma Performing Arts – is to give children good character, resilience, and grit. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from stress and adversity. When children are resilient, they are braver, more curious, more adaptable, and more able to extend their reach into the world. Grit, as the name would imply, refers to an inner toughness that drives a person to keep working toward goals even when faced with obstacles. It requires self-control and the ability to defer instant gratification for a bigger, more meaningful payoff down the road.

Above all, Oklahoma Performing Arts helps children develop good character. Character is that ineffable sum of qualities that make up a person's truest self, the moral core that empowers them to make constructive, just, and selfless decisions. It is that quality that makes a quality human being.



**Resilience is knowing that you are the only one that has the power
and the responsibility to pick yourself up.**

- Mary Holloway



How We Achieve Social-Emotional Learning

To empower children to become resilient individuals with grit and good character, **OPA offers four drama-based SEL programs:**

OPA Training

Children ages three and older receive dramatic training in a variety of performing arts genres, including ballet, tap, jazz, singing, acting, acrobatics, and music (e.g., music theory, piano). These lessons, which are delineated by age to ensure children are surrounded by developmentally similar peers, teach skills in a non-competitive environment. Classes meet several times per week and are conducted both online and in-person.

All Hands on Tech

This hands-on class teaches technical theater skills such as light programming, theatre rigging, knots, and more. Participants must be ages 10 or older, and classes are conducted once a week.

Theatre Movement

This class teaches the basic movements needed for plays and musicals and is crafted to meet the specific needs of each participant. Classes meet once a week.

Allenato

OPA's signature program, Allenato, is an all-youth performing arts company. These children receive comprehensive training in all theatre disciplines throughout the season, including ballet, tap, jazz, acrobatics, music, voice, acting, and technical theater. Allenato creates four productions annually, along with community service performances and programs for area seniors and other nonprofit organizations. Past productions have included musicals, dramas, and operettas.

Unlike traditional theater productions that require competitive auditions, Allenato's performances and presentations are open to every child in the program. While the goal is a public performance, the process of getting there is collaborative, encouraging children to work together to develop their dramatic, technical, and interpersonal skills.



Grit And The Genius Of The Allenato Program

One of Oklahoma Performing Arts' priorities is helping its students develop grit – that ability to follow through in pursuing a goal over time, even in the face of adversity.

While grit has received significant attention in recent years, the concept actually has been studied for nearly two centuries by social scientists attempting to figure out why some individuals are more successful than others. As early as 1869, Francis Galton studied biographies of geniuses and concluded their success was due to a combination of innate talent, enthusiasm, and a “capacity for hard labour.” Half a century later, C.M. Cox concurred, adding that persistence in pursuing a goal (i.e., grit) was even more important than intelligence in determining a person's success in life.

Today, research continues to demonstrate that a person's “grittiness” has a direct bearing on their success in multiple arenas. For example, high levels of grit (as demonstrated by quantifiable follow-through in sports, paid work, and academics) is a greater predictor for whether a student thrives in college than SAT scores or high school GPA. What's more, grittier people simply report being happier, with more stable careers and relationships. It just makes sense—people with the ability to persevere despite setbacks are more likely to achieve their goals and be successful and satisfied as a result.

At Oklahoma Performing Arts, children are consistently offered opportunities to develop grit, especially through the Allenato program. The genius of Allenato is that it teaches grit stealthily by requiring students to make a commitment to seeing a production through to the end, when they perform the piece publicly. Participants in Allenato aren't permitted to drop out of practice or the performance without a compelling reason, such as health issues.

This can be challenging for children who are used to immediate gratification, as well as to their parents who may have previously undervalued consistency in their child's development. The demands of the program can tempt children to give up when they can't achieve proficiency right away. By sticking it out, however, children at Oklahoma Performing Arts become more tenacious or grittier people, a character strength they will carry into the future.



Character Through Performance

What sets Oklahoma Performing Arts' programs apart is the organization's investment in its students. Staff is committed to the extra planning, flexibility, and creativity required to make the arts accessible to all students. This includes those with behavioral issues and developmental delays, who arguably stand to benefit the most from the interpersonal skills and resiliency that can be gained from the performing arts.

Some children, for example, may need far more time than others to learn a skill. Whether it takes 10 minutes or 10 days to master French in an operetta, staff will patiently work with children until they achieve at least a basic level of proficiency. This is why children typically spend three to six hours per week at the organization, a significantly higher investment than the typical once-a-week hour long lesson in singing, dance, or drama. The expectation is that children will achieve artistic standards, if not through innate talent, then through perseverance, patience, and time.



The oak fought the wind and was broken, the willow bent when it must and survived.

- Robert Jordan

At the same time, Oklahoma Performing Arts holds children to firm behavioral standards to develop strong character. Through constant observations of students and ongoing dialogue with parents, staff members develop an awareness of each child's capabilities. This enables them to maintain a custom baseline of artistic and behavioral expectations for each child and leverage that to gently encourage the child to grow personal capabilities through courage, hard work, and perseverance.

In general, staff will not do anything for students that they can do for themselves. For example, 3- to 5-year-olds are expected to put their street clothes on after practice by themselves. A child who refuses or tantrums to avoid getting dressed will be met with a calm staff member who insists he or she can perform the task. If the child continues to be uncooperative, staff will communicate with the parent and both parties will "settle in" until the child chooses to cooperate with the reasonable request that is entirely within their capabilities.

Occasionally, this has meant a very late night for the student and staff members, who consistently reassert the expectations until the child accepts the invitation to demonstrate competency. It's a heavy investment up front, but well worth it: a three-hour delay in putting on shoes translates into a more cooperative child at home, at school, and at Oklahoma Performing Arts. And ultimately, a more emotionally regulated, self-confident adult.

Organizational Sustainability

Oklahoma Performing Arts started as a small studio with a handful of students nearly 30 years ago and grew to more than 300 students pre-COVID. The program continued even during several relocations, including stints in a defunct nursing home and a church.

Currently, Oklahoma Performing Arts operates on a budget of just \$199,975. Revenues are generated from a few small grants from private foundations, individual donors, and tuition from parents that is based on a sliding scale. The organization prioritizes low-income children and has never turned any student away for inability to pay. For this to continue, Oklahoma Performing Arts needs additional funding.

Community interest in Oklahoma Performing Arts's programs increases each year, but the organization needs significant financial investment to build out capacity to serve more children. **The two most pressing needs are:**

- **Staffing** – Oklahoma Performing Arts currently serves 60 children with just one full-time staff member, eight part-time staff members, and 20 volunteers. To build capacity to meet the unmet need for services within the community, Oklahoma Performing Arts needs at least six full-time and four part-time staff members. Needed full-time staff includes a program manager, whose duties have fallen to the executive director due to budget constraints. The outreach program also needs two full-time instructors to reach more children in the rural areas outside Tulsa.
- **New Programming** – Oklahoma Performing Arts would like to add a program for children with physical challenges. The school previously received \$10,000 to launch the program, but needs additional funding for staffing (as noted above) and to complete minor renovations to make the facility more easily accessible to children with disabilities (the facility is already ADA compliant).

Over the next year, Oklahoma Performing Arts is committed to developing local partnerships with up to three Tulsa Public Schools, with a priority for partnering with Title One schools serving primarily low-income students. Outreach also is planned for two rural schools outside of Tulsa, whose students are underserved in arts education. With these partnerships and additional funding, **Oklahoma Performing Arts is poised to offer services to upwards of 600 children by the end of 2022, an increase of 225% over its existing capacity.**



Serving A Growing Need

While the number of children served by Oklahoma Performing Arts has declined since 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization continues to serve a small but dedicated group of approximately 60 students. Unfortunately, the pandemic has cost the organization not just funding, but most of its teenage students. After more than a year of social isolation, many older children have carved away extra-curricular activities to focus on being back in school and getting caught up on core competencies that took a hit with online learning.


Tulsa's children need the services of Oklahoma Performing Arts now more than ever. Social isolation, job loss, school closures, and family stresses have intensified children's need for emotional resiliency. A recent study by Oklahoma University's Early Childhood Education Institute reported that nearly half of responding parents lost their job or had their hours cut, and **60% reported a decrease in household income**. Additionally, **49% of families experienced food insecurity**, with families of color reporting higher levels of income loss and food insecurity. One in four parents reported experiencing symptoms of depression since the beginning of the pandemic, with food-insecure parents twice as likely to experience symptoms.

Not surprisingly, these family stressors have trickled down to children. **Nearly half of parents (46%) in the OU study reported increased emotional or behavioral problems in their children**. Tulsa's children have inherited a unique psychological burden having grown up during a pandemic, and have lived under the spectre of fear for nearly two years. With help from community partners, Oklahoma Performing Arts can help our children transform their anxieties and traumas into the inner strength they need to thrive in an increasingly uncertain world.

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