



Society for Research in Child Development

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A High School Theater Program Helped Strengthen Adolescents' Emotional Development

A unique study found that adolescents' emotional skills were strengthened through a high school theater program. The study appears in the July-August 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Adolescents face formidable challenges in emotional development. To become functional adults, they must learn to manage the emotions that unfold in complex social interactions, including those in collaborative work groups. Yet little is known about the day-to-day circumstances of adolescents' emotional development.

Researchers at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign conducted open-ended interviews and observations to gain an in-depth understanding of one setting—a high school theater program. Ten teenagers were interviewed every two weeks over a three-month period while the theater group rehearsed a musical. Two adults who led the production also were interviewed biweekly. In addition, the researchers observed the rehearsals weekly.

During the rehearsals, teenagers reported frequent emotional experiences, including disappointment, anger, anxiety, and exhilaration. The program provided a culture that helped them learn to respond constructively to the events and feelings associated with these different emotions, the researchers found. The adults provided models and helped the teens cultivate strategies to manage strong emotions. The youth learned from repeatedly using these strategies to employ positive emotions to motivate their work; they also learned how to manage their own and others' negative emotions.

The theater setting supported this process by putting the youth in situations in which emotions were likely to occur because the expectation of hard work created stress and tension. Moreover, intense emotions were accepted and discussed openly with a climate of concern for others. The adults and youth alike stated shared beliefs about the importance of emotional experience, and the adolescents drew on the models and ideas of the culture as they learned about the dynamics of emotions in themselves and in groups.

The researchers also found that the young people were very actively engaged in the process of emotional learning. In the theater setting, they were proactive in learning to manage emotional situations, evaluated experiences and put to use the insights they gained, and actively drew on the ideas and assistance of adults and peers.

“The development of ‘emotional intelligence’ is important to adult work and family life, but many young people arrive in adulthood with incomplete emotional skills,” according to Reed W. Larson, professor of human and community development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and the study’s lead author. “These preliminary findings suggest how, under the right conditions, adolescents strengthen these skills. Although further research is needed, youth programs and schools that provide these conditions may be more likely to facilitate emotional learning. “

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 4, *Emotional Development in Adolescence: What Can Be Learned From a High School Theater Program* by Larson, RW, and Brown, JR (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.