

Brief Summary for the Palestinian Circus School and Psychosocial well-being

The Palestinian Circus School (PCS) is an organization created to address the emotional and psychosocial needs of Palestinian youth. PCS is a local non-governmental organization created in August 2006, as a small circus group with the intention of combating the negative effects of the aftermath from the second intifada of 2000. The aim of its founders was to introduce circus pedagogy to Palestinian youth to promote emotional intelligence along with cognitive, physical, and mental stimulation in order to achieve optimal well-being among Palestinian youth. PCS operates in five areas within the West Bank-Birzeit, Ramallah, Jenin, Tulkarem, and Jerusalem and hosts around 200-300 children and youth per year. Moreover, PCS operates under the backdrop of inclusion, ensuring participation for children and youth with disabilities.

Their curriculum is built on the pedagogy of social circus. Social circus is an intervention that combines the use of circus arts and social pedagogy. It is intended to be used for children and youth considered at risk of being marginalized, thus ensuring support and empowerment to mitigate any trauma and or psychosocial harm. It utilizes a strength-based perspective by leveraging participants' self-agency through the increase in self-esteem and the ability to build trust and rapport with others. In addition, participants can acquire and improve social skills while increasing their creativity. Hence, the emphasis is placed more on the ability to create societal change through one's self-actualization, rather than the acquisition of physical artistic skills.

Data revealed that participants involved in PCS showed a significant decrease in emotional worries, unhappiness, and nervousness along with a decrease in conduct disorder and hyperactivity. In addition, results showed an increase in prosocial behaviors such as cohesiveness, sharing and kindness

Chart 1: Emotional (worries, unhappiness, nervousness)

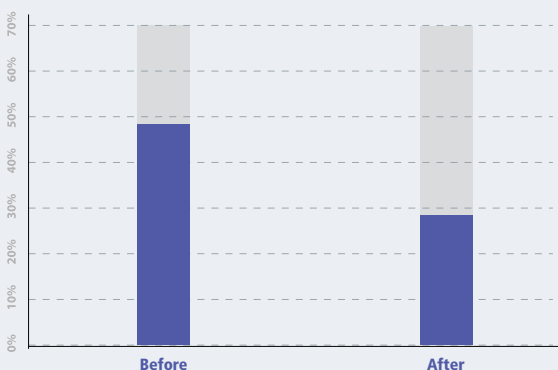


Chart 2: Conduct disorder

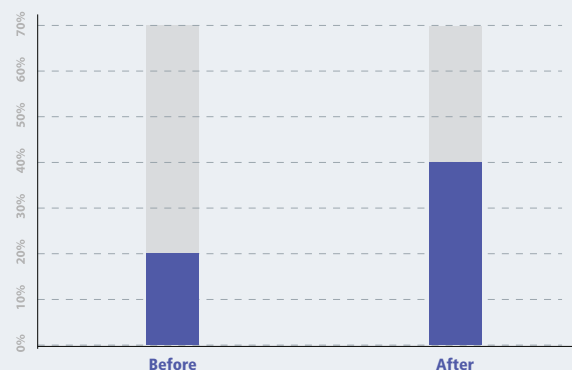


Chart 3: Hyperactivity (restlessness, fidgeting)

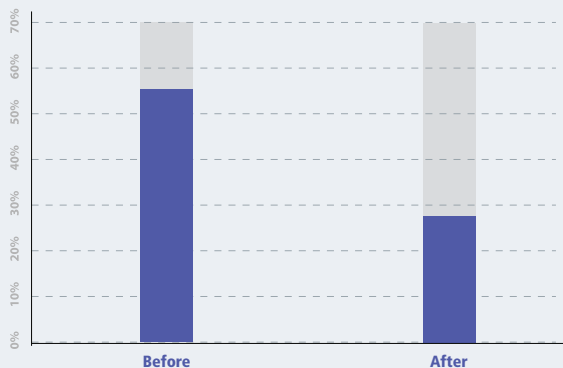
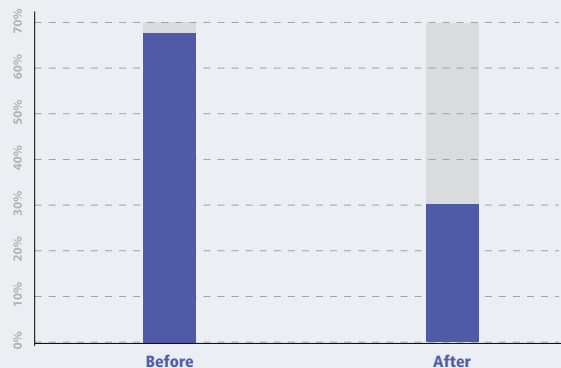


Chart 4: Pro-social scale (kind, helpful)



When data was segregated by gender, results showed a significant decrease in both males and females in emotional worries, unhappiness, nervousness, conduct disorder, hyperactivity, and an increase in prosocial behaviors such as sharing and overall social cohesiveness.

Interestingly male participants were more likely than female participants to encounter emotional worries, unhappiness, and nervousness in addition to conduct disorders and hyperactivity. In contrast, female participants were more likely to experience pro-social attributes such as sharing and cohesiveness.

The parent questionnaires revealed that parents were aware of the importance of their child's mental health with numbers showing no significant difference between the pre and post measurement: 97% of parents in the pre-questionnaire agreed that mental health is a vital component to their child's overall wellbeing, versus 99% in the post measurement. In contrast, there was a significant difference in parental opinions towards PCS and their child's involvement in the program showing 76% of parents in the pre-questionnaire agreed with the statement that PCS instructors are experts in their field versus 92% when measured in the post questionnaire. In addition, 63% of parents measured in the pre-questionnaire believed that their child would improve their social skills by being enrolled in PCS, versus 94% percent when measured in the post questionnaire. Measurements on opinions of their child's safety in the program revealed no significant difference, with both pre and post measuring at 99%.

Since data results show a decrease in emotional concerns, conduct disorder, hyperactivity, and an increase in pro social behaviors, it can be inferred that PCS participation contributes to psychosocial wellbeing. More notably, results show that both male and female participants, in all age groups, benefit from PCS participation.

In the same manner, studies have shown that circus pedagogy has direct effects on the mental, social, and physical wellbeing of children and youth. This is supported by a study done on children diagnosed with autism and the benefits gained while participating in circus training. The qualitative study examined the link between the program and social emotional wellbeing, concluding that participants, who for the most part feel isolated and stigmatized for their diagnosis, perceived a sense of community bonded by connection and trust. Their confidence increased because circus training required them to step outside their comfort zone and push themselves beyond their limiting beliefs. In the same manner, the parents of the participants felt a sense of community amongst themselves because of seeing their children thrive.

Another important point to mention is the competence of the program trainers. PCS uses a grounded model when it comes to hiring trainers, meaning the trainers were former students of PCS that worked their way up into the program. Using this model ensures that trainers are knowledgeable of circus pedagogy and know how to execute the curriculum to fit each student's needs.