



**”They’re  
smiling  
from ear  
to ear”**

**Wellbeing Effects from  
Social Circus**

Publication of the Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre  
University of Tampere



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## THE BACKGROUND OF THE PUBLICATION

The Effective Circus project (2011–2014) has continued on the footprints of the Social Circus project (2009–2011) in developing social circus activity in Finland. The Social Circus project organised successful initiatives for social circus activity in different parts of Finland. However, more efforts were still needed to establish the activity because it became challenging to find financing to support the circus activity. The Effective Circus project was developed to answer this need.

The main objective of the project was to provide the circus organisations with the tools for demonstrating the wellbeing effects of their activity thus increasing the funding opportunities and employment in the field. Another important objective was to increase dialogue between the municipalities and the circuses and to productize and mainstream existing wellbeing services in working seminars organised for the municipalities and circus actors.

Circus teaching was organised in six different participating circuses which gave a larger number of circus instructors the opportunity to work with special groups. The target groups for the circus teaching included:

- families in need of support
- special education classes and flexible basic education classes
- families with special needs children
- children and young people in the suburbs
- children and young people within the outreach youth work project
- immigrant classes
- multicultural groups
- private childminders
- elderly inhabitants in retirement homes and institutions
- children, young people and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- clients of mother and child homes and shelters
- substance abuse and mental health rehabilitants
- work communities.

Over a two-year-period, the research company Social Development Co Ltd hired by the project developed and tested, in collaboration with circus instructors, methods for studying wellbeing effects from social circus. The work resulted in the publication of two booklets: the one you are now holding in your hands demonstrates the benefits of social circus activity, and A Guide to the Study of the Wellbeing Effects of Circus explains how the organisations can keep demonstrating the impact of its activity in the future.

The Effective Circus project owes a debt of gratitude to the Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre that is a part of the School of Communication, Media and Theatre at the University of Tampere for administering the project. The main financier of the project was the Lapland Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY) which channelled funding from the European Social Fund. The Lapland ELY-centre made administering the project and applying for financing effortless and efficient. The following cities and municipalities who committed to the development of circus activity without prejudice also deserve our special thanks: Tampere, Turku, Vantaa, Lempäälä and Oulu took part in the funding. The biggest thanks belongs to the wonderful circuses who took part in the project: Sorin Sirkus, SirkusUnioni, Sirkus Magenta, the Cultural Centre Pii Poo, Oulun Tähtisirkus and Monitaideyhdistys Piste are so committed to the development of social circus that they have contributed to the total funding of the project. The following pages will give you an insight into the wonderful effects circus activity has had on the participants.

At the end of the book you will find an interview article edited by Katri Kekäläinen in which three experts share their views on the wellbeing effects of culture and the significance of studying them.

Hopefully this publication will inspire further study and more financing for this important work.

The Effective Circus project management  
Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre

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From left: Noora Honkanen, Piia Karkkola, Sofia-Charlotta Kakko and Katri Kekäläinen.

# Wellbeing Effects from Social Circus

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## **Abstract**

According to this study, social circus has obvious effects on the wellbeing of its participants. It naturally promotes social interaction, because it brings the participants together and offers the group something to do together. At best, the participants also keep in touch in the world outside of the circus.

The researchers collected information through surveys and interviews with the circus participants and the teachers, instructors, nurses and specialists who worked with them. A total of 164 people completed the survey and approximately 100 people were interviewed.

Circus activity is usually pleasant and rewarding. Circus lets one try and learn tricks that have never been attempted before; they are challenging, enjoyable and fascinating. The attention is focused on controlling the body and the equipment, on balance and movement. Focused practice lets the participant experience success. The atmosphere is encouraging and failure is accepted because everyone makes mistakes at some point, and only by trying again is it possible to learn new things. Working with other people promotes team spirit, and positive experiences from performing increases the participants' confidence

Most children and young people enjoy circus as a hobby. Circus is inspiring and it brings joy. It creates the opportunity to have a good time with the other participants and increases social interaction. The activity lifts the spirits and creates a sense of calm. Circus is a place where the participants can make mistakes, but they also discover that learning new things can be exciting. Children and young people learn to trust themselves, they become confident performers. Circus improves the team spirit of a class. Young people learn to understand differences, and their confidence is strengthened. Circus creates success while increasing the tolerance of failing.

Circus as a hobby has many benefits for the whole family. The circus groups for families with babies or small children let the parents spend fun, relaxing and re-energising moments with their children. It is good for the parents to see the joy of their children when they learn new exciting things. The circus activity helps the parents become more accustomed to handling their small children and playing with them. Circus offers activities families can share as parents enjoy watching their children succeed. Circus also strengthens the parents' idea of their children's abilities.

Elderly people enjoy themselves and find rejuvenation in the circus. Most elderly people direct themselves towards circus practice with real enthusiasm and are happy to make use of their strengths. Circus differs from the other activities in the retirement home, because residents can enjoy themselves in a playful environment and interact on equal terms with their nurses. Circus improves the ability of elderly people to show more consideration towards others, to co-operate with their treatments and to accept being touched. Circus improves the elderly



Cultural centre Pii Poo, Antti Yrjönen

people's social interaction and develops their confidence in participating in an activity. Circus has also been shown to increase the mobility of some elderly participants. Being in a good mood and being successful in the circus practice lessen the anxiety the elderly sometimes experience, which makes it easier to manage the daily routines. Circus develops the connection between nurses and their patients and gives them a better understanding of what their elderly clients can do.

For people with developmental disabilities, and for their caregivers, circus is creating a welcome change from the daily routine. The clients with disabilities dare to try new tricks and they learn new skills, which lets them experience success. Circus promotes the community spirit and supports the group activity for example by teaching them patience when interacting with the group. The instructors develop a clear picture of what their clients can do, and for many clients the circus improves their concentration and makes the treatment easier to tolerate.

The research demonstrates that social circus activity can be used in social rehabilitation and to prevent social exclusion. Social circus produces positive experiences from working in groups, encountering other people and interacting in a positive atmosphere. Social circus allows failure without embarrassment or punishment, because in circus everyone inevitably makes mistakes from time to time. This ensures that the practice has a relaxed atmosphere and produces the experience of being accepted. It takes place in a relaxed atmosphere in which everyone is accepted. Repeated practice increases the opportunities to learn, and learning brings success. This is how social circus becomes a virtuous circle.

# 1. WELLBEING EFFECTS FROM CIRCUS ACTIVITY

Social circus has many benefits for the participants. The effects of social circus activity were the subject of a study that was conducted during the Effective Circus project in 2012–2013. The research data was gathered by using surveys and interviewing the circus participants and their teachers, instructors, nurses and specialists. Completed surveys were collected from 164 people, and the researchers interviewed almost 50 people. Additional interviews were conducted by the circus instructors, and the recordings and notes from these interviews were also used in the research analysis.

The results from both the surveys and the interviews show that social circus has tangible social, psychological and physical benefits. The research demonstrates that circus significantly enriched the daily lives of most of the participants in the target groups of all ages, providing them with variety and recreation. It is suitable for people with physical and developmental disabilities, mental health rehabilitants and the families using child welfare services.

Many participants find circus activity rewarding and they have positive experiences from it. The circus is a place where they can learn challenging, enjoyable and interesting tricks that are previously unfamiliar to them. It is crucial to concentrate on controlling the body and equipment, balance and movement. Focused practice leads to success. The atmosphere is positive and failing is acceptable, because everyone fails at some point; willingness to try is what is needed to learn new things. Doing things with others promotes team spirit. Performance is an important part of circus – after all, the participants will be excited to show off their new skills. Positive experiences from performing increase the participants' courage to perform.

The experiences gained in circus also have an effect in other areas in life, because many of the things that are learned in circus can be applied in the world outside. Circus gives more confidence to perform which encourages self-expression and makes it easier to be the centre of attention elsewhere too. Accumulating new skills and learning new things strengthen the self-esteem. Having to wait one's own turn in circus teaches patience and helps the participants be more considerate. According to the study, circus clearly has a positive impact on these areas.

It is not possible to make conclusions of more far-reaching effects of circus activity based on the data collected in this research. For example, a group of students in flexible basic teaching may focus on the circus practice during the circus lesson and forget to tease each other. Circus also includes trust building exercises such as falling into the arms of the other group members and

realising that they can be trusted to hold one up. This temporarily improves the team spirit, but soon after the circus sessions young people return to their old habits and behavioural patterns.

What makes circus exceptional is its variety. It attracts different kinds of people and they can all find their own special field of interest, if they so desire. However, the participants need motivation and courage to try the circus tricks. Usually it takes only a few practice sessions before circus really captivates the participants, but not everyone will warm up to it – for some, it can be hard to admit to their friends that circus is actually pretty cool.

What makes circus instruction successful? First, the research data shows that circus offers meaningful and pleasant group activity. Secondly, circus offers something for everyone. Furthermore, no one has to feel bad about not being able to do something. Thirdly, circus creates a unique combination of culture and physical exercise so it offers a multidimensional platform for self-expression. This makes circus different from other activities. Fourthly, professional circus instructors who appeal to many kinds of participants and are genuinely excited and encouraging are essential to the circus' success.

Chapter 2 discusses circus activity from the perspective of children and young people. The chapter opens with an examination of the much-publicised problem of the social exclusion of young people and ways of preventing it. Social circus can be particularly helpful to young people at risk of social exclusion. This chapter speculates on the links between circus activity and prevention of social exclusion. Chapter 3 focuses on family and baby circus activity. The chapter discusses the results of having an entire family participate in the activity. Chapter 4 examines the effects of circus on the elderly. Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on two special groups: visually impaired children and young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

## Wellbeing and health effects from artistic and cultural activity

The objective of this study has been to investigate the effects of circus activity on wellbeing. The participants were asked about these effects, and so were their instructors, teachers or parents. The results received on the effects of circus activity are consistent with other data.

The Arts and Culture for Wellbeing programme (2010–2014) initiated by the Finnish government aims at promoting health and wellbeing by the means of art and culture and increasing social inclusion on the individual, community and society levels. In the background memorandum Hanna-Liisa Liikanen and the research group state that art and culture affect health and wellbeing. The conclusion is based on several national and international studies.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Liikanen, Hanna-Liisa (2010). Taiteesta ja kulttuurista hyvinvointia – ehdotus toimintaohjelmaksi 2010–2014. Opetusministeriön julkaisu (The Ministry of Education and Culture publications) 2010:1, pages 59–65.

According to the research, artistic and cultural activity enrich the everyday lives and interaction of children and young people. Culture supports children's and young people's learning, wellbeing and health. Among over 65-year-olds, communal cultural activities have been observed to have effects on both their physical and psychological wellbeing. When compared with the control group the elderly who participated in cultural activities felt healthier and less lonely; furthermore they had fewer problems relating to their general health.<sup>2</sup>

The research shows that the social interaction, the sense of community and the feeling of belonging people derive from cultural activities, improve their wellbeing and prolongs their life expectancy. Engaging in the activities with other people has more health benefits than doing the same activities alone.<sup>3</sup> Participating in the creation of art makes people feel better, happier and healthier. Cultural hobbies help people make friends, search new experiences and set new goals for themselves. Collaborating in the creation of art is considered more important than art itself.<sup>4</sup>

According to the study, people who have art as a hobby have lower blood pressure, less stress, and less pain and psychological symptoms. Art has positive effects also on the treatment of people with memory disorders and improves their ability to communicate<sup>5</sup>. When it comes to the connection between art and health the causal effect is not clear: good health might be a prerequisite for a rich cultural life, and cultural activities must accommodate a person's health.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to prove that there is a link between cultural leisure activities and improved wellbeing.

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2 Cohen, G. D., Perlstein, S., Chapline, J., Kelly, J., Firth, K. M. & Simmens, S. (2006): The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on the Physical Health, Mental Health, and Social Functioning of Older Adults. *The Gerontologist* 46:6, 726–734. Ref. Nummelin, Satu (2011). Kulttuurin hyvinvointivaikutukset: onnea, elämyksiä terveyttä. Turun kaupungin kaupunkitutkimus- ja tietoyksikkö. Tutkimuskatsauksia 1/2011.

3 Hyypä, Markku (2013). Kulttuuri pidentää ikää. Kustannus Oy Duodecim.

4 Matarasso, François (1997). Use of Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts. *Comedia*. Published online.

5 Staricoff, Rosalia (2004). Arts in Health: A Review of Medical Literature. Published online.

6 Kultur – En Del av ett Hälsosamt Liv? Kulturrådets skriftserie 2008:4. Published online.

## 2. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Circus activity provides children and young people with positive life experiences and supports their spiritual wellbeing. The majority of children and young people have enjoyed having circus as a hobby. They have found it inspiring. It has created opportunities for having a good time together with the group and for social interaction. The activity has uplifted the mood of many and increased their tranquillity. The participants have courage to make mistakes in circus and they find that learning new things is inspiring.

Social circus also supports the ability of children and young people to work in groups and to build a sense of community. Children and young people have gained more courage and have acquired experience in performing. The team spirit of a school class has improved because of circus. Some have learned to understand differences and have acquired more knowledge of themselves. Circus has also given the participants more self-confidence. They have more experiences of success, and the encouraging atmosphere of circus has taught them to accept failing.

However, circus has little effect on people who lack motivation to try. It is not possible to get results without motivation. The impact on familial interaction is also small if there are members in the family who do not participate.

Social circus activity has been organised for children and young people who are at greater risk of marginalisation, because their social or cognitive skills may not be sufficient for working or studying. The deficiency of life skills can result in a situation where a young person is excluded from his community and the society. Social circus has many effects that support wellbeing so the theme of social exclusion merits further study.

### 2.1. Circus for Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion

#### On social exclusion

There are an estimated 50.000 socially excluded young people in Finland – about 5% of the 15–29-year-old population. The young people who are not employed or in school and who lack post-school education are classified as socially excluded. As many as two-thirds of Finland's socially excluded are young men. An immigrant background is an additional factor in the risk of



social exclusion<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, social exclusion is closely connected to psychological problems: on average, five young men under 30 enter into early retirement every day because of mental health issues.

It is hard to calculate the societal cost of social exclusion, but an estimated 1.1 million euros<sup>8</sup> – or even 1.8 million euros<sup>9</sup> – per person has been given as the lifetime total cost. A cost of this magnitude will be created if the social exclusion lasts for the duration of the entire expected working life. One marginalised young person will cost society almost 30.000 euros annually in transfer of income and missed tax revenue. The economic pressure has forced many municipalities to cut finances from preventive work; this can have costly consequences in the future.

Social exclusion is also a personal tragedy when a young person drifts away from education, employment and social networks. Moreover, the problems of a marginalised young person tend to accumulate. The lack of social networks and lack of education increase social exclusion and economic vulnerability. Social exclusion may also increase violent behaviour, substance abuse and crime. A marginalised person will be lost to social services, support structures and networks.

The essential question is: Does social circus have a preventive impact on social exclusion as indicated by previous observations? Among other benefits, circus increases team spirit, builds confidence and creates social networks for the participants, all of which are important in society. If social circus is organised for the at-risk groups, the future effects might be significant. One perspective comes from a message sent spontaneously from a young person to her circus instructor.

*“Circus is an amazing example of something that will actually help marginalised kids to hold on to something they can enjoy. It also helps SO much in creating a community which we all need in this world. I still haven’t seen or experienced anything negative in the circus. I’m excited about the next session! The instructors are awesome, understanding, cheerful, effective, skilful and wonderful! Yesterday, when I went to circus, I felt really awful because of personal reasons. And I noticed yesterday, that there was a real change in me during the circus session. I was completely surprised by its effect on me, because I was in an excellent mood by the end of the session. Circus is cheerful, fun, effective, nice, captivating, positive, trust-worthy, incredible and everything else that’s great! Circus makes us FEEL LIKE WE CAN SUCCEED! We can just feel the joy taking over the entire mind and body. I really hope that the circus sessions can continue for a long time to come, because that is what creates TRUST. [Emphasis original.]*

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7 Myrskylä, Pekka (2012). Hukassa – Keitä ovat syrjäytyneet nuoret? EVA-analyysi.

8 Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto (2007). Nuorten syrjäytymisen ehkäisy. Toiminnantarkastuskertomus 146/2007.

9 Leinonen, Tuomas (2012). Nuorten koulutuksen keskeyttäminen ja sen hinta. Web publication.

It is possible to connect circus to social rehabilitation because it has a positive impact on life management, such as teamwork, the courage to try new things and to take on new challenges with the confidence that it is possible to succeed. Social rehabilitation gradually reconstructs a person's abilities to participate as an active citizen and as a member of the society. There is no right way of achieving this, but the conditions for social rehabilitation can be constructed for each client in many ways by using social rehabilitation counselling and group services. The aim of social rehabilitation is to increase wellbeing, broadening the possibilities of self-expression and social inclusion. At best, a person's path of social rehabilitation continues from training all the way to participation in working life.<sup>10</sup>

Based on this study, social circus creates many useable tools for social rehabilitation and the prevention of social exclusion, because it meets several of the clients' needs:

1. Social circus gives positive experiences from working in a group, meeting other people and interacting in a positive atmosphere.
2. Social circus creates an environment where it is possible to fail without losing face and feeling inferior to others, because it is the nature of circus that everyone fails occasionally. This creates the atmosphere of openness and enables the experience of being accepted.
3. The open atmosphere in the group and the encouraging direction given by the professional circus instructors produce the will to try again. Repetitive practice increases the opportunities to learn, and learning generates the experiences of success. This is how social circus becomes a virtuous circle that keeps regenerating.
4. Circus offers a varied selection of exercises and tricks on different levels of difficulty, so that everyone can find the ones that are best suited for themselves.
5. The circus tricks are visually impressive and create aesthetic experiences. The participants' motivation to practise is increased by the fact that they will receive positive attention and social approval from performing tricks that require courage and skill.

The following discussion focuses on the experiences of the young participants who are at risk of social exclusion. There are young people from a workshop school, flexible basic education group, a special education class and from rehabilitative education.

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10 Kesä, Mikko & Kinnunen, Riitta & Ala-Kauhaluoma, Mika & Laiho, Anna & Müller, Jan-Erik & Joutsen, Minna (2013). Sosiaalisen kuntoutuksen selvitystyö. Tampereen kaupunki, Työllisyydenhoidon palveluyksikkö.

## The workshop class for young people

The young people attending an arts-oriented lower secondary level workshop<sup>11</sup> class have challenges such as behavioural problems and Asperger's syndrome. They are usually very impulsive and easily distracted, but they have had the capacity to concentrate during the circus practice and have generally had a very positive response to the circus activity. The young people have been able to test skills that they otherwise would not have. Their idea of what circus is has also broadened. Circus is suitable for all pupils and it enables them to develop a wide array of skills. For example, physical disabilities do not prevent participation.

The most crucial effects are visible in the young person's social development. According to the teacher, the team spirit in the workshop class was weak in January, but it improved noticeably as the spring progressed. Getting to do things together has increased the feeling of togetherness. According to the teacher, circus has been an important factor in this positive development.

Participants in the circus learn that everyone is good at something. Everyone will find suitable activity for their level, and the young people set their own goals. Circus lets the young people see the differences between themselves and others.

No one does all of the activities perfectly, so no one criticises anyone else. Therefore circus also teaches humility. The pupils' self-esteem has clearly risen. The teacher has been surprised by how bravely the young people have attempted different tricks and used unfamiliar equipment. The young people have clearly started to believe in themselves more and not being perfect at the tricks is no big deal. The young people are also supportive of each other.

Circus has an effect on the mood as well: especially the successful performances create positive effects. And some of the effects on the mood are long-lasting. Circus may improve the ability to concentrate, although this requires a long-term commitment. Circus is not so much the solution, but rather a factor in maintaining a longer attention span.

Even though the effects of circus are not really physical, the circus practice has increased positive attitudes towards exercise. Some of the pupils have started jogging more and they are more interested in exercise in general

For the teacher, the most memorable moment took place when the young people asked him to photograph them performing their circus tricks. The students had not wanted to have their picture taken before, but now they had asked the teacher to photograph a balancing act the young people did during a circus lesson. The pictures were published on the student's web pages.

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<sup>11</sup> Workshop education is a pragmatic way to finish basic or vocational education. The workshop school is often organised in the workshop facility.

The pupils' favourite pieces of equipment are the hoop, the aerial silk and the trampoline. One pupil said that the best thing was trying things which he had been too scared to try before. However, learning the circus tricks requires concentration and not everyone will like everything: riding the unicycle has been too difficult, juggling isn't really interesting and it's hard to balance on the wire.

### The flexible basic education class

Due to the circus activity it has been possible to detect positive changes in the social interaction among the young people in the flexible basic education<sup>12</sup> class. According to the teacher, the pupils have formed closer social contacts. They have also become more considerate. The young people most appreciate the chance to try new equipment in circus, whereas the teachers emphasize the importance of the team-building exercises.

The pupils claim that circus brings a welcome change to the normal routines and is different from physical education classes. Having the circus instructors come outside the school means that the teachers can also immerse themselves in the activity and relax, because they no longer need to hold on to their authoritative status. The teachers have also gotten to know their students better because of circus. Meanwhile the pupils realise that their teachers are actually just regular people. The pupils weren't too excited about circus immediately after they heard about it, but the practice proved to be more enjoyable than they expected.

According to the teachers, the pupils' mood often improves during the circus lesson. They have particularly gained a lot more courage. The young people have gained more courage to perform, without feeling embarrassed if they make mistakes.

The pupils see the circus as a pleasant change from classes. Restless students who tease each other clearly enjoy the circus lessons. The atmosphere during the circus lesson is relaxed and positive. The young people will focus on the circus practice and not pick on each other. There is hardly any fighting or shouting. Everyone is happy to join in the practice.

The pupils would recommend circus to others. The circus's own facilities are seen as the best place to practice, because there is more equipment at hand. The young people would be eager to participate even in more circus practice during the school hours; however, one of the pupils suspected that circus would then lose its sense of novelty.

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12 Flexible basic education is directed to the pupils who are at risk to be left without a diploma from basic education. It is employed to help prevent a pupil from not achieving upper secondary education and dropping out of school. The teaching focuses on using individualised methods and practices that considers the different needs of the young people.



Oulun Tähtisirkus, Katja Pikkarainen

### The young people say: What is the best thing in circus?

- I guess it's that we have a chance to make decisions ourselves, our opinions matter, we're not just given a list of things to do. The instructors are genuinely excited. It really makes a difference in my motivation if the teacher is like 'whatever'. Quite a lot depends on that, what we are willing to do.
- We get to have a say in what we do.
- It's pretty relaxed.
- We get to do things together, just our class. We haven't argued or shouted at each other even once.
- There's always something to do, we can go and do things and jump around, and in school we just have to sit still. We need that kind of chance to release some energy. Otherwise it would come out in some worse way.
- When we tell them that we wish to do something, we get to do it. They would probably even let us try the drums, if someone wanted to.
- There we can play for example a game of trust. One falls down and the others catch him. There's no teasing in circus school. But there's shouting and swearing here in class.
- In there we all just focus on doing our own thing, many of us find interesting things, then we'll fight less.

## The special needs class for young people

The young people in the special needs class have various kinds of diagnoses, but what they have in common is that they are between ages of 14 and 17, which is a very challenging phase in puberty. According to their teacher, students this age do not want to study. But the circus lessons require the students to put in some effort to get results. The teacher in the special needs class had been expecting to see the young people gain more skills during the circus practice, but they still seem to lack perseverance. For the most part, however, circus has met the teacher's expectations, and he hopes to continue the circus activity with his class. In his opinion, the group has not really aimed at learning the circus skills, but it has been more important to get them to try and do new things.

Nonetheless, the circus has clearly opened up a whole new world for the class. The young people have left the circus lesson in good spirits, but the mood does not necessarily last for a long time. The circus environment has become safe and familiar and that in itself creates positive associations.

In circus the young people realise that they are all very different. Some of the young people will lose some of their arrogance when they see that some of their friends are better at the tricks than they are. A young person who thinks of himself as really tough might realise that he suddenly cannot climb up a rope because he has a fear of heights.

The young people's attitude towards circus is somewhat reserved. Some think of it as an activity where they are free to do what they want. However, others find it boring and would rather be doing something else, like woodwork. Many of them do like the circus:

*"The final circus performances have been the best, because we've had the chance to show what we can do. It really is the best feeling when others get to see what we've learned. I can't help it, that it's so great, getting to show-off a little. At first it's really nerve-wracking standing in the dark, but that helps to succeed in the more difficult tricks, I know I can absolutely nail them. Being nervous is a part of the thing; it is impossible to perform well without being a little bit nervous."*

*"It's always been fun to practice the tricks; we've gotten to see that it is possible to find humour in all kinds of things."*

*"It's funny when someone has been saying how they can do all the circus tricks, but then when he tries he fails, and then I've actually managed it."*

### **In the words of a young circus participant:**

The best things about circus are getting to practice together and the moment when the tricks succeed. We get to try out different activities and everyone has their basic stuff that they practice whenever possible. We do a lot of things here and we work on a lot of things. P.E. is usually more one-sided and limited – it would do them good to try circus there too. In regular P.E. it's possible to be trampled over in football for example without having any training. Here in circus everyone is more or less a beginner. No one is pushed aside here. It's possible to start circus by doing some pretty simple tricks. That will give confidence to do more.

It's very motivating, wanting to get to circus in time. It would be nice to be always able to come to practice and participate in all the circus instruction. Circus creates variation and it picks up the mood. We have many other projects in the workshop class but this is one of the best. We can talk about these same things with the other kids and watch how everyone develops.

In the beginning we went through all the different activities. When we had experience from all of them, we could decide what we wanted to focus on. I have learned everything pretty well and I've gotten a hang of this. I'm really excited about this. This circus thing has really made us trust in ourselves, trust that we have the energy and that we have the motivation to try more.

### **The young people talk about their other hobbies and how circus is different:**

- I play computer games at home, circus is more active.
- Circus is more about doing things by hand and learning new things
- I like to play a dance game, circus is easier physically.
- I like to work out, and circus is a little bit easier physically, but it takes more skill.
- I spend most of my free time on the computer, in circus we use part of the time doing things together as a group.
- My hobbies are writing and rapping, circus is more physical.
- My hobbies are music, art, dancing, drawing, poetry, taking photographs, circus is more physical and there's more performing.
- A lot "sportier" than my other hobbies.
- I don't really do a lot of other sports, except swimming. In circus we have to practice our motor skills and I hate it, I'll never learn the tricks.
- I've played ice-hockey and football; circus is more an individual sport than footie or hockey.
- Dancing, among others, has been a hobby of mine for a long time; circus is a lot freer and more fun.

## The young people in rehabilitating education

The young people in rehabilitating education have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, ADHD, psychological disorders, behavioural disorders; many of them have co-occurring disorders. The instructors find that circus is particularly helpful for them, and want to continue with the activity. With these students, the impact of circus is more psychological and social than physical. Due to the circus practice the young people have better self-esteem and their interpersonal skills have improved. The activity gives them confidence, teaches them new skills and allows them to succeed at something.

Circus activity is particularly beneficial for students who want to try new things and who are not afraid to fail. Circus has least impact on those who prefer to remain in their comfort zone.

## 2.2. Circus for Children

According to the survey of primary school children, circus activity gives them many things to smile about. Circus makes them happy and it is nice for them to be in motion. Based on the answers, many of the children have been inspired to be more physically active thanks to circus. Circus gets even the smaller participants to concentrate on the practice. Almost all of the children feel that it is acceptable to fail in circus and that failing doesn't matter. Many of the children feel that they have become braver because of the circus activity. Almost all of the children state that they have learned new skills. Sometimes a child might even get compliments from his or her friends. Over half of the children in the primary school children's groups wish to continue with the circus activity. A few are a little bit more hesitant, saying "I might maybe take it on as a hobby".

Social circus has been organised for first and second graders with attention deficits whose class size has been reduced. The pupils in smaller classes are offered plenty of other activities too, so it is difficult to determine which of the effects can be attributed to circus. However, circus does improve the group dynamics. The pupils have learned to support and admire each other. The impact is often small, but significant.

The teachers join in the activity. This has helped them to bond with the pupils. The great thing about circus is that everyone fails sometimes – that just means that more practice is needed. This is a good model to apply in school too. The children learn to tolerate failing in circus, because the mistakes are made in a playful setting, and is part of the game. During the school lessons the teacher may have reminded the children that if they can make mistakes in circus, they can also make mistakes in class.



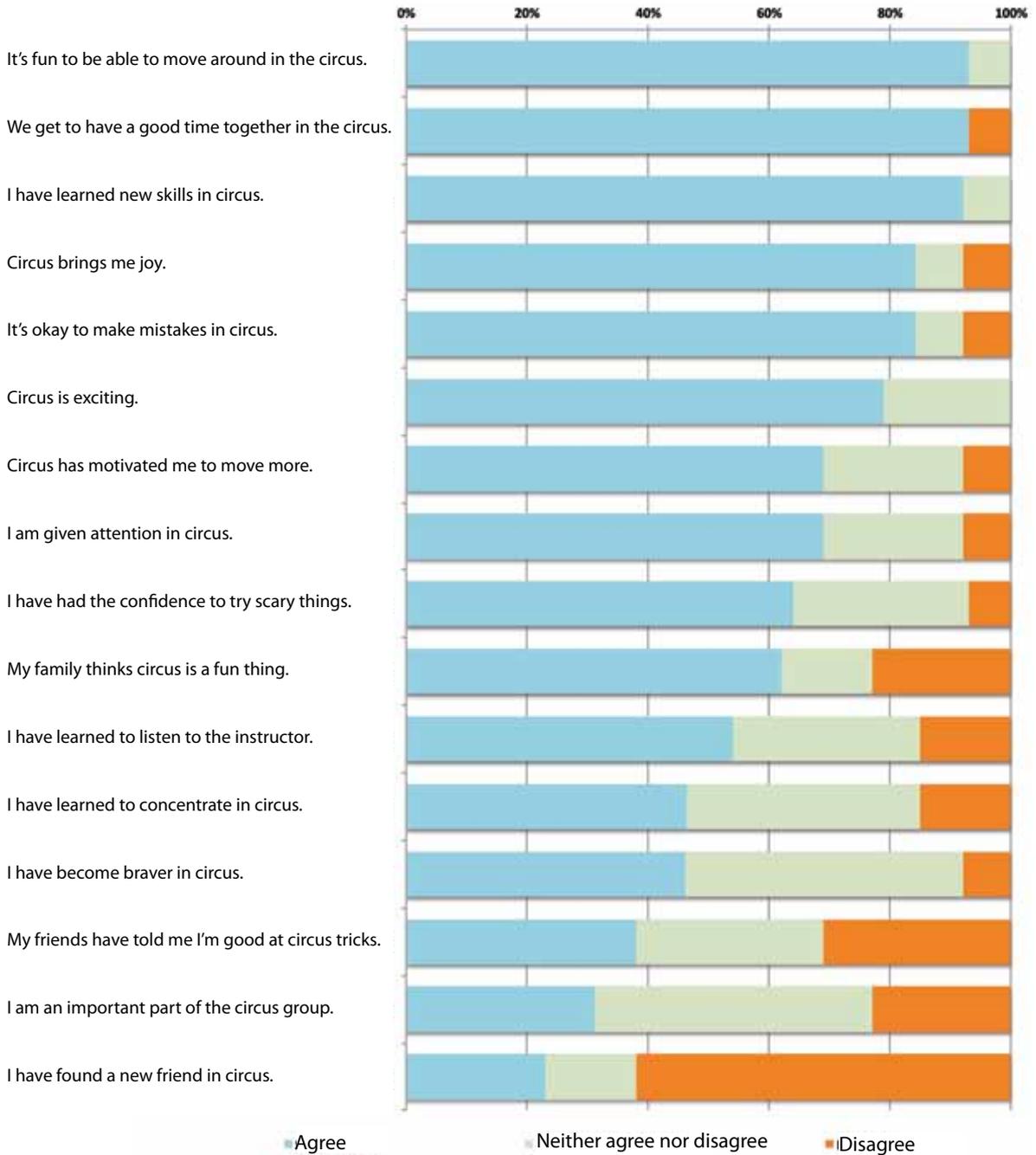
Sorin Sirkus, Mia Bergius

### **The young people answer how they would briefly describe circus to their friends:**

- You have to go and see.
- Crazy fun.
- Try it at least once.
- It's nice.
- Different from anything else.
- You'll get to do a lot of different kinds of stuff.
- The joy of doing things together.
- There's always something new to experience.
- Circus is the best.
- Circus is completely different from other hobbies.
- Easygoing, but takes skill.
- Whimsical silliness.
- Freaky circus.
- Learning new things.
- Laughing together.
- In circus you will learn all the different circus activities lead by the instructors.
- Fascinating, if you are interested in that kind of thing.
- Challenging but relaxing activity.

**The results are based on the interviews with 33 young people and 7 instructors.**

Figure 1: The pupils' answers to the statements. 13 respondents.



A few of the pupils did not like being touched until they were introduced to the circus activity. In circus they are happy to take part in human pyramids, for example. Nonetheless, aversion to touch persists outside of the circus. A singular example is a pupil who, according to the teacher, never used to laugh but had really burst out laughing a few times in the circus.

Figure 1 presents the answers given by the children in small group education. The results are generally positive. However, only every fifth respondent reported having made a new friend, possibly because the children already knew each other.

The teacher explains that it is often very difficult for the children with Asperger's to tolerate differences and to be touched, but circus activity provides a great opportunity to practice these things. For some of the children circus is the only time of the week they are physically active. Being able to perform the movements and tricks correctly develops the children's self-esteem. The pupils are in a good mood after the circus sessions, even when they might have been listless and restless before. The teacher thinks that circus also promotes social activity. According to the survey conducted with the pupils, the children in the Asperger's and occupational therapy group are at least somewhat excited about circus and most of them have gained at least a little more confidence. These pupils report that circus has a small impact on them; whereas, for example, the young circus participants from the suburbs estimate that the effect of circus has been great.

In the initial measurement carried out with the school age children, the parents noted that the children are generally happy with their lives, and have a healthy amount of self-esteem and believe that they have positive characteristics. The children have good relationships with other people; they are outgoing and have enjoyed being part of a group. The survey indicates that the families spend time together and that the parents have good relationships with their children.

However, they have detected some shortcomings in the children's ability to concentrate and a lack of patience in group interaction. It may also be difficult for some children to believe that they are as good as the other children. Over half of the children occasionally suffer from loneliness and four children out of ten are occasionally depressed for a longer period, they have disagreements with others which are difficult to resolve, and they want to isolate themselves. Quite a few of the children also report a lack of confidence in expressing themselves. About 40 % of the children do not have a hobby that requires regular physical exercise and almost 20 % have no leisure activities at all.

The parents generally hope that the activity will give their children the courage to express themselves, learn new skills, increase their energy and exercise more. These goals have been reached in the circus practice. Many of the parents were hoping that their children would make new friends and get to experience a sense of togetherness with the other children. The survey illustrates that every child has indeed had at least one friend in circus and most of them report a sense of belonging.

Circus has been seen to have a very positive impact on the self-esteem, because it has increased the children's body awareness as they mature. Circus has given the children faith in their own abilities, which has enabled them to find the joy of performing. However, the children still need some more patience and concentration.

### 2.3. Children's and Young People's Experiences from Circus Activity

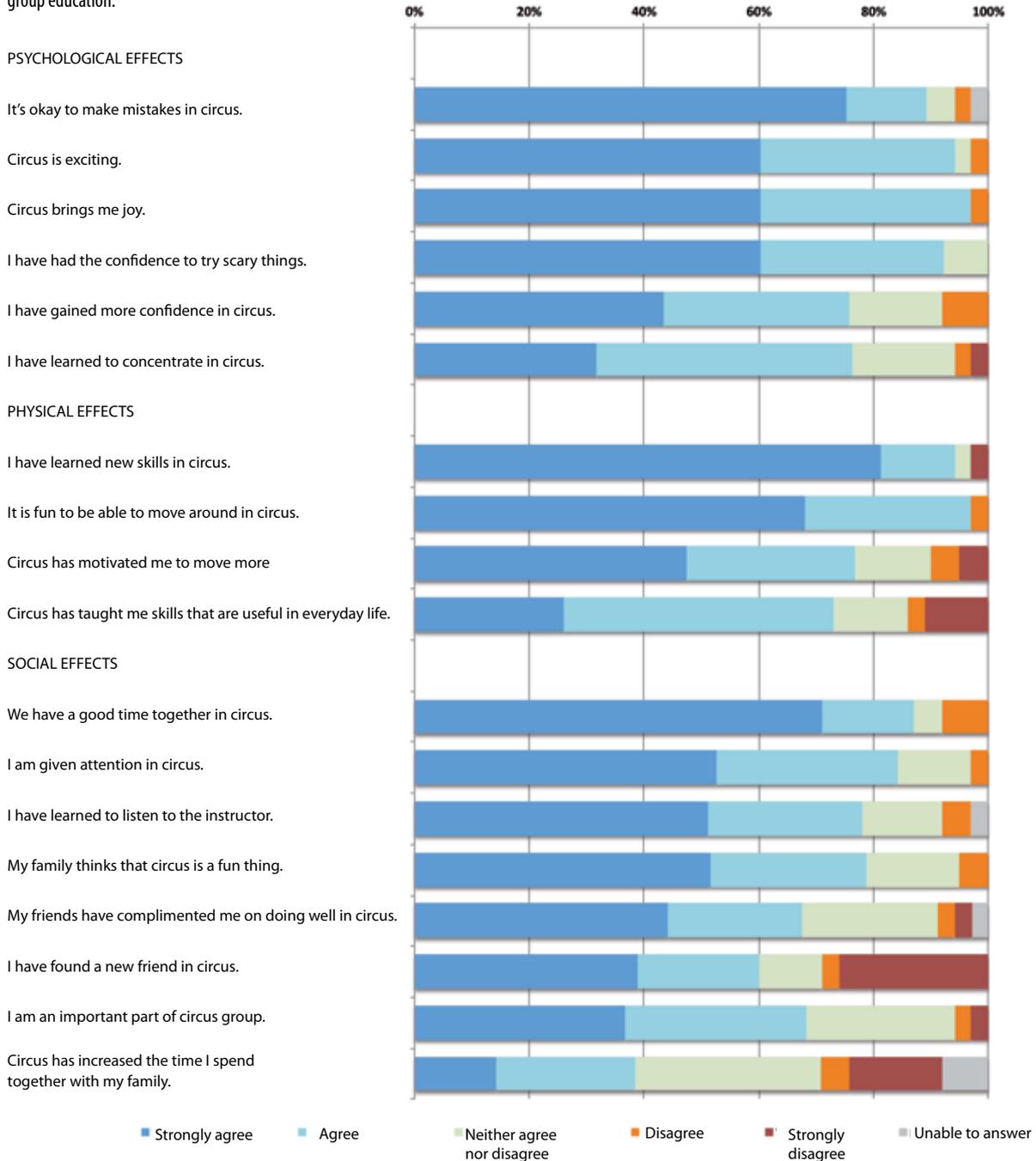
The survey conducted with children and young people reveals that almost all of the respondents regard circus as an exciting and joyful addition to their routines. The young people enjoy the physical activities in the circus and many have been inspired to try other kinds of physical activities too. Nearly all of the young people have acquired new skills, such as twirling a hoop, doing tricks on the diabolo, juggling, doing handstands, walking on a wire and riding a unicycle. The young people will usually find a favourite circus activity, because there are so many to choose from. Seven out of ten have noticed that the skills acquired in circus have been helpful in other areas of life.

Circus has encouraged the young people to try more demanding stunts and many feel that they have become braver. Circus allows making mistakes in a positive sense, without having to be embarrassed. They all get to see that the tricks aren't easy for anyone, but that trial and error help you to get gradually better. The feeling they get when they succeed is overwhelming. The young people feel that they have been encouraged to try new things overall and also in certain specific stunts such as doing hand stands. For one young person, the *"fear of heights is a distant memory"*. Performing in front of others also increases courage. Applause is rewarding and makes the children feel good about themselves.

Circus gives the young people a chance have a good time together. Depending on the composition of the group, many have formed at least one new friendship. The majority of the young people feel that they have learned to concentrate better on the more challenging tricks and to listen to the instructor's advice. Generally the children and the young people believe that their opinions are taken seriously during the sessions and that they can help choose the exercises and tricks that will be practiced.

The young people are capable of explaining what they like about circus. Learning new things is usually considered particularly inspiring. The most popular equipment is the trampoline, the tissue and the trapeze. Some of the young people think that the best things in circus are the motivating instructors; for others it's their friends. Some of the young people mention that the warm-up games at the start of the lesson are a particularly enjoyable way to let loose. Many like everything about the circus.

**Figure 2:** The results from a survey conducted with young people on the effects of circus activity. The results have been compiled from the responses given by young people with Asperger’s diagnosis, an occupational therapy group, a suburban circus group and the children and young people in lower secondary small group education.



Almost every one of the young people wish that they could continue with the circus practice after the course has finished. The young people who gave answers in the circus survey couldn't really find anything in circus that they would change. It seems that circus brings out the best in the young people and reveals their talent in an enjoyable way.

Figure 2 presents the answers to the survey conducted with children and young people. The respondents have experienced significant psychological, physically and social benefits from circus.

### **The young people explain: The most memorable thing in circus has been...**

- how nice the instructors are
- everything we've done and practising for the show
- learning and all the fun we've had
- free time and creating performances
- the shows, because it's really fun to go and perform to others
- well I don't know, it's fun to perform and stuff, but I don't know what to say
- failing at something and succeeding in something else
- great teachers!
- being helped by the leaders and that they teach fun and great things
- having a good time
- the spring / Christmas shows
- learning
- hanging on the tissue
- the trampoline
- all the fun and developing
- all the awesome stuff
- succeeding in the tricks
- succeeding and failing
- the stunts
- the Christmas show
- having fun together and succeeding at the tricks
- this whole experience of the circus project and having been a part of this and having been given the chance to come here
- everything is memorable
- learning new things and tricks!
- all the great stuff and fun movements

**The results are based on the survey responses given by seventy-two 16-year-olds and one teacher.**

## 3. FAMILIES

The families who use the child welfare services are dealing with crises such as a divorce. Family services and the rehabilitation period in the family crisis centre aid the families to create a balance in their life situation, help them find the strength to handle problems and support the parents in raising their children. The goals are family-specific: a better daily rhythm, better interaction within the family or finding shared activities and things that support the family cohesion. Social circus has been introduced as a way to support the families and it has found its place within the scope of the family services.

The instructors in family work and family crises centre report that circus has produced joy for both children and parents. It offers the parents and the children something fun to do together, which also teaches them how to work together. The joy of success is a special benefit of circus. Failing is not seen as failing, because the point of the activities is doing them together. Circus develops the interaction within the families when the parents learn to talk to their children in instructive and encouraging ways. The employees of the centre and the parents are equals in the circus sessions, because everyone is there to be directed and to learn new things. The case worker becomes closer to the family, which advances the family work and collaborative solutions.

Circus activity also has many benefits for the families that do not need child welfare services. In the baby circus and the circus for small children the parents get to spend relaxing and re-energising moments with their children. It's good for the parents to see the joy of their children when they learn new exciting things. Circus activity helps the parents get more accustomed to handling their small children and doing things with them. The parents notice that the children are not made of glass, because the personnel make sure that all the tricks are safe. Circus offers the family a shared hobby, gives the parents the joy of seeing their children succeed and strengthens the parents' idea of their children's abilities.

### 3.1. Family Circus

#### Circus in child welfare family work and in a family rehabilitation centre

Circus activity has been organised once a week in the child welfare family work and family rehabilitation centre. The employees and the families participate together and the practice

sessions are led by a circus instructor. Based on the interviews with nine of the directors in the family rehabilitation centre and two of the child welfare family workers, the families have been happy to take part in circus. The children eagerly look forward to the circus sessions. Circus is something the children and parents do together. Everyone is in good spirits from the moment they walk in, and everyone has a good time. Getting to see the families sharing good moments together puts the centre employees in a good mood.

The employees in the family rehabilitation centre have noticed that the circus develops children's motor skills. Upon entering a rehabilitation period the children may have been afraid to climb into a bunk bed, but later were seen climbing the wall bars all the way to the top. It takes only a few circus sessions to improve the children's body awareness.

The family work and family rehabilitation centre employees have noticed that it is beneficial to the interaction within the family that the parents engage in the activities with their children. They learn to function as a unit. When a father holds up his child, the child learns to trust him. The effect of the circus practice is also visible in the everyday life, for example, when a mother dresses her child: getting the child dressed is easier when the mother has gotten over her need to be excessively careful. The circus has allowed the children to see that the parents aren't perfect either.

Family work and family rehabilitation centres also arrange other types of recreational activities for the families. Circus is made special by the joy of succeeding which often goes easily undetected in other types of activities. Circus is capable of creating a varied selection of activities: there is something for everyone to do. The wellbeing effects of circus might be attained by other methods too, but it would require that various activities are organised side by side. For example game playing helps develop various skills. Different crafts develop precision and dexterity. However, not everyone will get excited about the same thing. Circus offers a variety of exercises. Regardless of the cultural background of the participants, something in the circus will be familiar.

The family workers have noticed that the families become more daring in the circus sessions. Especially the fathers become more comfortable giving advice and directing their children: they seem warmer and more caring when talking to the children, they don't just bark out orders. Circus promotes better family relations and interaction. Both parents encourage the child during circus practice and they are happy when the child succeeds. In other areas of life the parents have usually set their children high demands and have not been able to pay sufficient attention when the child succeeds at everyday tasks.

The centre staff has noticed that when the circus practice is linked with family work, the sense of togetherness within the family increases. The families have gradually gotten closer to other families too, however, this development takes a bit more time. The instructors in the family rehabilitation centre have realised that circus promotes the closeness of a family when they attempt the same tricks and share experiences with the other families.

## Circus's effects on family work

As a part of child welfare work, circus provides a welcome counterbalance to working with the families and dealing with the more difficult issues. Circus reveals a different side of both the parents and the family workers. The employees are occasionally released from the responsibility of leading the activity when the circus instructors step in. This gives the employees a chance to fully engage in the activity, to observe the families and have a good time with them. The circus also changes the parents' attitudes toward the staff and they may have free conversations with each other. Many children are naturally social, but circus makes them even better at connecting with others. The children practice circus with their parents and might invite the staff to join in. Circus broadens the employee's role next to the parents when they are getting instructed themselves.



Cultural centre Pii Poo, Riitta Yrjönen

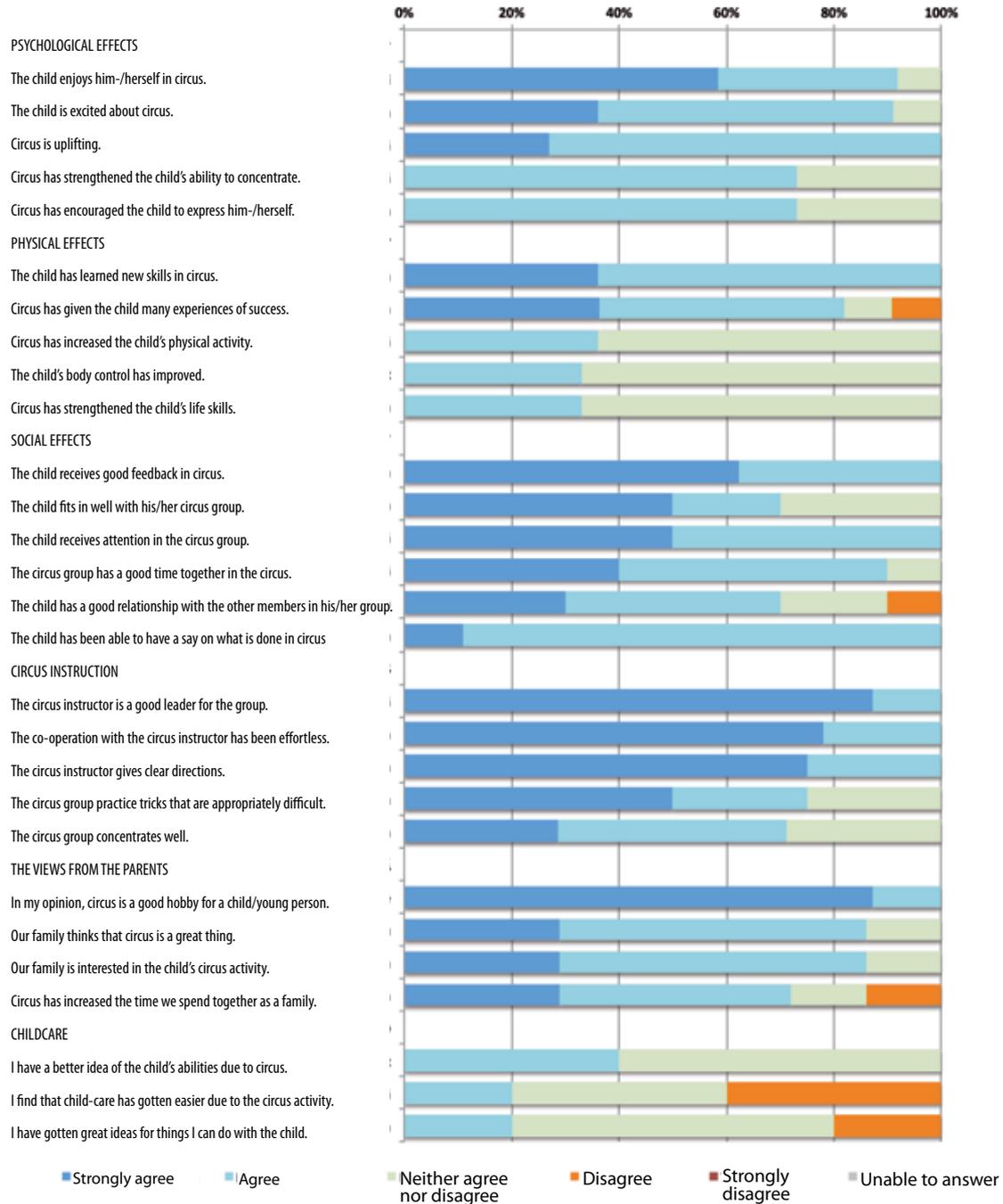
The social workers have gotten ideas for developing their own work and working methods in circus. Circus helps them get closer to the families, which gives the work a sense of humanity. Things are discussed openly and honestly, but in a softer manner. The workers feel that there is a trust created between themselves and the parents, which makes it easier to work with them on serious problems.

Figure 3 presents the answers given by the family circus participants concerning the effects of circus activity. They are very satisfied with the circus direction as a whole. They are also convinced that circus has social effects. However, circus activity seems to have had very little impact on the problems of child care.



Oulun Tähtisirkus, Katja Pikkarainen

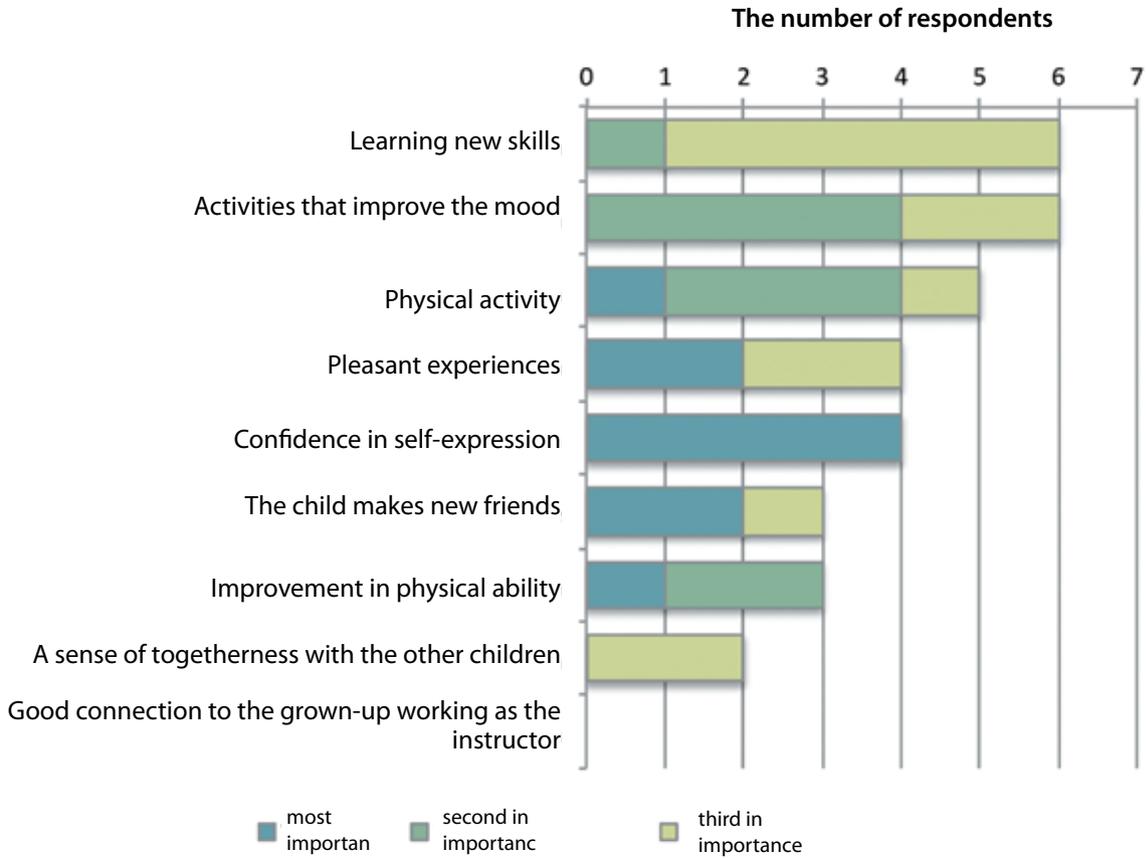
Figure 3: The views of the family circus participants on the effects of circus, 12 respondents.



### Comments made by the family work instructors on the circus activity

- The people we see are sometimes really depressed and in a bad shape, but in circus they have shown a different side to themselves, they've gotten more joy and strength – it can be good for the children too to see their parents happy.
- We've made the kinds of observations that may be continued elsewhere in rehabilitation, we see for example how the parent participates.
- It's positive that even though there are 16-year-olds as well as those who have just learned to walk, everyone is given attention and offered suitable things to do. That would be a great challenge if we organised the activities ourselves.
- I remember a game with chiffon scarves. Everyone was eager to throw and to catch. There was laughter and running, some of the scarves were taken from others too.
- Blowing soap bubbles with the family was wonderful, it was great to see the families share these good moments.
- First time in the fall, we saw how excited everyone was, that group was really into it. These big guys doing the stunts. It was so great to see how eager they were to do things. The most touching moment that first time was hearing a child give out a really loud belly laugh.
- The gym always looked the same, but with the circus assembled in there, there was a completely different atmosphere of anticipation: what fun things are we going to do today. I'm sure that the clients had that same feeling.
- Doing things together and the joy.
- People always look forward to circus.
- Circus is a place where it is impossible not to be successful. Failing isn't failing, because this isn't really about the outcome.
- Skills develop without even realising it.
- Mistakes are made, but that will only encourage the children to try again. Kids will easily quit things elsewhere.
- No one has ever said that they can't do something in circus. They talk about the things they were good at.
- Absolutely vital to have the circus here. There are no two ways about it. It changes the face of our activity so much. It would be hard to come up with many other activities in stead. It's such a big part of our thing. Interfering with that would change the way we do things, for everybody.
- If I was looking for work and I heard that they have circus there, I would definitely apply for that job.
- One father of a family had had the energy to attend the circus practice regularly for a year and a half. The highlight of the last session happened when this man stood up to walk on the wire. The circus instructor gave him high praise and encouraged him, his eyes began to shine and he stuck his chest out. It was a fine moment for everyone who was there.

Figure 4 demonstrates that the parents of the families attending the family centre have expected to see their children and young people gain the confidence to express themselves. They also expect their children to learn new skills, get more energy and become more active physically. According to the surveys, circus has met these goals.



**Figure 4:** The views of the parents who participated in the family circus at the family rehabilitation centre on what they thought of as the most important things they expected from the circus activity before it started, 12 respondents.

## 3.2. Family Circus for Small Children

Family circus for small children captivates families with 2–3-year-olds. The families who participated thought that circus is very enjoyable and increases their personal resources. The parents have experienced that what is particularly rewarding and memorable is the joy and glee that shines from the children's entire being when they get to experience new and exciting things. One family reported: *"The circus as a whole has been a really big thing for our child. We have always gone to the circus practice with so much excitement and every session has given us things to talk about until the next time. It's been such a pleasure to see how excited our child is"*.

Children in particular learn new physical skills in the circus's positive atmosphere through trial and error. Circus lets the parents feel the joy of success through their children, and it has strengthened their idea of their child's abilities. Families with small children may participate in other shared physical activities that let them enjoy physical activity, such as going on outings together and swimming.

Circus has increased the time the family members spend with each other, it has generated many interesting topics of conversation and strengthened the parents' relationship with their children. *"The kids are even proud of their circus skills and they talk about them with their parents and grandparents. Circus follows us all the way home and the kids put on performances to their parents"*, one mother explains. The circus participants include both mothers and fathers with their children. In one family with many children, circus gives a chance for one of the children to spend time alone with his mother. Circus is their thing.

The circus instructors receive much gratitude for their work. The parents participating in the course have found that the co-operation with the instructor has been very effortless and that the directions have been quite clear. The difficulty of the tricks has also been seen as appropriate for the participants' level. The families have also received skilful individual and family-specific instruction. Leading a family circus group requires strong professional skill. *"What our regular instructors do is excellent! It's inspiring and encouraging, but there is still a sense of 'order' in the group. Other instructors still have a little bit more to learn, at least when it comes to directing these little kids. Even though there is supposed to be a certain amount of noise and high spirits, the instructor should be able to stay in control"*, one family explained.

According to the circus instructor, circus is a place where nothing is forbidden, and that makes it different from being at home. Furthermore, the children are not expected to like all of the tricks. Even running is allowed in circus, but the children are still able to focus on practising the tricks too.

One family summarised the best part of circus as follows: *"Lots of new things in a safe environment directed by good instructors in an encouraging atmosphere with the family"*. These were the things that other families also mentioned as the most significant characteristics of circus practice.

**The results are based on a survey conducted with families with children under school age, 5 in total, and the interview carried out with a circus instructor and three of the parents.**



Monitaideyhdistys Piste, Joonas Martikainen

### 3.3 Baby Circus

Baby circus consists of fun sessions where the parents and the baby get to do circus tricks together. Meanwhile the parents become more accustomed to handling the baby and the parent realises that the small person is not so easily breakable. They learn new ways to hold the baby via balancing acts and games that can be practiced at home too. Circus has an effect on the baby's body control and mobility. *"Practising with the exercise ball seemed to help getting started with the exercise. The babies will bravely try to do the movements without any help and come up with their own. It was fun to know how the exercises have the effects, on the motor skills and body control. When we went to the physical therapist I remembered that these things were discussed in the circus",* stated one mother.

Baby circus offers activities that are different from those that people normally engage in at home. Circus practice also shows in the baby's mood: *"That's where we got started just being silly together, after the first time. Still, the exercises are done with safety in mind, and every family practices only the movements that feel good to them"* one of the mothers explains. She continues: *"Baby circus is fun and wild, a mixture of musical playschool and baby gym. I had no idea what to expect in advance. It was really surprising to actually have the courage to do some pretty wild things".*

Baby circus also lets the families turn to each other for company. From time to time the parents befriend each other – after all, they have children of the same age and a hobby in common. *"We originally came to the baby circus so that our child would meet other babies, because there are no other children of the same age in our family or among our friends. We got to know another baby family and we've been very much involved since then",* a mother says. Baby circus is a welcome pastime to enrich the families' daily lives and the time they spend together.

**The description is based on the answers given to the baby circus survey by five families, and an interview with one of the mothers.**

## 4. ELDERLY PARTICIPANTS

The goal of the circus for the elderly is to bring joy to the daily lives of the elderly, to broaden their chances of self-expression, to create opportunities for them to learn and succeed, and to organise experiences of doing things together and participating in group activities. In addition, the activities noticeably improve the wellbeing of the elderly care personnel and the interaction of the entire staff in the retirement home.<sup>13</sup>

This study demonstrates that the elderly people enjoy themselves in the circus. Most of the elderly approach the circus practice with great concentration and make use of their strengths. Circus also promotes good team spirit. Circus is different from the other leisure activities in the retirement home, because it creates possibilities for playful togetherness and a degree of surrendering to the practice in a way that allows the elderly and the staff to interact as equals. Everyone finds his or her own interests and roles within the group.

The research shows that for many of the elderly, circus improves their ability to be more considerate of other people, to co-operate in their treatment and to accept being touched. Circus has increased the social interaction among the elderly and developed their courage to engage in the activity. Positive mood and being able to perform make the elderly less anxious and increases their tolerance of pain; this makes their daily activities run more smoothly. With the help of circus the nurses have gotten a better connection with the elderly as well as a better sense of their abilities. Circus has also been seen to improve the physical mobility of some of the elderly.

### Effects on the mood

The nurses and directors working in a retirement home have noticed that circus has a positive impact on the mood of most of the elderly participants. This becomes apparent in the interviews with nine employees in a retirement home. Survey questionnaires were completed by the nurses on behalf of eight residents.

The elderly enjoy themselves and are re-energised in the circus (figure 5). Most of the elderly approach the circus practice with concentration and make use of their abilities. They learn new skills and experience the joy of increasing their skills and their own competence. The instructors can tell this from the smiles, laughter, grateful words and willingness to try new circus tricks. One of the nurses explains how the face of a 96-year-old senior lit up when circus showed him what he was capable of doing. The high spirits last for a long time after circus and there is a positive atmosphere throughout the group. One of the elderly people said that circus helped him forget all his troubles and complaints.

13 Kuitu, Pilvi (2013). Sosiaalisen sirkuksen toiminnan vaikutukset vanhusten hoivaympäristössä. Final project, Tampere University of Applied Sciences.

Figure 5: The views given by the family and the nursing staff of the elderly circus participants on the effects of circus activity, the number of respondents 8.

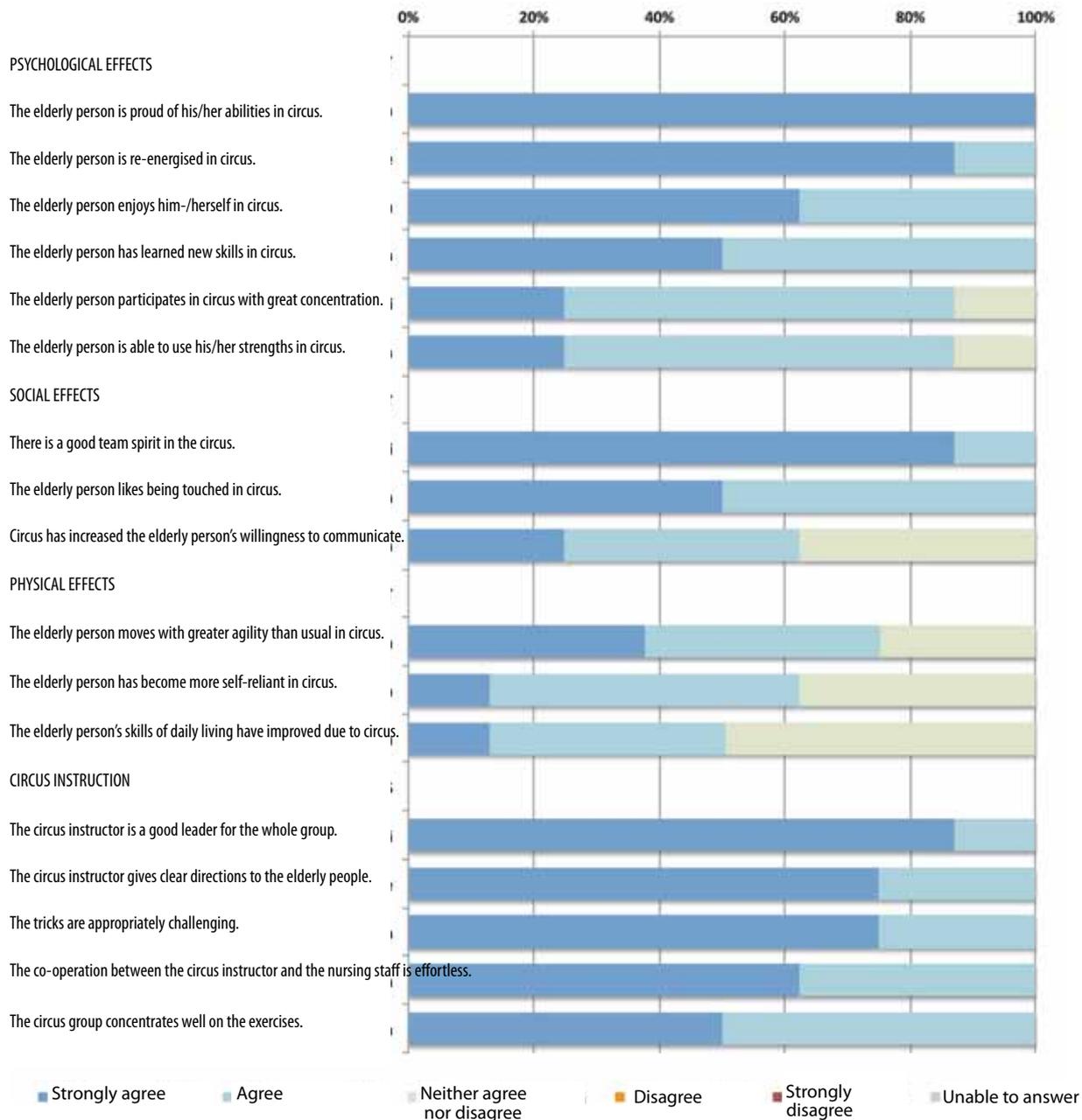
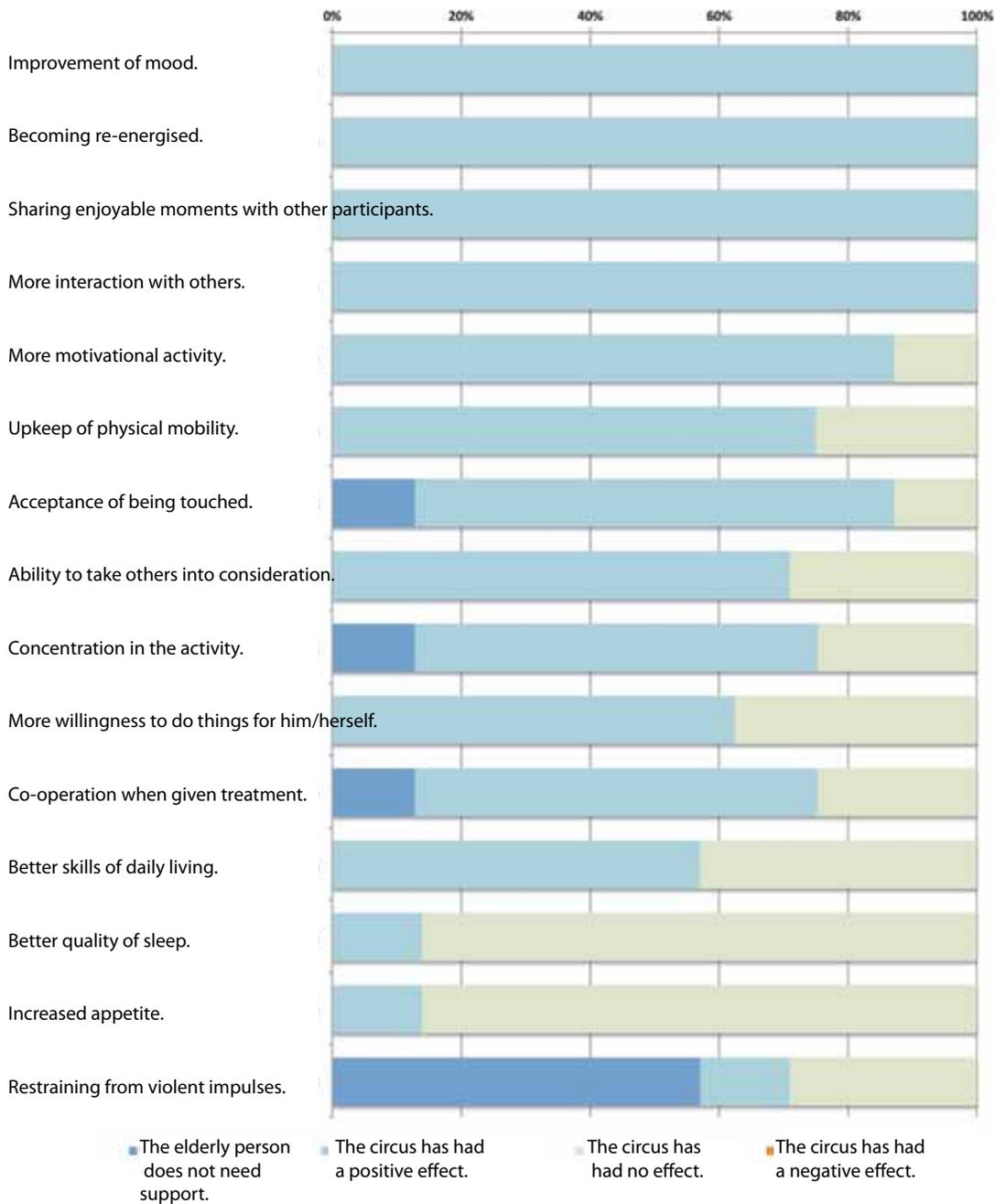


Figure 6: The views of the family and nursing staff of the elderly circus participants on the areas where the senior has needed support, and on the kind of impact circus has had on the different needs for support. Eight respondents.



The aim of the circus activity for the elderly is to get everyone excited about trying out different tricks and about giving performances. According to the nurses, not all of the elderly are thrilled at the prospect of performing, but this attitude usually changes when they see that everyone else is excited. Although circus is voluntary, the residents of the retirement home are willing to go back to the circus. This can be seen as proof of how much enjoyment circus produces and how tempting the activity is. One nurse described a resident who participates in circus but not in any of the other activities in the retirement home. One resident who had been suffering from occasional bouts of depression cheered up when he was told about the circus. According to the nurses the anticipation of the circus sessions helps to lift his depression.

The clients who suffer from memory loss may not remember having participated in the circus practise. However, the nurses state that even they do sometimes ask whether 'today is the day when we have circus.' Circus becomes a routine which people with memory loss able to recall. Photographs taken during the circus sessions can bring a smile to the lips of an elderly person with memory impairment.

### Social effects

According to the survey, the circus promotes team spirit and social interaction among the elderly (figure 5). The nurses think that, for many of the clients, circus improves the ability to be more considerate towards other people, to collaborate during treatment and accept being touched (figure 6).



cultural centre Pii Poo, Riitta Yrjönen

The staff of the nursing home feel that the best part about circus activity is that the elderly get to do things together, especially in pairs, and they get to spend time with the other inhabitants overall. Touching another person is natural in circus and the elderly like to be touched. The social effects show particularly well in those seniors who have not joined in any other group activities: in circus they are eager to connect with the others and might make the effort of getting to know the others even after the circus session is over.

Circus develops the courage to join in the activity. It might take some time before a shy and withdrawn elderly person has the courage to participate. *"I caught on so late, I thought it wasn't for me, but after I went I realised it was actually great fun. I didn't need to know how to do anything either. I'm so excited about it now!"* exclaimed one resident.

### Physical effects

Many nurses in elderly care centres have been surprised to see the physical abilities of their elderly clients. Circus has been proven to improve the physical mobility of some elderly participants. However, the nurses estimate that the circus sessions, which take place only once a week, do not have significant effects on the physical wellbeing of their patient. The social and psychological impact of the circus on the elderly is considered more significant.

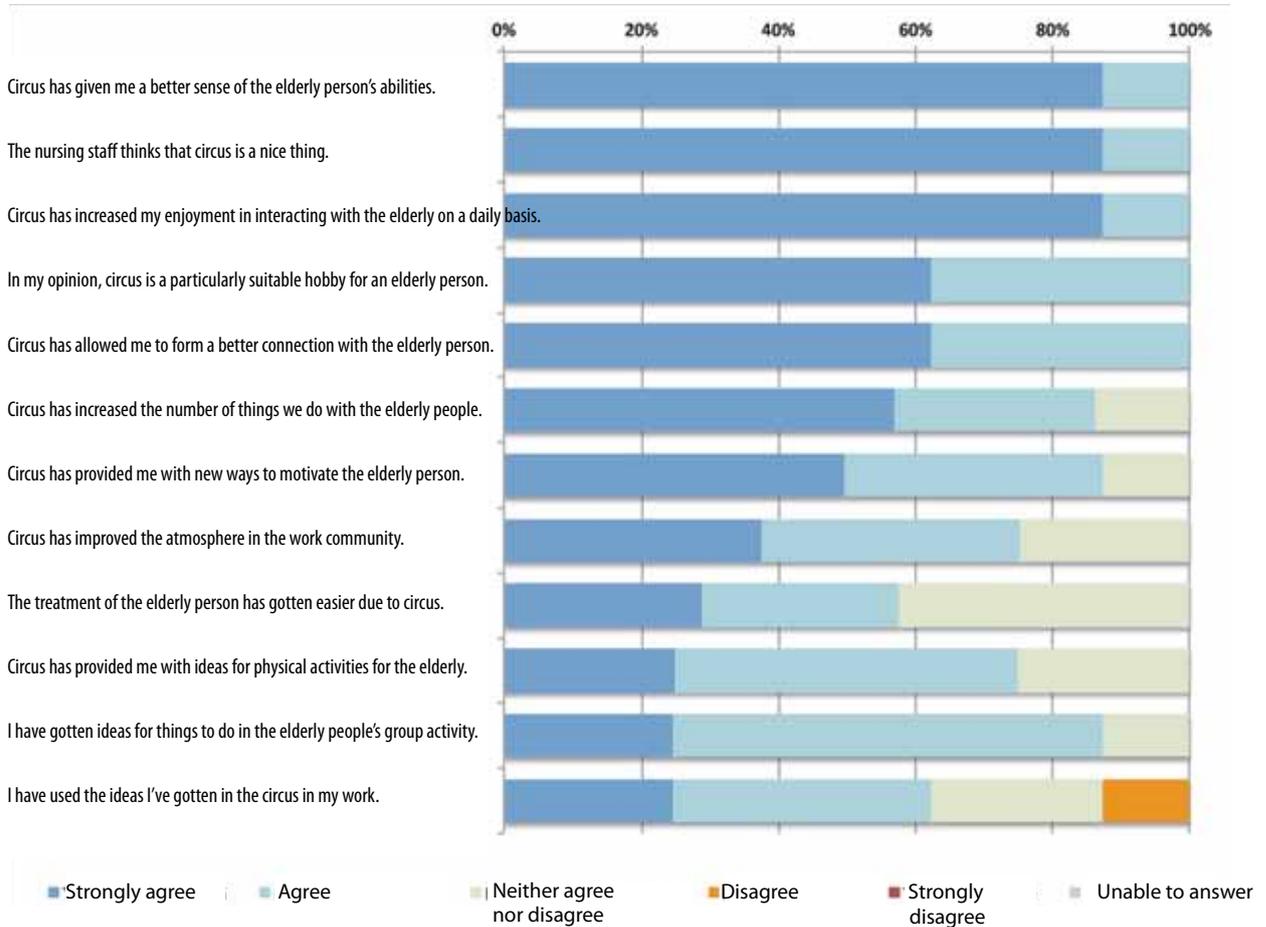
Circus has become something the inhabitants can look forward to every week. That is why they are more energetic when carrying out their ordinary daily routines. The nursing staff believes that circus practice also contributes to the seniors' self-reliance and strengthens their abilities to perform activities of daily living. Circus activity has been noticed to have benefits when caring for the elderly, because of the improvement in mood during the group activity decreases anxiety while increasing tolerance of pain and discomfort.

### Impact of the activity in relation to the nurses and the work community

The nursing staff also benefited from circus. Circus has improved their connection with the elderly and given them better sense of their abilities (figure 7). Circus has taught the workers some new ways to motivate the elderly people and given them ideas for group activities and physical exercises. It has also increased co-operation among the nurses, improving the workplace atmosphere.

Thanks to the circus instructors, the staff gets a chance to participate with the elderly. Circus places the nurse and the patient in equal positions, because they are both learning new things and can be together without the nurse having to give the instruction, which is what often happens in nurse-patient relationships. The nurse and a patient may develop a close relationship if they are regularly paired in the circus. The nurses become friends with the elderly. This is what

Figure 7: The views on circus activity given by the family and the nursing staff of the elderly circus participants. Eight respondents.



distinguishes the circus from the other activities in the retirement home. Nurses and their patients can bond and learn to trust each other.

Besides circus, there are many other activities available in the retirement home such as handicrafts, day activity, reading, sit-down dancing and bingo. The staff's attitude toward circus was originally skeptical, but they were pleasantly surprised. Many people working in elderly care have been astonished at how much the elderly people want to perform and how capable they are. The inhabitants have been eager to participate in the circus sessions. *"For once we get to act silly and be childish",* said one resident.

### **Nurses in elderly care discuss the experiences and the surprising moments in circus:**

- A withdrawn senior has found the ability to perform.
- An inhabitant in a retirement home throws the ball and kneels down to form a pyramid with the others.
- She is a really wonderful dancer.
- After a few sessions, the elderly person arrives at the circus without any assistance.
- The elderly person has been able to do all kinds of things during the circus sessions as soon as she gained the courage to try.
- Circus has really gotten them to let loose quite freely.
- The elderly person has succeeded in some pretty wild acrobatics.
- The elderly person hasn't been previously interested in doing anything new, but circus has motivated her to try the different equipment.
- Circus allows the elderly people to break boundaries and participate in activities that they wouldn't be able to do otherwise in her everyday life.



Cultural centre Pii Poo, Susanna Lyly

The nurses have not had anything bad to say about the circus. A few of the elderly have experienced the transitions between the facilities as difficult, while one of the elderly people reported anxiety. Organising circus activity takes some effort on the part of the nursing staff, but they relate that the effort has been worth it. If there is something that the nurses did not like in circus, it is that they were not able to participate in every session because of the changing work shifts. Almost all of the residents are considered to have benefited from continuing the circus activity.

In general, circus is seen to be suitable for all seniors, because there is something for everyone. Some of them may only want to watch, but their role is equally important. *"We are really happy to see him going to circus with such enthusiasm. It's a bit of a miracle, actually, and we are so proud of him. He has talked to the nurses about his observations, about the things he has seen in circus. He has been watching all of them"*, one of the nurses said.

### Participant observation

The impact data collected with the surveys and interviews is complemented by video footage of the seniors' circus practice. Surveying and interviewing the participants and the nursing staff reveals new information on the observations they have made themselves during and after the circus sessions. However, the video footage, as it is, shows something that is difficult to measure and to put in words: the way the circus creates experiences, emotions, closeness and the elderly person opening up to interaction. The nursing staff has been seen to wipe away tears brought forth by seeing how happy and excited their patients are.

Research based on participant observation shows that when organising circus for the elderly it is important for all participants to join in the activity in ways that come most naturally to them. This guarantees that the circus activity is conducted with respect and appreciation for the elderly, in an atmosphere that is welcoming and safe. The instructors have an important role in creating such an atmosphere. Significant factors in making the circus activity successful are meticulous commitment to planning the sessions; having strong knowledge of the circus activities and carefully choosing the right ones; the ability to observe and take each participant into account; and being flexible in offering instruction. The amount of excitement and courage to approach the circus activity shown by the personnel has also encouraged the elderly to join in. After a tentative beginning, the elderly have enthusiastically taken part in trying out the different tricks and activities.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Kuitu, Pilvi (2013). Sosiaalisen sirkuksen toiminnan vaikutukset vanhusten hoivaympäristössä. Final project, Tampere University of Applied Sciences. Pages 37-39.

## 5. VISUALLY IMPAIRED PARTICIPANTS

Social circus has various effects on children with visual impairments. According to an expert in the rehabilitation of visually impaired children, they show improvements in their physical stamina and muscle tone. The social effects are particularly pronounced because the children join a group with the children who are just like them. Many have formed new friendships during the circus activity.

Circus activity organised for 7- 13-year-olds within the Effective Circus project has produced positive results. Most of the children have co-occurring disabilities such as hearing impairments, developmental disabilities or brain damage. All the children have past or ongoing experiences with physical rehabilitation.

The physical effects of circus are the most visible, particularly because they are easier to observe than the social or psychological effects. Many children show better muscular fitness, physical stamina and body perception, better quality of movement, mobility of the body and flexibility. A good example of this is a child who is paralysed on one side. His hand on that side does not function, but due to circus activity the weaker hand was activated and he was able to use it in the final performance of the circus.

The psychological effects are better manifested on an individual level. A good example is a girl with multiple disabilities who, according to her mother, has become more joyful and confident thanks to taking on circus as a hobby. She had not previously engaged in any kind of leisure activity at all. The girl has acquired more confidence, for example her use of space in circus is now more varied than before. Thus also her spatial perception has also improved. The girl has enjoyed giving performances which the girl's mother sees as wonderful.

The social effects are clearly manifested among the children, because they have the opportunity to collaborate with other participants who might have multiple disabilities. Children with disabilities can bond with others. The hobby may also bring families closer. For example, one girl has quite a long way to travel to circus practice. When her father drives her there and back, the two of them can time together. The journey has been something for them to share when it has been difficult to find anything else to do together. Another example is a family going through a divorce: although the children are upset by their parents' divorce, the circus has given the whole family the opportunity to work together. Everyone in the family is happy despite the situation.



The results of circus practice depend on what each of the participants wants. For instance, the group-specific goals for the visually impaired have been increasing interaction, developing self-expression, strengthening friendships, testing their limits and practicing balance and coordination. The activity has been supportive of these goals, the friendships have become stronger and everyone has tested their limits.

The activity of the instructor and the circus group is central for generating the effects of circus. The professionally capable instructors are clearly idolised by the children. The instructor's personality really matters. They are peers for the children which promotes team spirit and their sense of belonging. Another crucial factor in producing effects is the fact that circus is very creative, interactive and enjoyable. Even the more difficult exercises are carried out while using different pieces of equipment. The children get to be stars, they're allowed to do things they might never have tried. Circus is different from other activities because it is creative.

The children are obviously happy when performing and practicing. They do not drop out of practice because they are tired. The parents are proud of what their children can do.

**The results are based on an interview with a specialist in the care of children with visual disabilities.**

## 6. PARTICIPANTS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

The study shows that circus offers variation and revitalisation for the people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as for the people who take care of them. The people with disabilities are encouraged to try a variety of tricks and learn new skills. Circus increases the sense of togetherness and supports their activity in a group, for example by teaching them to be patient. The group instructors who participate in the circus activity get a clearer idea of what their clients' abilities are, and for many clients the circus exercises improve their ability to concentrate and to co-operate with their treatment. Circus gives the instructors ideas for how to direct the intellectually and developmentally disabled patients. According to the study, circus supports the direction and mood of the people with developmental delays regardless of their severity and nature.

### Results of the circus's effects on the participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities

Regular circus activity – with a session every week or every few weeks – has been organised for children in a special needs school, 10-12-year-old residents of a group home, and young people and adults living in disability service centre within the Effective Circus project. In addition, these people and their families have been offered weekend camps.

The circus groups for the disabled children, young people and adults have been particularly valuable. The clients are eager to participate. The participants have been very satisfied with the organisation of the circus and almost all of them have found it to be uplifting (figure 8).

According to the survey, the intellectually and developmentally disabled from all the age groups have enjoyed learning new circus skills. They have been encouraged to participate and to try doing the stunts. The employees estimate that circus has, at least to some extent, increased their physical activity, improved their body control and strengthened the skills they need in everyday life for almost all of the participants.

One of the group directors mentions that even trying new things is a great achievement for many of the clients. For example walking and sitting on the wire and forming pyramids is the kind of physical exercise that allows them to naturally find new poses and positions that, according to the director, has an impact on the mobility of the disabled children and young people. According to the group director, all the disabled people benefit from circus practice regardless of the disability.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS**

- Circus is uplifting.
- The child is excited about circus.
- Circus has given the child many experiences of success.
- The child enjoys him-/herself in the circus
- Circus has improved the child's ability to concentrate.
- Circus has encouraged the child to express him-/herself.

**PHYSICAL EFFECTS**

- The child has learned new skills in circus.
- The child's body control has improved.
- Circus has strengthened the child's life skills
- Circus has increased the child's physical activity.

**SOCIAL EFFECTS**

- The child fits in well with his/her circus group.
- The circus group has a good time together in circus.
- The child receives attention in the circus group.
- The child receives good feedback in the circus.
- The child has a good relationship with the other members in his/her group.
- The child has been able to have a say on what is done in circus.

**CIRCUS INSTRUCTION**

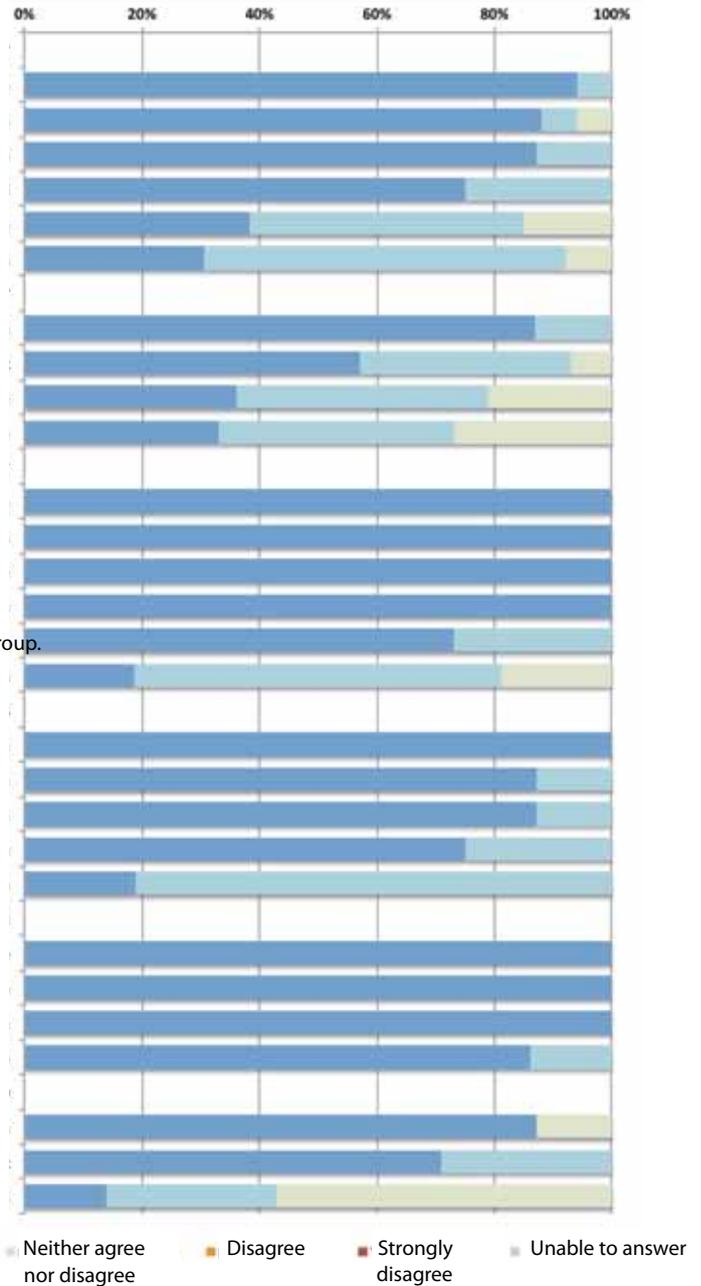
- The co-operation with the circus instructor has been effortless.
- The circus instructor gives clear directions.
- The circus instructor is a good leader for the group.
- The circus group practice tricks that appropriately difficult.
- The circus group concentrates well.

**EFFECTS ON THE FAMILY**

- In my opinion, circus is a good hobby for a child/young person.
- Our family is interested in the child's circus activity.
- Circus has increased the time we spend together as a family.
- Our family thinks that circus is a great thing

**CHILD CARE**

- I have gotten great ideas for the things I can do with the child.
- I have a better idea of the child's abilities due to circus.
- I find that child-care has gotten easier due to the circus activity.



**Figure 8:** The views on the impact of circus given by the directors of the intellectually and developmentally disabled. The directors have answered the survey on behalf of 16 participants.

A blind young person as well as one with severe developmental disability will have the use of the other senses so that even this kind of client is suitable for the target group and benefits greatly from the circus practice.

Circus, as well as other activities, has been seen to improve alertness and the sleep cycle. Some of the disabled people are energised by the circus, others are calmed by it. The effects depend on the client's individual characteristics and their situation in life. None of the participants have had any alterations in their medication due to circus. The group director of the disabled participants states that the circus activity would have to be more intensive and longer in duration for it to be able to decrease their need of medication.

The circus groups with disabled participants function well. The survey shows that the participants enjoy being in the circus group and have a good time together. The group director says that circus has created the opportunity for the young people with disabilities to practice the transitions from one place to another, which is something they often find difficult. Each of them gets a turn to practice the exercises so that the young people have had to learn to wait patiently. Developing the group interaction and easier waiting periods have been visible in the routine of the nursing home.

The circus practice for the disabled has been directed with great professionalism. The nurses think that the participants have been taken into consideration; they have practiced tricks with a suitable level of difficulty, the collaboration between the circus instructor and the directors has been effortless and the directions have been clear. The participants have also been given the chance to have a say on the content of the practice. The group has stayed in the instructor's control and for the most part they have concentrated on the exercises quite well.

The nurses have a better idea of what their clients can do thanks to the circus. Almost every one of the group directors has also gained useful ideas for his or her own activity with the group. One of the directors has explained that circus has broadened his idea of his clients' strength and ability to participate because the disabilities had not kept them from participating in the activity. Circus has been a refreshing change in his own routine as well.

Some of the staff members state that caring for the intellectually and developmentally disabled has gotten easier due to circus, but there doesn't seem to have been a general impact. At the same time, circus has not made giving treatments any more difficult. The children and the young people have been eager to attend the circus sessions. The parents and guardians of the disabled children and young people report that the circus has increased the amount of time they spend together as a family and that the families are interested in circus as a hobby.

A staff member reports that circus has had a unifying impact on the employees – much as sharing common goals and doing things together usually does. He has noticed that working

with all the employees always makes for a better working atmosphere. Circus does not release the staff members from their own responsibilities, because the circus instructor occasionally needs help to control the group. They also promote collaboration because the group consists of many assistants and students in the field in addition to the clients.

**The results are based on a survey conducted with the parents and nurses of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The survey was responded on behalf of eight 7–12-year-olds, one young person and seven adults. The results are also based on interviews with a disabled young person, two disabled adults and two of their directors.**

**Circus activity for the intellectually and developmentally disabled children, young people and adults has, according to the directors, had a very positive impact on the following subjects:**

- the child's self-esteem, motor skills, concentration, patience
- concentration, listening to instruction, performing and enjoying giving performances
- waiting for one's own turn
- courage to perform
- the child's self-image
- courage to do things that require motor skills, tolerating failure
- stimulating the everyday life, and the mood
- social interaction
- developing a sense of balance and courage to try new things
- social skills and consideration of the feelings of others
- high spirits
- bring joy to everyday life

## 7. CONCLUSION

The study shows that social circus has obvious effects on wellbeing. The social effects were visible in all of the target groups. Circus activity is naturally social: it unites the participants and offers the group something to do together, and at best, it also brings the participants together outside the circus. Psychological effects are reported primarily by those who have problems tolerating failure and with self-esteem. Circus is also a nice hobby that gives the participants a chance to be active and spend pleasant time together.

Measuring the effects of circus activity is challenging. This study does not lead to any conclusions about the long-term effects of the activity, because it has not been possible to implement a required follow-up time. Overall, impact evaluation on the preventive activity has been quite rare in Finland, because reaching convincing results requires several years of study. Another challenge for examining the effects is that the circus participants may have an array of other hobbies, which makes it difficult to isolate the effects that can be traced to the circus activity.

In spite of this, circus activity seems to be responsible for many positive effects. Naturally some participants do not report any great benefits. However, the data collected in the study demonstrates almost a comprehensive positive impact from circus activity. These positive effects should be the subject of continued measurement in the future. Convincing follow-up research helps collect factual knowledge of the effectiveness of preventive wellbeing services.

The success and quality of the circus activity are ensured by capable instructors who teach by example. For example, they take young people's opinions seriously. They like young people and make continuous observations about them. The instructors are also good at guessing the reasons for certain problems. The activity is based on the special requirements of the group. The atmosphere and the instructors are the makings of a good circus session. The instructors insist that everything is voluntary – no one is forced to do anything.

The effects of circus activity can also be small, individual situations that spread wellbeing to the other group members. A worker in outreach youth work recounts a memory from circus work that illustrates this phenomenon: *"It's the excitedly shining bright eyes, the experiences of success. Every time they learn something, they are smiling from ear to ear. It's a pleasure to watch. It's good to see"*.

# Three Perspectives into the Future

Katri Kekäläinen



## Every Lived Life Has Value

In the summer of 2013, Senior Specialist Päivi Känkänen, from the Child, Young People and Family services unit at the National Institute of Health and Welfare, published her doctoral thesis *Arts-Based Methods in Child Welfare—Towards Own Space and Experiences*, which draws from her decades-long experience in child welfare.

The data for the thesis were collected from three projects conducted within the research programmes funded by the Academy of Finland: *Elämänketju – ilmaisutaidot lastensuojelussa syrjäytymisen ehkäisemiseksi* (2000–2003), a project for utilising the arts to prevent of social exclusion; *the Sytytin project* (2010–2011), based on theatre work; and the rap music project *Räpätesä roiskuu* (2010–2011). Material was also collected from training programmes carried out in approved schools, where the focus was on using arts-based methods to create new operational models and ways of interacting when working with young people. During Känkänen's career, arts-based methods have gradually become recognised as noteworthy instruments in health and social services.

*When I started in my current position almost 15 years ago, at the beginning of the 2000s, arts-based activity was by no means a standard in health and social services. Things are completely different today; more people are familiar with it than not familiar with it. But you could still say that, in terms of enthusiasm, the field is still divided: There are those who are really fired up about it and are fully on board—about one-third of people are in this group. Another third doesn't really seem to care one way or the other, and yet another third is strictly against it. It is also very much a communal issue: How does the community receive it and how do superiors support this new kind of activity? All in all, I would say that it is more a question of attitudes than resources. Sometimes all you need is a pen and paper, or a ball and a hula-hoop.*

*If you consider, for example, circus activity, my own principle has always been that anything that makes contact and communication easier between people is helpful. When you've been through enough difficulty and hardships, you often lose the ability to process things by means of speech. This is when you need other tools to get you to a place where you can vocalise the issues, for example; the arts-based methods are useful for this.*

*When you come from a difficult background and have had to deal with traumatising issues, you might also lose the ability enjoy life. Circus activity offers a multitude of ways to guide you back to joy. You'll find the joy of creating things, the joy of togetherness, the joy of performing and the joy of not having to be ashamed of yourself, instead recognising that it is okay to enjoy your body and its emotions. These needs exist in everyone, but it is possible to lose touch with them.*

It has been important for the circus groups within the Effective Circus project to be joined by the teachers, nurses or other guardians as equal participants with the clients. This makes it possible to leave the issues of hierarchy and authority out of the circus lesson and focus on doing things together on equal footing. According to feedback gathered from the participants, this has been a valuable experience for the caregivers as well, as it has enabled them to view the clients and patients in a different light—from the perspective not of their limitations, but of their potential.

*It is challenging for the worker to break down the barrier of authority, but it is also rewarding to witness how it creates the possibility to see familiar clients or patients in a different light. Making contact with them can open new horizons when the position of authority and professional approach are broken down from top to bottom. It really doesn't take that much: You form a pyramid together, let loose a little bit or take a few dance steps, and before you know it, the walls between you are crumbling down. The way that you assume characters, throw yourself in the mix and participate in the activity already deconstructs the hierarchy and the position of power in a way.*

*Child welfare has recently started using experiential specialists, young people who have themselves fallen within child welfare services and are able to bring forth the wisdom of their experience, a completely new voice, to what things should be like and how to proceed. It is important that—no matter who the client is, a young person, an elderly person, a child, an intellectually or physically disabled individual—the basis for the activity is created in collaboration and that there is room to change the procedures, if necessary, along the way. Sometimes you might get the feeling that some things take more time to process, so make that time and then perhaps plan a completely different way of proceeding. Planning things together also makes it easier to commit. In my research projects, I always allowed young people to participate in planning the activity from the very beginning. I didn't have any ready-made packages to open up and use, but the activity was created together in a way that was pleasing to them.*

The central terms in Känkänen's research are *the control-free space* (i.e., a space free of adult-oriented wishes and where the young person is able to determine his own relationship with himself and the surrounding world) and *the metaphoric shelter of art* created through artistic self-expression, which for some young people might be the only means—or approach—to process difficult life experiences.

*The projects I followed were primarily carried out in institutions with much control and discipline, yet even in such an environment it is important to make a conscious effort to create a control-free space. For example, in the rap music project, the control-free space meant that the boys were allowed to write their lyrics so that nothing was edited out or limited, nothing was prohibited. Then, gradually, as they had the chance to let out their negative feelings through the lyrics, the rhyming started to become more gentle and sensitive.*

*And what is often forgotten is that there should always be room and opportunities in life for letting go, acting silly and staying playful. We tend to let go of that so early and move on to a life where play is not appropriate, yet grown-ups enjoy playing too.*

*On the other hand, the metaphorical shelter that art creates enables us to indirectly present the issues that are difficult to face. For example, a costume or hand puppet might on one hand create a distance from the difficult issues, but on the other hand it can bring it safely closer. Circus art includes plenty of indirect expression through different functional objects.*

Känkänen's main principle in all arts-based activity is the possibility to gain experiences of self-worth and the joy of being creative. It is not so much about being "skilled", but rather that everyone's efforts are significant and deserve notice.

*I remember seeing a social circus group performing at Sorin Sirkus. They had some clowns jumping and doing somersaults; they jumped on the board at full speed, landed on a mattress and that was it. It wasn't like a difficult tumble or anything like that, but the jump was just as valuable and important, as was the fact that they performed before an audience. No performance was less worthy, but they were all equally valuable, no matter which group it was or the age of the performers.*

*I have been particularly taken by this circus activity and the way it includes transferring that joy to the daily routines. So many people have lost that joy. I can see a permanent demand for this kind of activity. They have already developed some kind of routine for it and I think that it is currently stabilising its position as part of the health and social services.*

Känkkänen considers researching the effects as part of the Effective Circus project as a remarkable opening for discussion.

*It is significant to conduct this kind of research, systematic measuring, interviews and follow-ups as so little of it exists. A new kind of activity and its significance can be justified by getting the validation that it is effective. All this kind of research, which can demonstrate that this activity really matters, is supportive of the efforts to take it further. It is good for not only the circus activity, but the field as a whole, to showcase the effects and significance.*

Känkkänen hopes that arts-based methods will become more strongly present in the structures of basic education in the health and social sector, thereby enabling healthcare practitioners to adopt them to increase their skills and abilities to collaborate with the artists. The feeling of social inclusion in the daily routines of health and social services is of utmost importance. If the experience is valuable to the person having it, no matter how small or insignificant, it is just as worthy as a skilful performance.

*These basic principles highlight the fact that you are included in something, you are valuable and you matter. You are seen, you are looked at and heard, and that's about it. The fact is that everybody's story and the life they've lived are important, no matter how difficult or stressful the experiences. You can learn to live with many kinds of things, even if you don't accept them, gaining a valuable life experience.*

*Sometimes, when trying to keep up with our busy schedules, it is easy to forget that we are actually talking about fundamental human needs and values. Perhaps my most central message is that it is important to release humans from their own emotional bonds and experiential bonds, so that we can live life such as we are and enjoy the things we have a right to enjoy*

D.Soc.Sc. **Päivi Känkkänen** has worked as a researcher and developer of child welfare and arts-based methods at the National Institute of Health and Welfare (previously Stakes) since 2000. Her doctoral dissertation *Arts-Based Methods in Child Welfare – Towards One's Own Space and Experiences* was published in June 2013 as part of the National Institute for Health and Welfare publication series and is available online (in Finnish) at [www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/104494](http://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/104494).



## Art Penetrates the Entire Mind

Docent of social politics and research professor emerita at the National Institute of Health and Welfare, Marjatta Bardy has contributed to developing and researching arts-based methods and their generalisation.

*There has been a great change over the past few decades regarding the number of these projects and how much information we have gleaned from them. The past decade has been strongly marked by a question of the effectiveness of arts-based activity. Both national and international research has been conducted, and I feel that it has reached the understanding of the common man that art promotes human health and wellbeing.*

*The effects have been studied, naturally to justify the activity, to prove that it is beneficial to people. Now it is necessary to take it further. We have to move on to the idea that art, and arts-based methods, must become an essential part of our daily practices. Instead of constantly starting new projects, we must move towards the development of established activity from the perspective that art is an essential part of human life in terms of both individual and social development.*

According to Bardy, it is particularly significant to understand how comprehensively we experience art: It often touches us physically and psychologically as well as socially.

*The philosopher Martha Nussbaum from the USA discusses how art permeates the different levels of the human mind, reaching all the way to the most primitive layer, the limbic system. Art can have the effect of penetrating the entire mind and, in this way, the body in its entirety. Thus, the mind takes flight.*

*The power art has to assist the consciousness that is currently needed in society. We should be able to make our lives less consumptive and trust in our functional capacity to fit our way of life within the limits of the globe in ways that are socially just.*

Art has been a part of the everyday human life since the dawn of time. People created art in their leisure time long before taking up commercial or scientific endeavours. In industrial societies, the arts, as well as the sciences, have been compartmentalised within their own temples, according to Bardy.

*Now we are beginning to see a really fascinating “return” of the arts back into our daily environment. This is particularly evident in, among others, community arts such as learning circus skills; the circus artists lend their know-how to the use of the laymen.*

*Since living in caves, people have had the innate need to draw, dance, sing and tell stories, express themselves and describe the things they feel and see. We must make room for studying these experiences. One of the biggest problems in our culture is the*

*all-consuming technocracy, which we imagine to be rational. Even our idea of humanity has been stripped down, removing all the excess material. A human being is not just some creature who produces measurable accomplishments. Our idea of humanity and the world must be expanded so that we can survive the great transformation we face. For this, we need people whose minds and souls are alert and developed.*

The ongoing transformation to which Bardy is alluding is caused by the over-consumption of the natural resources and the climate change. The current life form based on constantly increasing consumption is not sustainable: As the standard of life grows in size, so does the ecological footprint.

*We are in desperate need of new, cleaner technology, but by itself it isn't enough. We need eco-social education, understanding that human beings are a part of nature and fully dependant on its ecological systems. The eco-social civilisation includes efforts to fight poverty and inequality and the ability to reach for a life that, from a social perspective, has good quality.*

*Getting to the road to sustainable development requires decreased consumption and new ways and forms of life. We cannot destroy our sources of wellbeing; we must cherish them—the natural as well as the human resources. Things such as the love of a parent, artistic expression, democracy, participation and sports can be practiced to your heart's desire. These are activities that make life meaningful. Developing sustainable ways of living on this planet is a boundless and creative way to utilise the human resources, and we can cultivate circus, dance, visual arts or other skills that nourish the human mind and social interaction.*

*The public discussion on art should move away from the ethics of profit towards the ethics of virtue. It would be important to focus on generating supply, creating the possibilities, for example, by offering social circus to those people who really want it. It's all about increasing mental resources and abilities, and the more of these abilities a person has from an early age, the richer his life will be both personally and socially.*

Bardy suggests that we consider the aphorism by the author Oscar Wilde: "All art is quite useless and therefore necessary."

*A human being doesn't live only of matter; art can promote spiritual and social survival. Art and artistic methods have been observed to increase joy, courage and critical thinking for the participants. A technocratic and output-oriented culture might not be able to appreciate these virtues, even when people find them empowering. Of course, it is also clear that not everyone will get excited about creating art or participating in circus, nor do they have to get excited. There are naturally various ways to maintain a sense of being alive, such as going out in nature.*

According to Bardy, arts-based activity might assist in orientating the individual towards the world, the mental perception of human existence. She refers to the experiential philosophy of the American educational psychologist and philosopher John Dewey.

*Dewey is known for his idea of learning by doing in the school world, and he discusses the importance of creating a comprehensive experience. I think that in arts-based activity we develop experiences and ways of experiencing. We can examine*

*our own skills, abilities and life situations by artistic means. The modern world creates many fragmented experiences when there is so much stimulation without any time to internalise anything, nor are there any common forums for examining these experiences. Creating art can be just such a forum, providing free space in which people can explore, even together, how we are doing and what is happening in us.*

Activity meant to increase wellbeing by means of culture and the arts is still largely fragmented in Finland and rests on varying projects. Bardy sees this as frustrating, as it is a model which wastes plenty of resources; with no continuity, the good experiences cannot accumulate. Any institutional structures are changeable with collective intention and shared knowledge.

*I think that the goal we should strive for, first of all, is that artists such as circus actors be hired in day-care centres, schools, children's homes and elderly care facilities. They should become an integral part of these environments, just as there are teachers, practical nurses or doctors, becoming a part of the arsenal in the same way. Art wouldn't then be just an occasional spice in everyday living, but would actually have a capacity to shape it.*

*Another way to go, I think, is that the basic education of these professions should be given a strong dose of the mentalities and procedures used in arts, without having to turn every doctor and social worker into an artist. It won't hurt anyone to have these skills. Being too academic is not recommended for any professional working with people. What is needed are connections between arts and sciences, as these are what an eco-social civilisation will be built on.*

**Marjatta Bardy** is a docent of social politics and research professor emerita at the National Institute of Health and Welfare.

Several of Bardy's articles were used as background information for this article, including 'Hyvinvoinnin moniulotteisuus' [The multiple dimensions of wellbeing] in the book *Kolmannella lähteellä—hyvinvointipalveluja kulttuurin, liikunnan ja nuorisotyön aloilta* [The third source—wellbeing services from culture, physical activity and youth work] (Kokos publications 1/2010), and 'Taiteen paluu arkeen' [Art returns to daily life] in the book *Taide keskellä elämää* [Art in the middle of life] (Kiasma—the Museum of Modern Art Publications 106/2007). Cf. the article collecting the central ideas of Bardy's thinking 'Taide, tiede ja myötätunto' [Art, science and empathy] (Synteesi 3/2012). The articles are available in Finnish.



## Cirque du Monde Puts the Social Circus Researchers on the Same Map

Canadian Cirque du Soleil is known to the larger public by its spectacular shows, but not everybody knows that it is also the world's biggest social circus organisation. The social circus programme Cirque du Monde was founded 1995, and the programme includes projects carried out in more than 80 communities and on all continents, apart from Antarctica. Cirque du Monde also includes training for social circus instructors; in Finland the first training session has been organised in co-operation with the Effective Circus project for December 2013 and January 2014.

Cirque du Monde's senior advisor–training content, David Simard, is also in charge of following the research regarding social circus and mapping different evaluation projects on social circus around the world. The results of more than six months of work will be presented in the final seminar of the Effective Circus project in December 2013. Simard first started to create the map for his team's own purposes, to have an overview of what's going on in the research field. Yet he soon realised that the map would also be useful for others.

*We realised that most of the people who work on their evaluation projects don't necessarily have contact with the other researchers in the field, so it would be very useful to put all these people together or at least inform them that there's a lot going on in the research field. They can see each other's evaluation methods, and it can be really inspiring for them.*

*We're going to expose the map at the Effective Circus seminar. I won't pretend that it will be exhaustive, but at least we will have most of the world's ongoing research on it. We are also going to create a community of practice on our online Cirque du Monde platform, 'The Box', providing a place for all researchers to communicate with each other and see all the documentation produced by them.*

According to Simard, a lot is currently happening in the field of social circus research; in ten years, the interest has increased considerably. He sees two clear trends.

*Normally, what we've seen in the last years is a lot of programme evaluation—good ones, but not ones that specifically focus on the impact of social circus. Now we are beginning to see this kind of evaluation, like what you're doing in Finland.*

*In Canada, this September, a five-year research study, led by the International Centre of Art for Social Change (ICASC), will begin and one of the five field studies will analyse social circus and the impact on participants. In Ecuador, a long-term evaluation*

*project on the health impact of social circus participants<sup>1</sup> is currently under discussion. This is new and is really important for us in Cirque du Monde because all of our partners and collaborators need to have something that will prove scientifically that social circus has a positive impact, thereby enabling them to access new funding.*

*So, among the new trends, the most important one is the evaluation of the impact of social circus. Another important trend is the interest in practicing social circus with persons living with mental and physical disabilities. We have two such projects going on here in Montreal, in the Centre de réadaptation Lucie-Bruneau, with which Cirque du Monde has collaborated since the beginning, and in the Sainte-Justine University Hospital. The two of them will finish at almost the same time, so as of 2014, we will have some very interesting information about this type of intervention. Frédéric Loiseau is going to attend the Effective Circus seminar in Finland to present his own work about physical disabilities in his own project with the Centre Lucie-Bruneau.*

Measuring the wellbeing effects isn't a simple task. Yet some elements can be more easily measured, such as children's physical literacy, which is studied in the National Circus School in Montreal. There's a series of movements that the kids do that can be assessed.

*But when we look at the psycho social aspect, it's much harder to see what's going on. As we can see with Frédéric's study, a lot of different methods are used—interviews with the parents, with the kids, at the beginning, in the middle, at the end, with the instructors and the community workers... You must have a lot of documentation to be able to demonstrate this kind of impact.*

At the moment, several academic research projects are already being conducted, and Cirque du Monde collaborates on some of those, but Simard doesn't want to underrate the ground-level evaluation either.

*In the two evaluation projects working with youth with physical and mental disabilities, one is a master's degree and the other one is a PhD. These kinds of academic evaluations are pretty different from others that we've seen before, in places such as New Zealand and Finland.*

*But the practical tools that come from less academic projects, like the Effective Circus project in Finland, are truly important. The small circus organisations don't necessarily have time to read all this great academic work and won't even have the time or resources to carry out this kind of evaluation themselves. Diversity is the main word: We need to have different kinds of research because each has a relevant role to play in the development of social circus.*

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1 In Finland the term social circus is used in a broad sense, but internationally this term usually indicates target groups like at-risk youth, as the circus involving participants with mental or physical disabilities is called "handy-cirq".

The Finnish projects the Effective Circus project and its predecessor the Social Circus project (2009–2011, also funded by European Social Fund) hold a special value in Simard's eyes.

*Normally we see the development of circus first and then social circus. It takes some time before they feel the need to evaluate the impact of their project. So it's very different in Finland because at the same time that you've started this project, you're already evaluating it. It's also very interesting because it's the first time that we have the initial development of a social circus movement in a country so well documented.*

*From the beginning, you have a great interest in seeing your effects on participants—not necessarily in a kind of academic way, but with all the interviews and all the different methods that you use. It's very nice to see that from the start you've already had this in mind: "We know it's good, now we have to know why it's good and what the impacts are."*

*From these evaluations you want to produce an easy-to-use tool for the circus organisations to make their own evaluation. So it's great because it completes something that we haven't really seen before.*

When it comes to the future of social circus research, Simard is very optimistic.

*In five years, we might have a final study or studies that will prove to everyone the greatness of social circus! And that's why we want to generate interest among academic researchers to enter this field, because we need them. This is also why we're working with them; we are trying to connect them and even offer some of our resources for their projects.*

*As I see it, I think it is going to be hard for me to follow everything that's going on in the research field in a couple of years because it's increasing. I will need people from everywhere to keep me updated! This is also why it's great to have this kind of seminar [the final seminar of Effective Circus project]. I've never heard about a seminar specifically about evaluation and the research of social circus, so this is great!*

Cirque du Soleil's social circus programme, Cirque du Monde, has been working with at-risk youth for nearly 20 years. With the aim of fostering young people's personal and social development, it partners with local organisations to offer circus workshops in close to 80 communities.

Since 2000, Cirque du Monde has also offered training to social circus practitioners. To date, this training has enabled more than 3,000 social circus instructors and social workers to enhance their teaching skills.

Always with a view for disseminating knowledge, it hosts the Cirque du Monde platform, initiated in 2012 and today bringing together more than 500 collaborators from every corner of the world to ensure that the educational tools developed by Cirque du Monde and its partners are shared.

As a voice speaking on behalf of young people, Cirque du Monde works to promote social circus, both in civil society and with public organisations. It also contributes to research initiatives on the subject.

**For more information, visit the website:** [www.cirquedusoleil.com/globalcitizenship](http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/globalcitizenship)

After his graduate studies, **David Simard** started working as a documentarist for the Artist Training Department at Cirque du Soleil. Since joining the Cirque du Monde team in 2009, he has produced educational content for the programme, which is now published in five languages. Dedicated to the development of social circus, David has greatly contributed to the deployment of the Cirque du Monde's online platform. Thanks to his academic background, he now works to support and promote social circus research.



# EFFECTIVE CIRCUS PROJECT 2011-2014

The Effective Circus was an ESF (European Social Fund) project run by the Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre at the University of Tampere. It was funded by the Lapland Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment and the participating circuses and municipalities.

The aim of the project was to increase employment in the circus sector by improving the circus organisations' prospects for employing professionals in the field of applied circus and social circus. The project supervised the organisation of circus teaching in different parts of Finland; increased dialogue between the participating circuses and municipalities; organised working seminars, and improved the marketing of wellbeing services. The project also involved in the development methods for researching the wellbeing effects of circus.





**Effective Circus Project**  
vaikuttavasirkus.fi

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