



A Creative Occupations Approach to Improve Self-Efficacy and Reduce Barriers to Success in At-Risk Youth

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Introduction

- There's a considerable amount of evidence highlighting how engaging in creative activities—like visual arts, music, dance, and theater—offers a powerful platform for self-expression and skill development in youth at-risk. Research shows that engagement in creative occupations can significantly boost self-esteem and resilience, which are essential for navigating the challenges faced by youth at-risk (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018). Occupational therapists play a crucial role in this process, enhancing self-efficacy, fostering positive attitudes, and improving behavioral health outcomes through play interventions rooted in the arts (Wilburn et al., 2022). Moreover, occupational therapists help youth at-risk develop vital skills such as problem-solving, communication, and social interaction through collaborative creative projects.
- This capstone project focused on developing a creative occupations program for youth at-risk. It integrated creative occupations into youth development initiatives. It was designed to increase social skills, improve emotional expression, enhance mental health, and increase self-efficacy. Four instructors were recruited to lead bi-weekly creative occupation sessions selected by the group (yoga, pasta making, creative writing/art, crocheting).

Methods

- An occupational-based approach was used to provide the at-risk youth population with opportunities to improve self-efficacy and reduce barriers to success by engaging in creative occupations. This program was incorporated into an existing at-risk youth program called Heroes in the Hood mentoring, an initiative within the Offender Alumni Association (OAA).
- Bi-weekly 1-hour in person sessions were held on Saturdays and consisted of engagement in 4 different creative occupation approaches chosen by the participants:
 - Yoga
 - Pasta Making
 - Creating Writing/Art
 - Crocheting
- The creative occupation instructors were recruited by the program developer with help from UAB faculty, OAA faculty, and colleagues. In addition, they separately taught four, 1-hour creative occupation sessions to the participants.
- Sessions were held at the OAA headquarters.
- The Qualtrics survey tool was used to gather pre- and post-session quantitative and qualitative data. The online surveys consisted of 14 pre-survey and 19 post-survey questions. Both pre and post surveys were analyzed on a weekly basis.

Results

- All participants (n=28) were male, ages 13-18.
- Since all surveys were taken anonymously, there was no way to accurately account for unique answers of each participant in each session. Some participants could have 1 or more responses in surveys.
- Post surveys indicated improvements in self-efficacy, self-esteem, and liking of the program while also creating positive perspectives about the program and reducing barriers to success.
- Results display the direct responses from pre and post surveys from each of the 4 sessions.
- N=28 represents the total number of participants that attended at least one of sessions.
- Participants reported they would most likely recommend this program to other teens and programs like OAA.

Figure 1: Participating in this creative occupations program created a positive impact on my overall well-being and quality of life. (All sessions N=28, Post Survey Results)

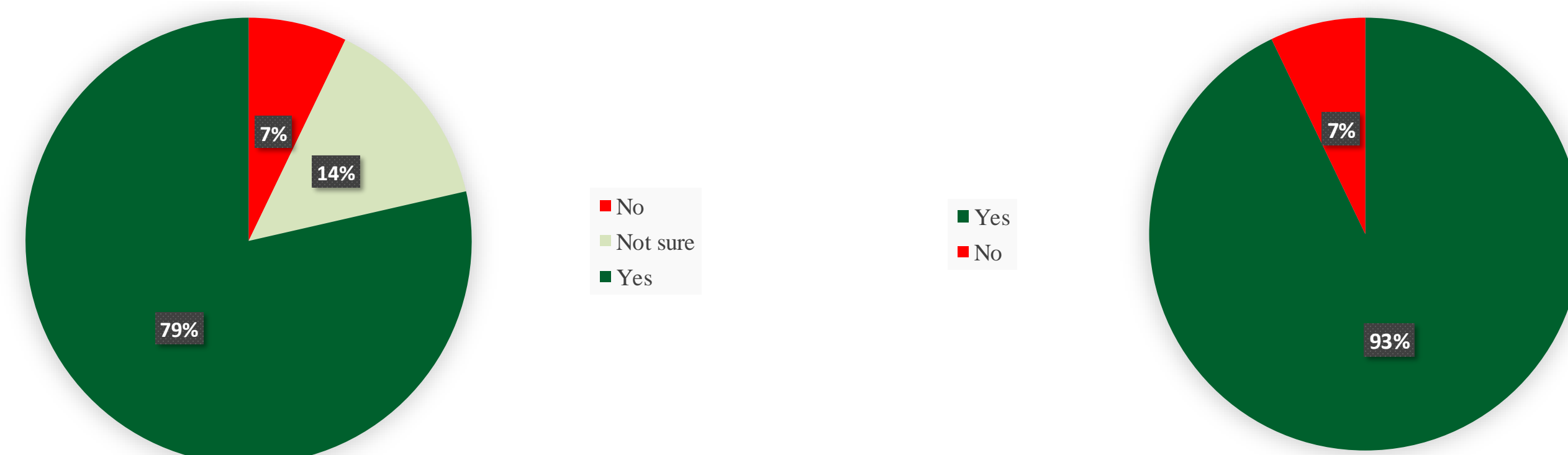


Figure 2: Would you recommend this experience to other teens you know or that are in other programs like OAA? All sessions N=28, Post Survey Results)

Results (Continued)

Figure 3: How effective do you expect this creative occupations program to be (was) with improving overall self confidence? *These questions were asked before and after each session.*

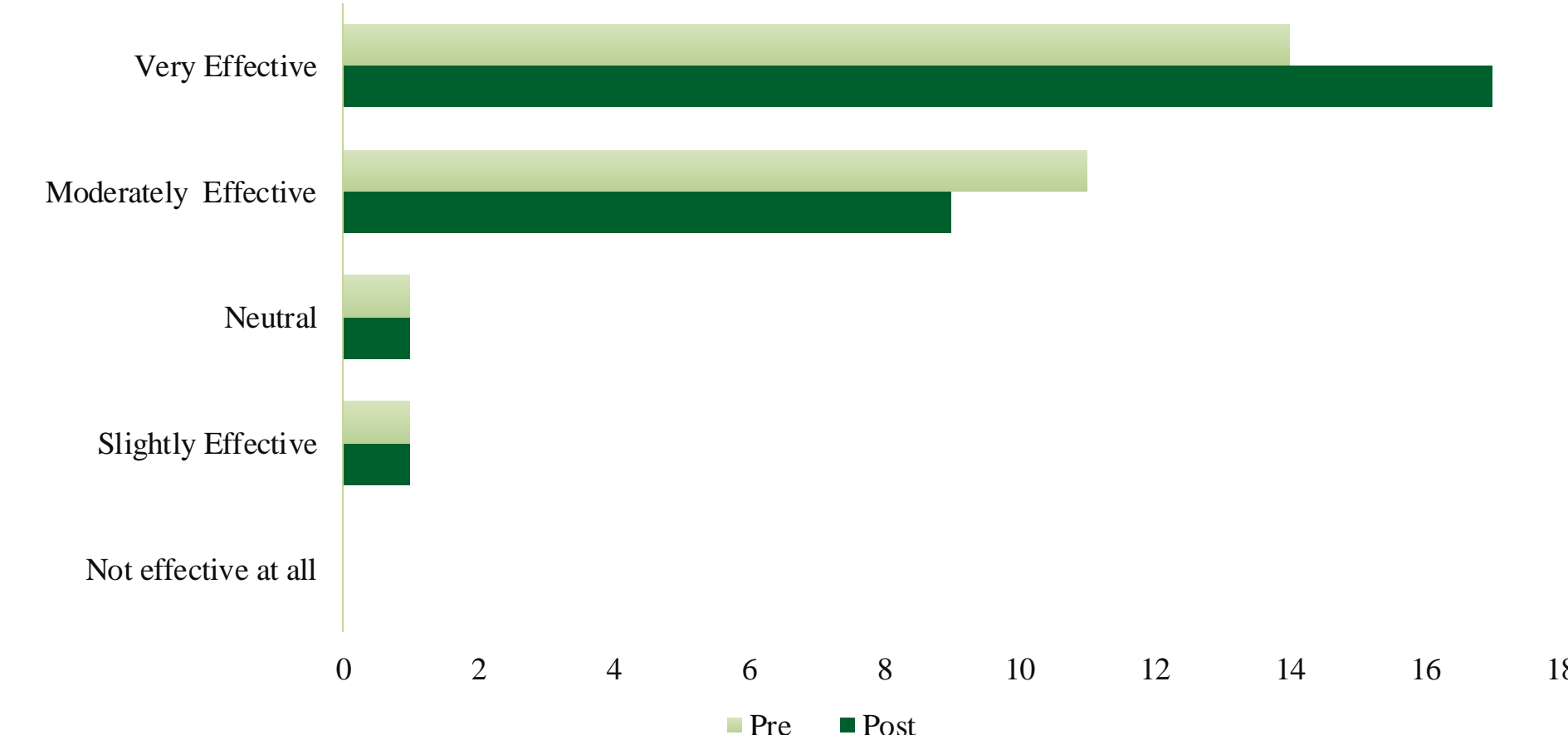


Figure 4: How big of an effect do you expect this program to have (did this creative occupations program have) on your self-esteem? *These questions were asked before and after each session.*

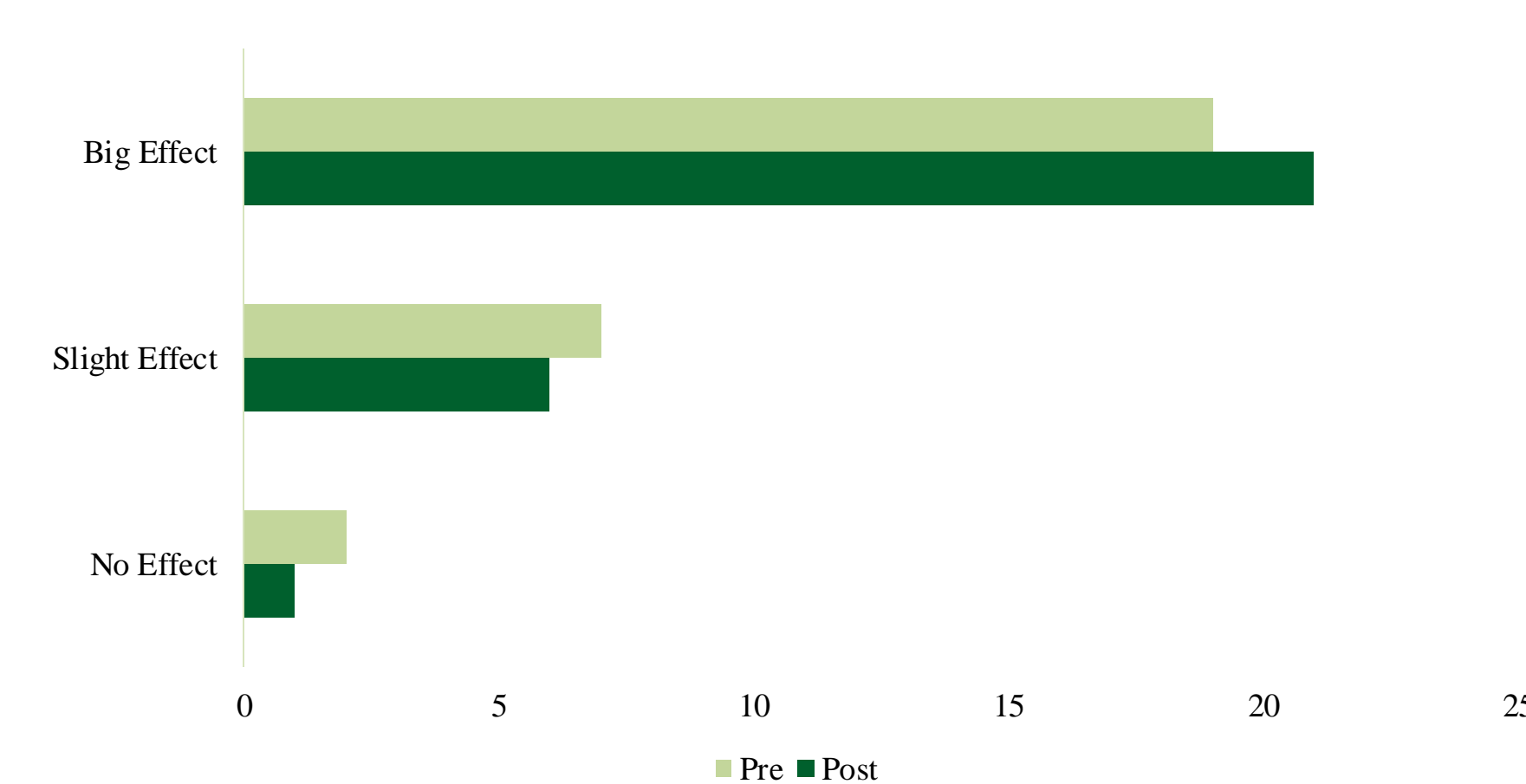


Table 1: Changes in behavior and perspectives between pre and post survey responses . *These questions were asked before and after each session.*

Questions	Surveys	Strongly agree (%.n)	Agree (%.n)	Neutral (%.n)	Disagree (%.n)	Strongly disagree (%.n)
I think this creative occupations session will be (was) fun and exciting.	Pre	39.29% (N= 11)	35.74% (N=10)	25.0% (N=7)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)
	Post	57.14% (N=16)	32.14% (N=9)	10.71% (N=3)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)
I think this creative occupations session will be (was) frustrating and difficult.	Pre	17.86% (N=5)	17.86% (N=5)	14.29% (N=4)	39.29% (N= 11)	10.71% (N=3)
	Post	17.86% (N=5)	14.29% (N=4)	17.86% (N=5)	28.57% (N=8)	21.43% (N=6)
Participating in this creative occupations session will allow(ed) me to explore and develop insight about barriers I have that hinder me from improving my confidence in my skills or abilities in real life situations.	Pre	39.29% (N= 11)	46.43% (N=13)	3.57 (N=1)	3.57 (N=1)	7.14% (N=2)
	Post	50.0% (N=14)	42.86% (N=12)	7.14% (N=2)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)
I think this creative occupations session will improve(ed) my skills in creative thinking and help me be successful in improving my problem-solving skills to work towards reducing barriers to success.	Pre	42.86% (N=12)	46.43% (N=13)	10.71% (N=3)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)
	Post	85.71% (N=24)	0.00% (N=0)	14.29% (N=4)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)
I think that this creative occupations session will help(ed) with managing stress and/or emotions.	Pre	39.29% (N= 11)	42.86% (N=12)	10.71% (N=3)	7.14% (N=2)	0.00% (N=0)
	Post	42.86% (N=12)	39.29% (N=11)	17.86% (N=5)	0.00% (N=0)	0.00% (N=0)

Discussion

Principle Findings

- Occupational therapy has been found to be an important component of encouraging at-risk youth into meaningful engagement in activities to promote overall health, well-being, and a sense of meaning in their lives (OTPF, 2020).
- Each topic was decided by the youth in the program which likely allowed for increased buy-in and engagement in the program, giving them the program's full potential.
- Overall, there was a change when comparing pre and post results, because there was a positive increase in strongly agree and agree responses related to self-efficacy and confidence. The creative occupations program could prove to be beneficial for this population.
- This program highlighted a combination of skill-building opportunities, mentorship, and supportive environments that allowed participants to take creative risks and overcome their barriers to success.
- In addition to these quantitative responses, some qualitative comments included:
 - "I hope that by doing yoga, I can learn how to be more disciplined."
 - "I hope to gain skills about how to control my emotions."
 - "I would like to learn how to be a better person through being creative."

Limitations

- Project was limited to 14 weeks.
- This study is not a research project; therefore, results cannot show individual change.
- All participants were in the same sample population around the city of Birmingham, Jefferson County.
- Scheduling and transportation conflicts made consistent participation challenging.
- Individualized vs. group needs: some needs may not have been met individually being that this was a group inclusive program.
- Lack of interest in completing surveys, possibly developing false and/or non-authentic responses.

Conclusion

- Occupational therapists have in-depth knowledge of creative occupations as well as the skills needed to carry out creative occupation therapy programs tailored to the needs of at-risk youth.
- Additionally, occupational therapists integrate clinical expertise with social, cognitive, and emotional understanding to emphasize a holistic approach to therapy.
- Conclusions from this study could show that creative occupations can also provide youth at-risk with a chance to reach their full potential through self-expression.
- OTs have qualified abilities to ensure that creative occupation approaches are meaningful and engaging to promote participation and positive outcomes.
- Nonetheless, per comparisons from the pre and post surveys, this program can provide therapeutic benefits for changes in self-efficacy and reducing barriers to success.

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