

Magic for Smiles – context and rationale, June 2019

Magic for Smiles is a novel initiative using magic to light up the lives of vulnerable children affected by conflict especially the Syrian conflict. The work is driven by the smiles and joy on the faces of the children, yet underpinned by evidence showing how magic can support the psychosocial needs of these vulnerable children.

Jamie Balfour-Paul is uniquely positioned to develop this programme having over 25 years experience working in or on humanitarian crisis situations, in the Middle East, East Africa, North Africa and elsewhere. He performs in Arabic and has practised magic since he was a boy. Magic for Smiles is at the forefront of a long line of programmes using the therapeutic benefits of magic to heal and inspire.

The humanitarian context – Syria focus

- ❖ 5,648,002 Syrian refugees in the region, 45% of these are children (1)
- ❖ 90% of Syrian refugees are in debt to shopkeepers and landlords (2)
- ❖ 40% percent of Syrian refugee children are out of school, many of these are forced into child labour on farms and in factories to support their families (2)

The refugee crisis is at historic proportions with a third of the worlds' refugees having fled the war in Syria (3). Children are particularly hard hit by this crisis, as they comprise 45% of all Syrian refugees (1). Many of these children have never known a time without war, many of them have lost family members and suffered physical and psychological trauma. In addition to coping with this trauma these children face the ongoing endurance of life as a refugee. Because of the many and complex risks to their development it has been argued that *“Children should be at the centre of our concerns about the Syrian War and the consequent Syrian refugee crisis”* (4).

Psychosocial Support

Early childhood (0-8yrs) is a critical developmental period for physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and disruption in one area hinders the others. The term 'psychosocial' is used to encapsulate the varying support needs of individuals affected by conflict and can be defined as *“the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of our experience and our wider social experience where one influences the other”* (5).

In children the psychological component can further be broken down into affect on cognitive development and emotional development. Where prolonged crises and inadequate adult support affect this development children can experience 'toxic stress', evident as a heightened state of arousal and the development of positive self-regulation is impeded (6). In turn, this can lead to aggressive behaviour, drug abuse, anxiety, depression, frustration, loneliness, distrust, and a sense of rejection (7,8).

Psychosocial support refers to actions that address these multiple needs and involves "a process of facilitating resilience within individuals, families and communities" (5). Child focussed psychosocial projects therefore aim to "meet children's core needs and help to reduce emergency-induced distress in safe, protected and structured settings, while providing relief and support to care-givers" (9).

Performance magic can contribute to these goals, particularly in the areas of developing trust in others, wellbeing and as an opportunity for cognitive development. These themes are evidenced in the following sections, using research from clinical and educational settings. In the context of a

refugee camp a magic performance becomes an even more remarkable experience, helping instil a sense of normality, combatting boredom, and offering a view that things are not as they seem. All of this can contribute to a renewed optimism and belief that things can be different in the future.

Therapeutic benefits of magic

Magic is one of the oldest performing arts in the world. In its more historical form, magic has been found evident in ancient cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Modern day performance magic is a multi-layered experience. It affects us emotionally, it affects the way we think about reality, and how we relate to those around us. By presenting seemingly impossible events as though they were really happening the audience is challenged to question deeply held beliefs about how the world works.

In the last 50 years a range of programmes have been developed using magic to improve wellbeing and recovery, particularly amongst hospitalized children (10–13). A recent review concludes that magic is effective as a motivating tool, and has been used to “enhance wellbeing in physical, affective, cognitive, and social domains throughout both active programs and emerging empirical studies” (14).

Here we give a brief overview of the evidence showing how magic can support well being, considering three related aspects of this; cognitive effects, emotional effects and changes in social interactions that can result.

Magic for smiles performances are carefully constructed around tricks that maximize these benefits and are tuned to the situation in hand. For example many of the tricks use everyday objects that can be found even in poor households (e.g. newspapers, water, oranges, ropes). By making magic out of familiar objects the children can experience their reality in a new light.

1. Cognitive effects

Problem solving and analytical skills: When the brain cannot make sense of what it is seeing it is challenged to find new explanations for things. Existing research suggests that magic has the potential to provoke **curiosity** (15), and exposure to paradoxes increases **motivation** to solve problems (16). Similarly, magic has been shown to enhance **divergent thinking**, also called lateral thinking, when new and creative ideas are generated and explored (15,17). Using magic in a classroom setting has been found to enhance student learning (18).

The power of the narrative and the seemingly impossible nature of a magic trick can help to hold the attention of the audience and **improvements in concentration** have been recorded (Sui and Sui 2007 cited in (14)). For children not in regular education these problem solving skills and improvements in concentration are particularly valued.

Magical thinking, and imagination: If rational explanations cannot be found, magic can stimulate more imaginative explanations, particularly amongst younger children (19,20). Young children tend to hold magical beliefs about the world and many preschool children believe magicians have supernatural powers (20). Such magical thinking is thought to play an important role in the development of cognition, in which “pre-causal” and magical explanations of the world are gradually replaced by causal ones (21). In a similar vein, watching a magic performance exposes the audience to a narrative that is entertaining, holds onlookers’ attention, and justifies the actions involved in the trick. This is likely to help promote a series of related skills, including imagination, storytelling, and emotional empathy.

Neurological effects: Scientists are now collaborating with magicians to understand better the neuroscience of magic (22). Using MRI scans to monitor brain activity has revealed that the areas

of the brain known to mediate cognitive conflict, decision making and emotional regulation are activated when watching magic, in addition to those involved in problem solving (23,24).

2. Emotional effects

Positive emotions: In a study of volunteers watching a magic trick a psychologist showed that when someone works out how a trick is done this gives an 'Aha' moment that is accompanied by positive emotions of happiness and personal satisfaction (17). When one cannot work out how a trick is done the emotions triggered often include a complex mix of frustration and wonder (23). Eliciting wonder or 'awe' is one factor that has been associated with wellbeing benefits including increased pro-social behaviour enhanced attention and decreased aggressive behaviour (14).

Overcoming boredom: Open Heart Magic is a programme working with hospitalized children at their bedside using magic to counteract boredom and frustration (12). Volunteers are trained to perform magic tricks and to teach the child patients a couple of simple tricks. In this way the project has been able to reach 10,000 children.

"Mike quickly realized that magic was the perfect vehicle for engaging these young patients. He watched as kids who were feeling sad and isolated rediscovered their sense of fun, laughter and wonder (12).

Boredom is a big problem for children in refugee camps, particularly where there is a lack of educational facilities. "When young people lack the opportunities for recreation and learning, often without hope for the future, the stress and boredom of camp life are conducive to high-risk behaviours." (25)

Reducing stress: As with refugees, for patients in hospital, dealing with stress can be just as significant as dealing with boredom. An American programme, Magic Aid, trains health practitioners to deliver one-on-one 'magic therapy' for child patients and their families with the aim of reducing stress that hospitalized children experience. Participating in the 'magic therapy' sessions resulted in a reduction of anxiety for both patients (33% reduction) and caregivers (23% reduction) in comparison to a control group (13). Another project brought clowns into a hospital to entertain over 500 patients using a variety of humorous skits, including magic. Using quality of life assessment tools researchers were able to show a marked increase in well being for these patients (Kesler 2012 cited in (26)).

Stress is a daily reality for displaced children living in economic hardship. Stress levels can become toxic where prolonged crises and inadequate adult support are experienced. Reducing stress levels for children and also carers is a significant benefit of the Magic for Smiles programme.

3. Social effects

Positive interactions: Magic for Smiles has found that the magic performances elicit great excitement among the children, with even normally withdrawn kids wanting to participate. Selecting some individuals to help with a trick at the front, invites greater participation and a sense of inclusion.

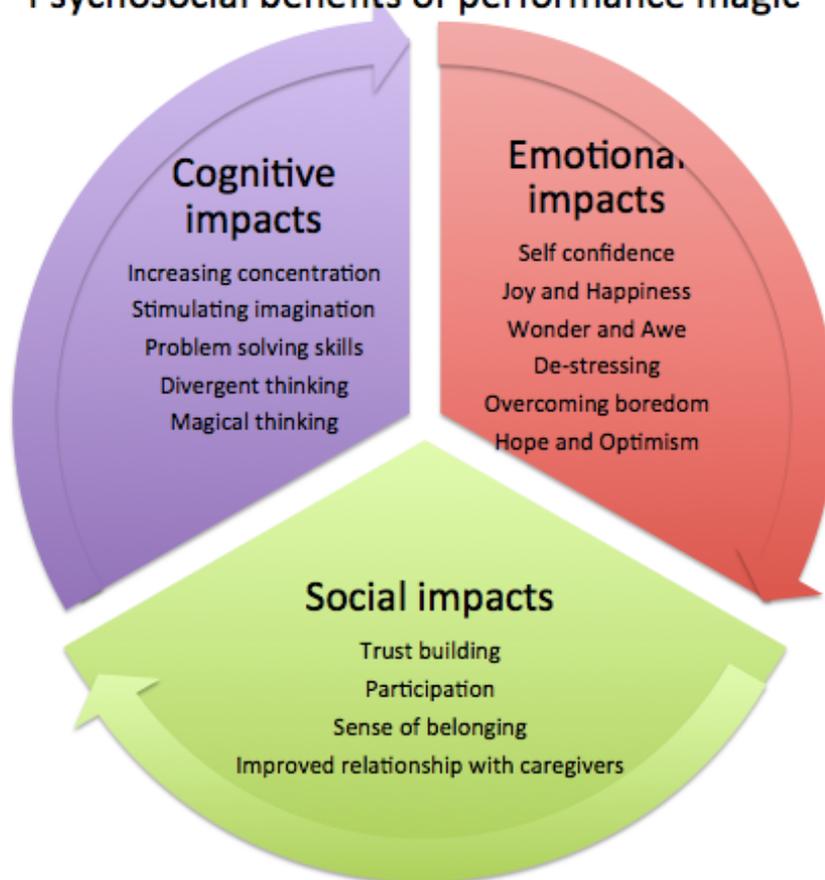
Building Trust: Magic has been used successfully to build rapport between therapist and child clients (26). Similarly, patients in a dental clinic became more willing to cooperate after being shown a magic trick (27). Wiseman (19) notes that sharing a trick's secret with the audience creates a spirit of togetherness and builds trust. Building on this potential a London charity, Streets of Growth used street magic to gain trust with adolescents who are susceptible to a destructive future in gangs, drugs, and crime (14).

Some tricks used in Magic for Smiles shows specifically link to the concept of trust building and teamwork. Situations are set up where the children have to trust in something that looks impossible, or rely on the other participating children as they are all linked together.

Improved Self-esteem: Self-esteem is a pivotal component of psychosocial development, particularly as a resource in stressful times. Bunker (28) suggests that children acquire self confidence and self esteem as a result of successful experiences. Magic projects, such as Project Magic (10), that work one-to-one with individuals using magic as a way of developing skills find that it is their interpersonal skills which improve as a result of the programme, contributing to an improved sense of self worth. Broome (29) developed a programme for children with behaviour and emotional disorders and used teaching magic as a strategy to build teamwork and increase self esteem. She concluded that after the children presented numerous magic shows benefits were noted in the students self esteem, social progress and academic skills. Similar improvements were observed among a group of pre-adolescent males with mental conditions such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. These students received 'magic arts counseling' as a form of psychosocial support and, as a result of the intervention, the subjects' self-esteem levels saw improvement, as did their relationships with their educators (30).

Magic for Smiles is incorporating more magic tuition into its work when the numbers of children are not too many. This enhances the potential of the programme, offering both performance magic and tuition when practical.

Psychosocial benefits of performance magic



Overall it is clear that magic can have a range of positive impacts on children in different settings. Magic for Smiles, in seeking to apply this in the context of vulnerable children affected by war, presents a unique approach to psychosocial interventions with great potential benefit.

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