

# ChildArt

**Your  
brain  
on art**



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# Developing empathy

Ashfaq Ishaq

**How do you develop empathy among 9 to 12 year olds from more than 70 countries in just three days? Bring them to the World Children's Festival (WCF) on the National Mall.**

The WCF is a three-day experience for 2,000 creative young people and the public in Washington, D.C., organized by the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF). I founded ICAF after learning that creativity is critical for success in business, yet many adults lack it. If all children start out creative, where does it go? I found a scientific explanation in the studies of E. Paul Torrance who discovered the "4th-grade slump" in children's creativity. I believe this slump is a roadblock to human creative development and an impediment to sustainable prosperity and peace-building.

To optimize a child's creative potential, we developed the Arts Olympiad, a global program with a four-year cycle like the Olympics. In the first year, students produce original artworks on themes as part of a school art contest. In the second year, regional or national exhibitions of local winners' masterpieces provide communities an opportunity to celebrate

their children's creativity. In the third year, the WCF provides a setting of global community to celebrate creativity, diversity and unity. In the fourth and final year, the International Arts Olympiad Exhibition travels to host cities to grow public awareness of the importance of children's creative education.

While the Arts Olympiad fosters creativity, the WCF develops empathy. Intercultural empathy does not come easily and yet it is more essential today than ever before. Here's how we do it:

## DAY ONE: DISRUPT BIASES

All children are faced with cultural biases, whether living in a war zone or a peaceful country. On this first "Health & Environment Day," delegates from around the world get to meet, paint and draw together, testing art as a universal language, often surprised at the concerns they share together. By the day's end, they realize they have much in common, despite their apparent differences.

## DAY TWO: DEVELOP TRUST

On "Creativity & Imagination Day," professionals of all kinds from architects and animators to Olympians and yoga masters host workshops and activities. Children come to understand their own creativity and learn how to grow their imagination and enhance their potential. By the end of the day, they feel more confident in themselves, realizing that their personal creativity can be applied to any field or domain, be it in business, government or science.

## DAY THREE: BE THE CHANGE-MAKERS

On "Peace & Leadership Day," all workshops and activities focus on interpersonal relations, peaceful resolution of conflicts and leadership training. The delegates become prepared as global citizens, collectively participating in activities such as mural-making to co-create masterpieces. From the host of activities and workshops, delegates learn that creativity and empathy are key attributes of successful learners and leaders. After attending the WCF, children feel more equipped to bring about positive social change in their respective communities.

Following three days of educational festivities on the National Mall, the delegates are honored at an Awards Banquet, where youth leadership shines.

Ashfaq Ishaq is ICAF chairman and WCF producer. He is planning the 6th WCF to take place on the National Mall in June 2019.

**Read about it**

*The Creativity Revolution*  
Ashfaq Ishaq

[www.WorldChildrensFestival.org](http://www.WorldChildrensFestival.org)

<http://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam/>



## Try this

Close your eyes and imagine a peaceful world. What would it look and feel like? Create a picture of your world using markers, collage or paint.



## Science of the arts

- 1 Part of the cerebral cortex, the right supramarginal gyrus, helps us act with empathy.
- 2 The activation of mirror neurons fire both when we perform an empathetic action and when we see that action being performed by others.
- 3 The inferior frontal gyrus in the brain is responsible for emotional empathy – “I feel what you feel.”
- 4 The ventromedial prefrontal gyrus in the brain is responsible for cognitive empathy – “I understand what you feel.”
- 5 Empathy can be cultivated and developed through all art activities and experiences.



World Children's Festival



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