

## Healing Beyond Prescriptions:

### How Creative Arts and Laughter Support Children's Recovery

#### Healing With Creative Arts Campaign

In contexts of prolonged crisis, children carry invisible wounds that cannot be treated with medicine alone. In Palestine, where conflict, displacement, and uncertainty shape daily life under the occupation, children's mental health needs are urgent and growing. Responding to this reality, RED NOSES Palestine (RNPS), in collaboration with six leading cultural and artistic organisations, launched the six-month campaign **"Healing With Creative Arts"**, running from November 2025 to April 2026.

The campaign brings together art, laughter, music, theatre, circus, performing arts, and visual arts as powerful tools for psychosocial healing, advocating for creative arts to be recognised and integrated into mental health support services for children.



Federal Ministry  
Labour, Social Affairs, Health,  
Care and Consumer Protection  
Republic of Austria



تركز الحملة على رفع الوعي حول دور الفنون والضحك والموسيقى والمسرح والسيرك وفنون الأداء والفنون البصرية كأدوات قوية للشفاء والتعافي النفسي والاجتماعي، لتعزيز الاعتراف بالفنون الإبداعية ودمجها في خدمات دعم الصحة النفسية للأطفال.



## Why Creative Arts Matter

Research consistently shows that children exposed to conflict and chronic stress are at higher risk of anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties, and emotional withdrawal. Studies in psychosocial care demonstrate that creative arts interventions can significantly reduce stress symptoms, improve emotional regulation, and strengthen resilience—especially in settings where verbal expression is difficult.

Creative arts are not recreational add-ons; they are structured, professional therapeutic practices that support emotional well-being and recovery.

### A Collective Campaign for Healing

The campaign is built around four core objectives:

1. Raising awareness of the psychosocial needs of children in vulnerable and crisis-affected contexts.
2. Educating the public about the impact of creative arts—such as healthcare clowning, circus arts, music, theatre, performing arts, and nd visual arts—on children’s mental health.
3. Advocating for the inclusion of creative therapies within child-focused mental health services.
4. Mobilising public and institutional support to expand access to these essential services.

### Partner Interventions: Art in Action

Each partner brings deep expertise and a unique approach to healing through creativity:

#### RED NOSES Palestine (RNPS): Laughter as a Healing Tool

In hospital settings—where children often experience fear, stress, and uncertainty—a different kind of support is provided. Instead of medical equipment, this support comes through trained healthcare clowns who use humour, play, and human connection to improve children’s emotional well-being. This is the work of RNPS, which uses professional healthcare clowning as a structured psychosocial intervention.

RNPS began working in Palestine in 2010 as a project and was officially registered in 2012 as a branch of RED NOSES International. Since then, it has implemented regular healthcare clown visits in Palestinian hospitals. During these visits, professional performers trained in healthcare settings engage directly with children and their caregivers through interactive play, music, and improvisation.



These interventions are not simple entertainment. Research and field experience show that healthcare clowning can reduce anxiety, support emotional regulation, strengthen coping skills, and improve children’s overall hospital experience. By creating moments of normalcy and positive interaction, the clowns help children feel seen, heard, and more in control during medical treatment.

In addition to hospitals, RNPS also works in rehabilitation centers and marginalised communities, providing emotionally safe spaces for children facing illness, disability, or trauma.

In 2025 alone, RNPS reached more than 19,000 children through regular visits by professional healthcare clowns. These visits contributed to lowering stress levels, improving mood, and strengthening trust between children and healthcare environments.

As Daoud Toutah, Artistic Director of RNPS, explains:

“Laughter is not a distraction from pain; it is a bridge toward resilience.”

The impact of this work is supported by evidence. A study published in the journal *World Development* in 2025 found that visits by professional healthcare clowns significantly improved the well-being of hospitalised children in Palestine.

One mother shared her experience:

“The best moments in the hospital are when the clowns visit. They give their full energy to the children and the mothers. Their presence is very important. They bring hope and smiles during a difficult time. We will always remember them—they were one of the most positive parts of my son’s treatment journey.”

RNPS demonstrates that art-based interventions are not a luxury in healthcare settings. They are structured, evidence-informed approaches that support both emotional and psychological well-being alongside medical treatment.

### The Palestinian Circus (PC): Building Confidence

The Palestinian Circus is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation founded in 2006 and officially registered with the Palestinian Authority in February 2007. Through its artistic and educational programs, the circus uses circus arts as a tool to develop children’s skills and enhance their psychological and social well-being.

Through activities such as acrobatics, juggling, and balance exercises, PC helps children reconnect with their bodies, build self-confidence, and develop teamwork skills. These activities have been proven particularly effective in helping children regain a sense of control and achievement after experiencing instability, fear, or trauma.



Mohammad Rabah, General Director of The Palestinian Circus, explains:

"Through movement, balance, and group play, circus training supports children's emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-belief—key elements for psychological and social healing."

Research shows that creative, movement-based arts, including circus training, are effective interventions for children affected by instability. These programmes help children manage their emotions, build self-confidence, and develop resilience (WHO; UNICEF; Al-Ajarma, 2010).

By 2025, PC had reached 4,540 children through its programmes. One participant, Tala Abdullah, shared her experience:

"I chose aerial silks as my speciality because it expresses who I am and reflects my personality. It gives me a space to express myself and tell my story through movement. With every practice and every challenge, I became stronger, more confident, and more connected to my passion."

Through these programs, The Palestinian Circus demonstrates that circus arts can be a powerful tool for change. They do more than provide children with moments of joy—they give them the skills and confidence to face life's challenges, find their own voice, and build a future of resilience and personal growth.

#### Al Kamandjati Association: Music Restores Hope

Al-Kamandjati Association was founded in 2002 to provide music education for Palestinian children, especially in marginalised areas. The association aims to strengthen children's cultural awareness and Palestinian-Arab identity, while also introducing them to international cultures. Through its programmes in music education and community orchestras, the association uses music to promote discipline, emotional regulation, and a sense of hope among children.

Learning music helps children improve focus, build self-esteem, and develop a sense of belonging. Research shows that regular participation in musical activities can reduce stress hormones and improve emotional well-being. As Eyad Sitti, Director of Al-Kamandjati, explains:

"Every time children come together to play music, they are not just repeating a piece—they are building connections, empathy, and a sense of belonging that extends beyond the stage."

Studies also indicate that structured music education, whether learning an instrument or participating in an orchestra, provides opportunities to develop discipline, concentration,



and perseverance, which in turn enhance self-confidence and emotional stability in children (Neuroscience News, 2025).

By 2025, approximately 233 children had benefited from Al-Kamandjati's programmes. One parent, Fidaa Fatoni, whose child Naji studies percussion at the Ramallah center, shared: "As a family, we believe music is a vast world full of freedom and creative chaos. Through my son Naji's experience with music, he has learned to soar freely and joyfully, become more aware of himself and his value, and take small steps toward a brighter future."

This experience demonstrates that Al-Kamandjati does more than teach music—it provides a powerful tool for personal growth, identity building, and empowerment, allowing children to express themselves confidently and achieve long-term psychological and social development.

### The Freedom Theatre: Transforming Pain into Power

The Freedom Theater is a Palestinian community theater founded in 2006 in the Jenin Refugee Camp. It is considered one of the prominent cultural landmarks in Palestine. The theater aims to amplify the voices of children and youth in the camp through innovative artistic programmes that combine creativity, multimedia approaches, and the therapeutic value of art, while maintaining a focus on high-quality artistic production.

The Freedom Theater integrates drama therapy, storytelling, and theatrical performance to help children and youth process their life experiences. It provides a shared space for reflection, dialogue, and healing, where personal stories are transformed into a collective strength felt by everyone.

Mustafa Shata, Director of Freedom Theater, explains:

"Here in the Jenin Refugee Camp, the theater is more than just a performance — it is a bridge between personal pain and collective hope. At The Freedom Theater, every story, even those whispered with fear in silence, becomes a voice on stage that cannot be ignored."

A systematic review of 15 studies involving children and adolescents aged 6–17 found that play and theatre interventions improve emotional expression, enhance social engagement, and reduce anger, depression, and anxiety (Sarris, 2025).

By 2025, The Freedom Theater had reached over 800 children through its mobile workshops and community-based creative arts programs, providing safe spaces for self-expression, play, and psychological healing.

One parent shared:

"It is our duty to support our children so they can hold on to life."



Through these programmes, The Freedom Theater demonstrates that theater is a powerful tool for psychological and social empowerment. It enables children and youth to transform difficult experiences into stories of strength, building a future filled with hope and self-confidence.

### Art to Heart: Self-Expression

At a time when children are facing increasing psychological and social challenges, there is a growing need for safe spaces where they can express themselves in ways that go beyond words. Art is not a luxury; it is a powerful tool for emotional release, building self-confidence, and strengthening mental well-being—especially for children who struggle to express their feelings and experiences verbally.

Art to Heart focuses on visual arts as tools for emotional expression and psychosocial support. Through drawing, painting, and creative workshops, children are able to safely express complex emotions. Artistic interventions are particularly effective for children who have difficulty with verbal communication, including children with disabilities.

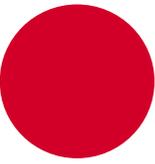
The organisation’s director, Suha Khafash, explains: “Every stroke, line, and colour a child creates is a step toward understanding themselves. Art allows them to transform emotions they cannot speak into something visible, tangible, and empowering.”

Scientific research supports this approach. A 2021 study on art therapy with children aged 6–12, researchers found that children who participated in structured drawing and painting sessions experienced a significant reduction in anxiety scores — nearly 30% lower — compared with children who did not receive art interventions. (Journal of Child and Adolescent Art Therapy Research Review, 2021).

In terms of community impact, the foundation reached approximately 1,000 children in 2025. Seema Abu Shamma, a mother of two girls, shares her experience:

“I am always looking for places that help my daughters grow, communicate, and enjoy their time, especially during the summer. Art to Heart was the ideal choice for us. It is an inclusive space where children—with and without disabilities—learn, create, and build friendships. My daughters love participating in its programmes and always look forward to spending their holidays at the Art to Heart’s summer club”.

In conclusion, Art to Heart is not only about teaching artistic skills. It creates a space for healing, growth, and meaningful human connection based on acceptance and diversity. It demonstrates that self-expression can be the beginning of recovery, and that investing in art is a direct investment in children’s mental health and their human potential.



## The Visual Arts Forum (VAF): Shaping Identity

In light of ongoing social changes and psychological pressures, there is an increasing need for safe spaces where children and young people can understand themselves and express who they are. VAF stand out not only as a creative activity but as a powerful tool for building identity, strengthening mental health, and fostering a sense of belonging and self-confidence.

The Forum believes that the visual arts are a key tool for psychosocial support and mental well-being. Through drawing, painting, collage, clay work, mosaic, handicrafts, and other visual media, it provides safe environments where children, youth, and adults can express feelings and ideas that may be difficult to put into words. This process helps improve communication at home, at work, and in schools and universities. It also strengthens self-confidence and shapes personality through creative experience and teamwork.

VAF was established in 2002 by a group of artists who felt a strong responsibility toward their community. During the outbreak of the Second Intifada, they went into the streets with colours and paper to engage people through art. Over the years, VAF has built solid, practical and methodological experience. Today, it implements structured interventions and training programmes for different age groups in schools, care and rehabilitation centres, and in partnership with various institutions—especially in marginalised areas. Its goal is to integrate the visual arts as an effective tool within educational and community settings.

In 2025, VAF reached approximately 2,500 children and mothers, reflecting its growing community impact. Dima Ershaid, Director of the Visual Arts Forum, states:  
“When a child draws their world, they are not simply putting colours on a page; they are shaping their identity and giving a voice to their inner life.”

Research also shows that artistic expression helps children communicate about feelings and experiences that may be difficult to express verbally, enhancing emotional well-being and resilience (STM Journal, 2025).

Mothers’ testimonies clearly reflect this impact. One mother shared:  
“Before the programme, my child used to release his anger by shouting or withdrawing. Through art, he learned to express his feelings safely. He became more confident, and communication at home became calmer and clearer.”

Another added:  
“The most beautiful part is that the sessions brought me closer to my son. When we draw together, he starts talking about things he couldn’t talk about before. I felt that he finally found a way to express himself without fear.”



In conclusion, VAF does more than teach artistic techniques. It supports personal growth from within. It is a space that reshapes the relationship between individuals, themselves, and their communities—proving that art is not just a creative activity, but a meaningful path toward identity formation and stronger psychosocial well-being.

### The Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN): A Space for Freedom and Recovery

The Palestinian Performing Arts Network was founded in 2015, following years of close collaboration between thirteen Palestinian arts organisations working in dance, music, circus, and theatre. The network aims to serve as a unifying framework for these institutions, strengthening Palestinian cultural identity in all its intellectual, civilizational, and human dimensions, promoting freedom of expression as a fundamental right, and expanding access to performing arts across all areas of Palestine.

The network emphasises the role of performing arts in creating safe spaces for children, youth, and adolescents, enabling them to express themselves in healthy ways and acquire social tools to actively contribute to building a more harmonious and balanced society.

Through its member institutions and a wide network of cultural, community, and artistic organisations, the network reaches marginalised areas across Palestine. Its programmes focus on the mental health of diverse groups, especially children, many of whom have experienced direct violations, particularly over the past three years.

One parent shared their child's experience:

"My children never stop talking about the dabkeh. I noticed improvements in their behavior. The dabkeh was not just entertainment—it was education, healing, and a truly rich and meaningful experience."

Nidal Al-Kaabi, the network's Executive Director, adds:

"Art gains its true importance when it becomes a social tool capable of addressing core issues and improving them. Here, art succeeds in providing a space that helps children overcome some of their psychological trauma, by freeing their bodies and imaginations through creativity."

By 2025, 466 children from across Palestine, including children with disabilities, benefited from the network's programmes and training, with an average age of 13 years.

Through this work, the network demonstrates that performing arts extend far beyond entertainment or education—they become an integral part of the social fabric. They give children opportunities not only for personal growth but also to actively participate in their social and cultural life, helping to create a more cohesive and creative Palestinian community where every child can shape their reality and enrich their society.



## Voices from the Field

Across all partner interventions, one message remains clear: children need more than survival support.

*“Mental health is a right, not a luxury. When children are given access to creative spaces, they begin to heal—not despite their reality, but within it.”*

Global evidence supports this approach. According to international child mental health research, structured psychosocial interventions using creative arts can reduce symptoms of distress by up to 30–40% in conflict-affected children, while also strengthening coping skills and social connection.

### From Awareness to Advocacy

Throughout the campaign, activities included:

- Designed social media content introducing partners and key messages.
- Storytelling videos highlighting real interventions and impact.
- Research-based facts and expert quotes on children’s mental health.
- Media outreach and advocacy articles enhancing collective impact.

The campaign also lays the foundation for long-term collaboration. In 2026, RNPS will host the **“Healing with Creative Arts” Conference**, bringing together practitioners, organisations, donors, and policymakers to exchange knowledge and advocate for the institutional recognition of creative arts in mental health services.

### A Call to Act

Children affected by conflict, displacement, or crisis need holistic care that addresses emotional and psychological well-being alongside physical needs. Creative arts offer evidence-based, human-centred pathways to healing—restoring joy, dignity, and hope.

Through **#HealingWithCreativeArts**, this campaign calls on the public, professionals, donors, and decision-makers to recognise creative arts as essential tools for child mental health and to invest in expanding access to these life-changing interventions.

***Healing begins when we see children, hear, and support them—through art, laughter, and connection.***