

# Holiday Fund: CHAC's 'BackTogether!' program empowers kids to express their emotions through art

by [Malea Martin](#) / Mountain View Voice

Uploaded: Mon, Dec 5, 2022, 1:34 pm

Elementary school requires structure to keep kids on track with their learning, but that rigidity can also prove challenging for young, curious minds – sometimes, kids need a space to express themselves on their own terms, said [Community Health Awareness Council \(CHAC\)](#) therapist Marita Seulamo-Vargas.

That's exactly what CHAC seeks to offer with its arts-based, social-emotional learning program BackTogether! It launched in Mountain View elementary school classrooms earlier this year and aims to empower children to make art to help them transition back to school after summer break and deepen connections with their peers.

In a traditional art class students are directed to draw something specific, but "here we give them the supplies, and they can experiment," Seulamo-Vargas said. "When they have control, it builds agency because they can decide, rather than – as is typical, of course, in a school – they are mostly told what to do."

Created by [CHAC arts](#) Program Director Carol Mellberg, the vision for BackTogether! was to address student anxiety and social connection issues that were exacerbated when children had to learn from home during the pandemic. The program ran for four weeks in Mountain View Whisman School District classrooms at the start of this school year, and served 1,200 second and fourth graders across nine campuses.

BackTogether! isn't therapy, Mellberg said, it's mental health prevention. Therapy is still available upon teacher referral if a child needs it, but CHAC arts programming is focused on giving kids the tools to express themselves artistically.

"It's not individual therapy, so when we are doing this program in the classrooms we are not going to start asking the children any questions, we are not doing therapy, we are not analyzing their drawings," Seulamo-Vargas said.

Rather, kids are given arts supplies, paper and freedom to create whatever they want. Therapists leading the sessions sprinkle "feelings check-ins" throughout to help kids engage with their emotions and then externalize them through art.

"It's led by therapists because you want the safety in there," Mellberg said. "Externalizing needs safety, it needs understanding and unconditional positive regard."

For young children who are used to having every minute of their school days planned out, the concept can be hard to grasp at first for some students, Seulamo-Vargas said.

"There were a few who found at first that it was really challenging for them," she said. "They would ask questions like, 'Can I really do what I want? Can I draw whatever?' So it was like a surprise to them."

But once kids adjust to the creative freedom, they flourish, Seulamo-Vargas said.

"I had a student who did a very expressive piece this fall," she said. "It was striking and powerful. The student was able to express a lot of emotion. Making art, for that particular student, probably was the best way to get those emotions out."

Mellberg said in one of the classrooms, the students were so excited to share their artwork that they asked their teacher to put it up on the overhead projector.

"They would stand up there with a pointer and just explain what their drawing was about, which was so empowering for them," Mellberg said. "A lot of teachers have told us, you know, they've never gone up to the front of the classroom before."

The BackTogether! program is just one way that CHAC serves local children. CHAC's clinic in Mountain View, located at 590 W. El Camino Real, provides multilingual counseling for children, teens, adults, couples and families, as well as school-based counseling services. The nonprofit is one of seven local organizations supported by donations to the Voice Holiday Fund, an [annual charitable giving drive](#).

Donations to the Holiday Fund are divided equally among the nonprofits and will go directly to organizations like CHAC that provide critically needed mental health and prevention resources to children and others in the community. The Voice and its Holiday Fund partner, the [Silicon Valley Community Foundation](#), are absorbing all administrative costs to run the fund, and all donations are tax-deductible.

For more information about the Holiday Fund, go to [MV-Voice.com.com/holidayfund](#). To make a donation, go to [embarcaderomediafoundation.org/holiday-fund/mountain-view](#). Checks can be made payable to Mountain View Voice Holiday Fund and sent to 450 Cambridge Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94306.

The Holiday Fund campaign will run through early January. Grants will be awarded in the spring.

