

Adults, Autism, Asperger's and Social Skills - All the World is a Stage

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The ever growing number of children with autism spectrum disorder aging out into adult systems of care should give us pause. Finding the constellation of services for this population will be one of the great challenges any of us working the field today will be faced with. Whether talking about housing, medical care, employment and vocational opportunities or recreational outlets, the limited availability of services will be an unequivocal challenge for every community. Through the many therapeutic interventions and advances in early diagnosis of autism, many adults on "the spectrum" will be able to fully participate in community life with proper supports. For the purposes of this article I will focus on the recreational aspects of adult life.

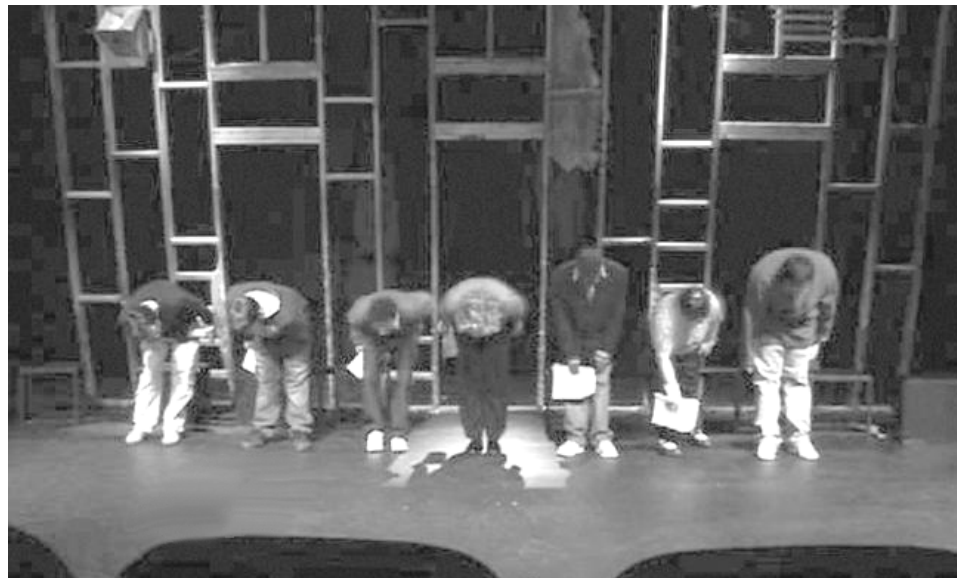
When we speak about recreational programs it is important to remember that as a society we place great value not only on the structure and functionality of social living, but also on the development and expression of recreational activities of all forms. Not to sound too pedantic I will quote the Declaration of Independence's famous lines from the second section: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The idea that we all have a right to pursue happiness should not be lost upon individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities. This idea should be incorporated into all IHP's (Individual Health Plans) as an integral part of life planning. The IHP is the document which follows an individual who has aged out of the school age entitlement, IEP Individual Education Plan (3-21 years of age) and is part of the transition planning following school into adulthood.

Around the state of New Jersey we can find what I like to term "pockets of excellence" in recreational programs. The challenge can be found in funding as well as information sharing and human resource development.

So far there are individual programs which are springing up to address these needs, but they are funded on a pilot, experimental basis, as opposed to being considered core to overall programmatic processes.

Systemic change in thinking inches along and is enhanced through unique collaboration which is cross disciplinary.



The Autism Center at New Jersey Medical School UMDNJ has had the unique opportunity to partner with excellent organizations such as The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation as well as other institutions of higher learning including Montclair State University and The Garage Theatre Group at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

By recognizing the innate passions and strong interests individuals on the autism spectrum possess, we are able to create vibrant programs which validate their passions while working on the profound skill deficits core to this disability.

Why theater workshops as a starting point? Simply put, because there was consensus in the community of individuals on the spectrum, when we bothered to ask... this was an interest and indeed a passion of many of our participants.

Theater workshops are not new. Autism is not new. Putting them together, however, is very new.

Haven't we all had a socially difficult experience? Haven't we all felt socially awkward on occasion? For us it is the fleeting uncomfortable moment of anxiety, nervousness or shyness. For adults with Asperger's Syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder it is their way of life. What if every day we were faced with that social anxiety, nervousness or shyness? What would we do? We would do exactly what they do. Struggle to come to terms and find a way to make it all work.

We have heard the descriptions: They have a hard time understanding body language; they have difficulty reading facial expressions; they are clumsy and awkward; they avoid physical contact, or they stand too close for comfort; they cannot make eye contact; they don't fit in socially; they have trouble making friends; they misunderstand the behavior of others; they act out in unusual and often un-

predictable ways; they have trouble taking the listener's perspective; they are eccentric. They... They... They. They are us... only more so.

"You are using *theater as therapy*?" "No." We are using *theater as theater*. That may just be why it is so successful. The problems for individuals on the autism spectrum are manifold. First, let's isolate and breakdown one area we can work on. If we deal with the area of social skills and target that area to focus upon we can tailor a program which works on those skills. The dilemma with many social skill classes is that of functionality. When I say that, I mean that the participants are incredibly adept at learning the "scripts" in the confines of the social skills class.

"Hey, it's been awhile since I've seen you." "What's up?" "What are you doing later?" So on and so forth.

Individuals on the spectrum can role play with the best. Unfortunately, life comes at you from left field and ultimately the context of that social situation is not experienced in the same context the participant learned in the social skills class. This often leads to a failure of generalized learning into the natural environment.

We live in a very fast paced and ever evolving social society. There is speed dating, instant messaging and Facebook, not to mention Twitter, to contend with. The innate ability to maneuver through this very complex and nuanced social world can be daunting for anyone. Overlay the inability to correctly "read" social situations into that equation and it is not difficult to understand and feel extremely empathic at this breakdown of social ability.

Solutions...beyond the social skills class. Solutions need buy in by participants. If the program is not of interest to the participants the exercises and skills those exercises build will be diminished

and the chance that they will be generalized into the greater social world is also uncertain.

Theater has, if not universal appeal, I would say it has near universal appeal. Participants may have an interest in, even an intense interest in, if not acting, individual actors or movies or movie genres. There is half the battle. Find that interest and find what leads to buy in. Buy in leads to participation. Participation leads to skill acquisition, shared learning, experiential activities, team building and the sky is the limit.

I think the other important aspect of this has to be process over product. The discussion whether or not to do a final performance has always been left to the group. The process of discovery always outweighs the product at the end. Also, a thoughtful examination of general theater course curriculum without accommodation based upon the goals of the group is also very important. Think about the skills you may work on in a performance group for example. You may spend time working on voice modulation and porosity. You may devote time to role playing character emotions. You may dissect the motivation for a character's actions. You may work on spatial relations on a stage.

I have been struck at how the craft of acting works on so many of the areas that typically individuals on the autism spectrum have difficulty with. I have also been amazed at the quality and enthusiasm of the work ethic everyone has brought to the classes. The camaraderie and fellowship amongst the participants and the teaching actors has been rewarding on so many levels.

The challenge is, as always, finding the funding needed to incorporate this type of programming into more areas and for a greater range of students. I would encourage advocacy on the part of families and communities to start regional groups where individuals with ASD can access this type of program. I feel the benefits are so compelling that this should be a priority for families and communities to pursue.

The synergy of the connection between theater and autism is an embrace of acceptance and community building which lasts far beyond the theater workshop. Who is the teacher? Who is the student? When the roles become melded and the lines become indistinct, there is growth, mutual respect and admiration. In short, there is success.

I will leave you with one quote I quite think sums it all up:

"The thing about performance, even if it's only an illusion, is that it is a celebration of the fact that we do contain within ourselves infinite possibilities." -Daniel Day Lewis