Materials for Preschool Drama Program for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

A Research Report

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ABSTRACT

A trial preschool drama program was implemented by Theatre and Communication Sciences and Disorders students and faculty at the University of Northern Iowa. Preschool aged children diagnosed with ASD participated in drama activities during two 50-minute sessions. The researchers utilized their experience with the program to create materials hosted on a website. The website includes pamphlets, handouts, lesson plan examples, and other helpful information. Pamphlets were created to give parents and teachers of children with ASD information on how drama can improve social and communication skills. Handouts are also provided on the website to educate parents on how they can facilitate communication and social skills in children with ASD at home. Finally, the website provides an overview of the preschool drama program for professionals who might be interested in recreating it in a variety of settings and will include materials as well as lessons.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects many children and adults. According to Rapin and Tuchman (2008), “Autism is defined as a symptom of atypical development of the immature brain” (p. 1129). The disorder presents a wide array of symptoms and children with ASD can be very different from one another. Children with ASD often have difficulty with communication, social skills, and reacting to the world around them (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2012). Children with ASD can present with echolalia, speech and expression deficits, difficulties following directions and answering questions, and poor vocabulary development (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2012). They may also have difficulty with nonverbal communication such as eye contact, reading facial expressions, examining emotions, and hand gestures (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2012). These communication challenges greatly coincide with their difficulties with social skills and interactions with others (Jacobs, 2012). An individual’s success at school or in the larger world can be critically dependent on how these communication and social challenges are addressed (Autism Speaks, 2013).

When addressing these issues, Autism Community (2013) suggests the importance of establishing a positive environment for communication. These environments keep focus on the positive outcomes of communication. This focus often encourages increased communication from individuals with ASD. As a result, greater independence and deeper relationships can be formed. Drama therapy is a way to promote a positive, interactive environment for individuals with ASD. Drama therapy is a type of intervention that implements aspects of drama and theatre. According to Crimmens (2006), “Drama therapy involves the use of improvisation, role-play, mime, music and movement, storytelling, masks and rituals, puppetry, theatre games and
scripted drama as a therapeutic vehicle” (p. 9). Drama therapy is an effective type of therapy for ASD because it keeps the children engaged by using surprises and originality (Kempe & Tissot, 2012). This type of therapy integrates aspects of cognitive, emotional and social development into therapy activities. Drama therapy can help individuals on the spectrum learn to recognize important social cues, develop skills in communication, movement, pretend play, and social interaction (Corbett, Gunther, Comins, Price, Ryan, Simon, Schupp & Rios, 2011).

Many studies have been completed that investigate the role of theatre in treating children with ASD. A theatrical intervention program was created called the Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology (SENSE) Theatre (Corbett et al., 2011). According to Corbett et al. (2011), “The SENSE Theatre is a unique theatrical intervention research program designed to improve the social and emotional functioning of children with autism and related neurodevelopmental disorders” (p. 505). The purpose of this theatre program was to increase social skills in children with ASD. Researchers hypothesized gains would be made in the children's social perception (reading people’s emotions, theory of mind, and memory of faces) skills and adaptive functioning skills (Corbett et al., 2011). Eight children with ASD were matched up with eight typically developing children. A number of subtests were conducted to evaluate each child’s memory of faces, affect recognition, and theory of mind skills before the intervention. The children participated in a theatre production for three months. The peer models were responsible for demonstrating appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication, socioemotional perception and expression, and behavior and affective control (Corbett et al., 2011). Results indicated the children with ASD improved in their facial recognition and theory of mind skills. Researchers determined it is beneficial to have children with ASD work collaboratively with peers to improve social perception and adaptive functioning skills.
A second study was done using the SENSE Theatre to get a more in depth look at the principles of the theatre (Corbett, Swain, Coke, Simon, Newson, Houchins-Juarez, Jenson, Wang, & Song, 2013). During this new study published in 2013, twelve children attended a two-week summer camp. The theatre program recruited typically developing children as well to participate in the play. Participants took part in peer-tutored theatre games, imaginative play, scripting, role-playing, and movement with music games (Corbett et al., 2013). At the end of the two-week program, the children had two public play performances. Results indicated children with ASD demonstrated increased social interaction skills and facial recognition memory skills. The results of this study also showed an increase in the social meaning of interacting with other people. Researchers determined that peer directed interventions in a child’s natural environment can help to improve carry-over effects from the theatre setting to the child’s everyday world (Corbett et al., 2013).

Current literature highlights the effects a drama summer camp program can have on children with ASD. Psychologist Liana Pena Morgens created a summer camp called the Drama-Play Connection because she wanted to implement a program where children could learn social skills while participating in theatre activities. The program lasts six-weeks during which children create a movie at the end of the summer session. Any child was welcome to attend the summer camp, but many of the children had ADHD, Asperger syndrome, PDD-NOS, and/or social anxiety. The goal of the program was to promote social development. Parents report children generalizing the social skills they learn as they enter school (Hartigan, 2012).

A study by Reading, Reading, Bellomo, and Pryor (2011) investigated the effects of theater on students with ASD within the context of the production of a play. The purpose of the study was to examine if participating in a theatre program will have an effect on the social
behaviors of students with ASD. The researchers recruited 16 students with ASD. Eight participants participated in all aspects of the production of a play called, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The other eight participants were utilized as the control group and they did not participate in the theatre production. The program was held after school one time a week for ten weeks. Each of the participants played a role in creating the scenes, making costumes, and rehearsing the play. Researchers noted throughout the process, the students who participated in the theatre project demonstrated increases in their social skills. The students also made gains in other areas such as displaying appropriate emotions, offering to help without prompts, controlling their temper, and acknowledging the perspective of others (Reading et al., 2011).

A study completed by Garrison-Harrell, Kamps, and Kravits (1997) investigated how peer networks have an effect on the social communication skills of children with ASD. Research has shown using peers can assist with the acquisition of social skills. Peers are used to demonstrate, prompt, and reinforce responses from children with ASD (Garrison-Harrell et al, 1997). The researchers in this study utilized peer networks to enhance social communication skills in children with ASD. The purpose of the study is to examine how peer networks affect the language and social interactions skills of the children with ASD (Garrison-Harrell et al., 1997).

Three first grade children with ASD were chosen for the Garrison-Harrell et al. study in addition to fifteen first grade age-matched peers. Five age-matched peers were assigned to one child with ASD. Children participated in eight 30 minute training sessions. Children with ASD and their peers participated in different activities including reading, language arts, computer, and lunch time conversations. A wide variety of social skills were targeted throughout the sessions. According to Garrison-Harrell et al. (1997), “Social skills including initiating and responding, conversing, sharing, giving instructions, and saying nice things were modeled by experimenters”
Training utilizing an augmentative communication system was targeted during the sessions in addition to the social skills training.

The results of the Garrison-Harrell et al. study indicated the children with ASD demonstrated increases in the frequency and length of peer interactions across a variety of settings including language arts, lunch, computer skills, and recess (Garrison-Harrell et al., 1997). The social skills gained during the study were shown to generalize outside of the treatment sessions. Verbalizations increased for two children after the completion of the treatment sessions. An increase in the use of the augmentative communication system was noted for all three children.

At the University of Northern Iowa (2013), Gretta Berghammer is implementing a similar program with children on the spectrum. The Spectrum Theater program provides a creative experience to encourage the development of play, social interaction, and nonverbal behaviors. During the Spectrum Theater program, students and the teacher work together to design a creative world to explore a problem, situation, or theme. Berghammer reports that the results of the program and previous research has been promising (University of Northern Iowa, 2013). Throughout the program, nonverbal individuals begin to show progress by developing pantomime and movement as a way to share ideas and dramatic actions. Berghammer uses role-playing to capture their imagination and help them expand their use of language, gesture and story. Berghammer (2013) stated, “Perhaps the most exciting development is the social collaboration and interaction among participants” (University of Northern Iowa, 2013).

In conclusion, children with ASD can present with a wide array of symptoms. The communication skills of children with ASD can be affected as well as their interactions with peers. Research has shown drama therapy can be an effective treatment approach for children
with ASD. Drama therapy provides children with opportunities to participate in hands-on activities to boost their social communication skills. Research has indicated the utilization of peers is an effective component of drama therapy in providing children with models for demonstrating verbal and nonverbal communication, expression, and affective control. Drama therapy has been proven to be a beneficial way to increase social communication as well as emotional regulation skills of children with ASD.

**OVERVIEW OF PROJECT**

This website was created as a research project to fulfill our master’s degree requirements. This website was created as a resource for parents, educators, and speech-language pathologists. Our goal was to provide information on how drama therapy can improve the communication and social skills of children with ASD and help others implement the program on their own. The website also serves as an example of how the preschool drama program can be replicated in the future. The website provides information on ASD, drama therapy, and how drama can be implemented with children diagnosed with ASD. Lesson plans for creating a preschool drama program for children with ASD are included as an example of the types of activities that could be utilized during sessions. Handouts are also provided for parents and educators on ways to improve social communication skills and how drama therapy can be beneficial for children with ASD.

**PROCEDURE**

Before constructing the website, the researchers assisted with the planning and implementation of a preschool drama program for preschoolers diagnosed with ASD on the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) campus. The children were recruited through fliers and
connections through similar programs. The researchers then met with other volunteers to discuss communication and social needs of the individual preschool participants. The last part of the planning process was to modify the lesson plans as needed to further facilitate social communication skill development. Social communication skills like imitation, turn-taking, pretend play, and generating ideas (verbally or nonverbally) were targeted within these lesson plans.

The drama program took place on four Sundays for 45 minute sessions each. UNI college students were paired up with each preschool child to serve as “models” during the drama activities. Low-tech communication boards were provided for the children to utilize during the sessions. Drama activities focused on increasing a number of communication areas including: turn taking, gestural communication, imitation, generating ideas (verbally and nonverbally), and pretend play.

After participating in the drama program, researchers began building the website. Handouts were created to give parents and educators information on how to increase social communication skills and how drama therapy can be beneficial to children with ASD. Other materials such as an editable communication intake form, fliers, lesson plan examples, and a brochure were also made available to assist in re-creating and implementing a future drama program.

The website can be accessed at (as of 12/12/14):  http://dramaforautism.weebly.com/
WEBSITE OVERVIEW

● Home Page
  ○ Overview of the purpose of this site

● Education on Autism Spectrum Disorders
  - Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is simply a general term for a set of complex disorders of brain development.
  - The disorder shows a wide range of symptoms. Children with ASD can be very different from one another.
Education on how drama increases social communication skills

How we did it

- Overview of the steps we took during implementation
- Communication goals that were targets
- Other tips for the viewer
● Lesson plan examples
  ○ 5 lesson plans that can be used to start a new program

● Other helpful materials to aid in the recreation of this program
  ○ Take home brochure with an overview of the program
  ○ Parent handout for what they can do at home to facilitate social communication
  ○ Program flier with open spaces to fill in the event date, time, and location
  ○ Editable enrollment form to help prepare for participant’s communication needs
- Education on how parents can promote social communication at home

Parents are often their child’s first teacher. Children’s communication skills grow and develop rapidly during the first few years of life. Here are a few things you can do at home to increase your child’s communication skills:

- **Establish consistent routines:** Routines are important to utilize because the child will begin to anticipate what is coming next. An example of a consistent routine is reading a story before bedtime.
- **Follow the child’s lead:** This technique involves allowing the child to make a choice on which toy, game, or activity they want to participate in. The parents will then also participate in the selected activity to interact with their child.
- **Imitate your child:** Imitate a child’s vocalizations during play activities. Expand those utterances by

- **About us!**

  ○ Information about the people behind this program and the website

  **Anna Halverson**
  Anna is a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa where she is studying Speech-Language Pathology. She hopes to have a career in the schools following graduation. With a passion for working with kids, Anna was so thrilled to work on this project and to be able to share it with the world!

  **Katie Youngblut**
  Katie is a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa where she is studying Speech-Language Pathology. She hopes to work as a speech-language pathologist in a pediatric clinic. Katie enjoys working with children and was excited to be a part of the preschool drama program!

  **Jennifer Garrett Ph.D., CCC-SLP**
REFERENCES


