

Teaching Social Skills through Theatre

Contributed by [Melissa Dubie](#)

Everyone knows our students on the autism spectrum have many talents. Have you thought about creating a theatre in your community to help bring these talents to life and use the experience as a “teachable moment?” The idea was first created by Applied Theatre Research and Autism Network (ARTRAN) (<http://www.autismtheatre.org/>) whose goal was to unite professionals and parents from around the world interested in using theatre to teach individuals on the autism spectrum. Theatre activities can be used to teach emotion recognition and expression, non-verbal behaviors and gestures, listening skills, eye contact, conversation skills, strategies to handle social situations, and critical social skills. Co-founders Dr. Parasuram Ramamoorthi (<http://www.velvi.org>) and Andrew Nelson facilitate theatre-based strategies using masks to promote eye contact and social skills by training individuals to refine their observation skills, teaching body awareness through movement, and building friendships through performance projects. The theatre is a safe place for individuals to try new things and to make mistakes they can learn from. Theatre is fun, motivating, and highly structured.

Within Indiana, two groups in Grant County started theater groups during the 2008-09 school year. In Gas City, Mark Fauser, the director of the Marion Community School for the Arts, is working in collaboration with Grant County Special Education Cooperative, the Community School for the Arts, and Carey Services. The group is called Face Place and serves adults and older teens on the autism spectrum. Mark is teaching the actors how to express emotions. Mark shouts different emotions for the students to respond to and teaches them how to use their voices, facial expressions, and hand gestures as actors. The group is using readers’ theatre style of acting to interpret the characters within a story. Chris Bohn, an autism consultant at Mississinewa Community Schools has been amazed at how the students have become so animated during a production while she videotapes them acting. Free scripts can be found on the web (<http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/playhouse>) and (<http://www.timelessteacherstuff.com/readerstheatre>). This collaborative effort has received additional funding through a grant (Autism Speaks) and started a junior Face Place for elementary and junior high students on the autism spectrum in the fall of 2009.

In Muncie, the other group called the Prism Project (www.prismproject.bsu.edu) is run by Ryan Hourigan, parent of a son with autism spectrum disorders and a professor at Ball State University. The Prism Project teaches students social skills through music, theatre, and dance. The Prism Project has a component involving students from Ball State University’s music and theatre department to work one-on-one to plan and execute lessons each week. BSU students receive some training on how to work with individuals on the autism spectrum. There are 22 children ages 7-15 performing with the Prism Project. Everyone feels they are learning from one another.

A good resource for teaching theatre to individuals on the autism spectrum is a book titled Acting Antics (<http://www.actingantics.org>) written by Cindy Schneider. The book provides a wide repertoire of activities, scripts, scene designs, and program leader tips for immediate application to use whether teaching at school, home, or within the community.

Is theatre an interest of yours? Get involved now by learning new strategies to teach individuals on the autism spectrum social skills.

Dubie, M. (2009). Teaching social skills through theatre. *The Reporter*, 14(3), 8.