

A Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators:

Supporting Young People on
the Autism Spectrum.



Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme
2017–2022



Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I am delighted to be presenting this resource '*A Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators; Supporting Young People on the Autism Spectrum.*' I am hopeful that the contents of this resource will assist youth theatre facilitators to feel more confident in planning and delivering workshops to groups where there are (known or unknown) young people on the autism spectrum, and indeed those with other neurodiverse conditions. I hope also that this resource will support the development of the culture of inclusion in youth theatre workshops across the country.



This handbook has been designed to educate facilitators on the condition of autism and the experience of those who are on the autism spectrum. It aims to dispel myths and misconceptions about the condition and promote understanding and acceptance of autistic young people in youth theatre. Communication, social imagination, social interaction, sensory processing, disclosing additional needs and creating a culture of inclusion are the key themes explored within this handbook and all examples and suggestions outlined are widely considered as best practice among the autism and education communities here in Ireland and abroad.

Autism is a complex condition, which affects a person's experience of the world around them. Although there are common themes outlined in this handbook, it is essential for facilitators to remember that there is no 'one size fits all' model for supporting autistic individuals. They are exactly that - individuals. You could try a suggested strategy and it may work brilliantly with one autistic young person and not at all with another. At AsIAM H.Q, we have a saying - '*when you've met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism.*' Trial and error are part of the process of supporting young people, as is making consistent efforts to get to know the young person - the more you know about them, the more support you can give. This requires the facilitator to demonstrate patience, resilience and persistence, as well as confidence in their professional ability and in their knowledge of the young person.

I wish you the very best of luck as you continue your journey to inspire creativity among young people through youth theatre. May you continue this journey with an open mind and an open heart to all those that you meet along the way. Please get in touch with AsIAM - Ireland's National Autism Charity, if there is any way we can assist you further in supporting young autistic people and creating a culture of inclusion in Youth Theatre Ireland affiliated youth theatres.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Hannah O'Dwyer'.

Hannah O'Dwyer,
Education Officer,
AsIAM

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Foreword

Inclusion lies at the heart of youth theatre practice. We welcome a rich mix of young people into our youth theatre circles every week and accept them for who they are when they step into our spaces. Our members – their skills, interests, personalities and needs – are the starting point for all our theatre adventures together.

As part of this rich mix, youth theatre welcomes many autistic young people. During the Centre Stage +20 research project (2019), nearly a fifth of youth theatre members (18%) reported a disability. Of the young people who described their disability, 85% reported conditions that featured a high prevalence of Autistic Spectrum Condition, Dyspraxia and Asperger Syndrome. Youth theatre leaders need training and information to support the engagement of autistic young people within their work and within the dynamic of the group. I hope this resource is a good start to equipping youth theatre leaders with the information and strategies they need to build their confidence and develop their inclusive facilitation practice.

It has been a fantastic experience to work with AsIAM, Ireland's National Autism Charity, to develop this resource and apply their expertise to the youth theatre setting. This resource was also created with the collaboration of Kilkenny Youth Theatre and its facilitator, Anna Galligan. The strategies and approaches used in Kilkenny Youth Theatre are used as examples of good practice throughout the resource and its participants feature in the case study section. Thanks also to all the youth theatre leaders who participated in our survey, documenting the successes and challenges they had experienced in including autistic young people and providing a strong focus for this resource.

Many thanks to Hannah O'Dwyer, AsIAM Education Officer, for her expertise, her commitment to this resource and her interest in youth theatre practice! Thanks also to Ciara Whooley from CNOCII for her design of the resource. A big thank you to the young people, the facilitators and the parents who contributed case studies.

Many thanks to the Creative Ireland Programme for their generous support of inclusive youth theatre practice and, in particular, for the funding to develop this resource and its accompanying training seminar. And finally, a huge thank you to all the youth theatre leaders and members who work together to create an open, kind and creative space for all young people.



Rhona Dunnett
Research and
Development Officer,
Youth Theatre Ireland

Welcome to “A Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators; Supporting Young People on the Autism Spectrum”. All of us in AsIAM - Ireland's National Autism Charity are delighted to be collaborating with Youth Theatre Ireland to ensure that autistic talent is nurtured and developed inclusively as part of Ireland's next generation of actors, performers and artists.

This publication of this resource is both timely and relevant. It is an unacceptable reality that even as we see one in sixty five children in our education system presenting with an autism diagnosis, that too often loneliness, social isolation and a lack of extracurricular activities are a norm for our young people. Structured opportunities to socialise, make friends and pursue interests are important for all young people but invaluable for autistic children and teenagers. We welcome Youth Theatre Ireland's commitment to playing its part in this regard.

We also believe that the arts have a particularly important role to play. Ours is a community of people which sees the world in a different way to others; that communicates differently to most people; that very often has to think outside the box in day to day life and that has an ability to observe and focus intensely on areas which interest us. These are all valuable attributes for any aspiring performer! We know that autistic people often excel in the world of the arts for this very reason and believe the more opportunities for inclusive participation the greater the benefit to autistic people and the arts community as a whole.

If it is easy to establish **why** inclusion is important, it can at times be harder to ascertain **how** autism inclusion can be meaningfully achieved. That is the value of this document. Packed with practical information, activities and resources this document will guide you through the process to make your theatre group a warm, inclusive place for our community. From providing you with background information on the condition, to exploring clear communication and disclosure, from reflecting on the sensory environment you are operating in, to allow you to make the implied explicit in how you operate (and lots more in between!) this guide will be a document you find yourself frequently returning to!

I would like to thank the AsIAM Education Officer, Hannah O'Dwyer and all at Youth Theatre Ireland for making this resource a reality and to you, the reader, for working to create exciting and positive opportunities for the autism community.

Adam Harris
Chief Executive Officer,
AsIAM



What is Autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, meaning it develops in a person's brain. It is a life-long condition and present from birth, which can be diagnosed from 18 months – 2 years old. However, it is quite often diagnosed later in life, during a person's school years, adolescence or even in adulthood.

A person who is diagnosed as autistic will experience the world in a different way to those without the condition. The four key areas which an autistic person will experience differently are:

1. Communication
2. Social interaction
3. Social imagination
4. Sensory processing

Please read below AsIAM's definition of autism, which explains the condition from a social, rather than a medical, perspective:

“

Autism is a complex, invisible condition that a person is born with. Autism is a developmental condition which means that the way a person understands, communicates and interacts with other people and the world around them is different to those who don't have the condition. It can be described as a spectrum, meaning it impacts different people, in different ways, to differing degrees, at different times and in different situations.

”

From this definition, you will see that the most effective way to describe autism is as a difference – and difference is not something to be feared or viewed as less than. It is something to be accommodated, embraced and celebrated.

The Language of Autism

The language a person uses when speaking about autism says a lot about their understanding of the condition, as well as their opinions about it. Over time language has been used to describe autism that many people within the autism community find disempowering.

Please see below for examples of inclusive language to use when speaking about autism:

1. The condition is called **autism** or **Autism Spectrum Condition (A.S.C)**. Many people on the autism spectrum find the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (A.S.D) to be disempowering, as the word 'disorder' implies that there is something innately wrong with being autistic.

2. Many people on the autism spectrum prefer to be referred to as an '**autistic person**' – this is an example of **identity-first language**. Others may prefer to be referred to as a '**person with autism**' – this is an example of **person-first language**. Pay close attention to the language used by the young person and/or parent when speaking about autism and follow suit. If you are unsure of what language to use – just ask. This shows you are interested in getting it right and ensuring that you are using the language that the young person is most comfortable with. An autistic person may also/ instead prefer the term '**neuro-diverse.**' A person who is not autistic is '**neuro-typical.**'

3. **Support needs** can be used to describe the level of support which an autistic person requires in order to participate to the best of their ability. High functioning and low functioning are terms which oversimplify autism into two categories and this fuels negative stereotypes.



Communication

Communication is the way in which we give, receive and interpret information. There are a number of different factors to consider when communicating with a youth theatre group where there may be a young person on the autism spectrum.

Information Processing

Information processing relates to how quickly the brain interprets and forms a response to a stimulus or to information it has been given. The way in which an autistic brain develops causes it to take in all information in its surroundings at once, which can make it quite difficult to focus on one particular element, such as a conversation or a question being asked. Because of this, it may take an autistic person a longer amount of time to respond to a question than you might expect.

Tips for facilitating information processing:

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Only use necessary words, no need to embellish your language
- Allow wait time for the young person to respond
- Don't repeat yourself multiple times to get your point across
- Check for understanding

Sometimes exercises themselves can be used to look at issues that arise. Here is one that looks at information processing and allows an open conversation about how we all process information at different speeds.

STRATEGY;

Tomato, Tomato, Tomato' - group activity to develop awareness of information processing...



The group make a circle. At the beginning, the facilitator stands in the middle. Each person (including the facilitator) is asked to choose a fruit or vegetable, no more than two syllables if possible and no two the same.

The aim is that whoever is in the centre will say one of the fruits/vegetable three times before the person whose fruit/vegetable is called says it once.

Easy? Yes...if the person in the centre is looking at you and calling your fruit! But introduce movement, not looking at the person, distracting conversation and it becomes quite difficult.

If the person in the centre (**A**) manages to say it three times before the person (**B**) says it once, **A** joins the circle and **B** takes their place in the centre.

Why is it so easy to get someone in the centre? We all process at different speeds and different things can distract us. An audience does not know the script, it does not know who will be speaking next, it needs time to process the information and react, and hence why we pace ourselves differently on stage.

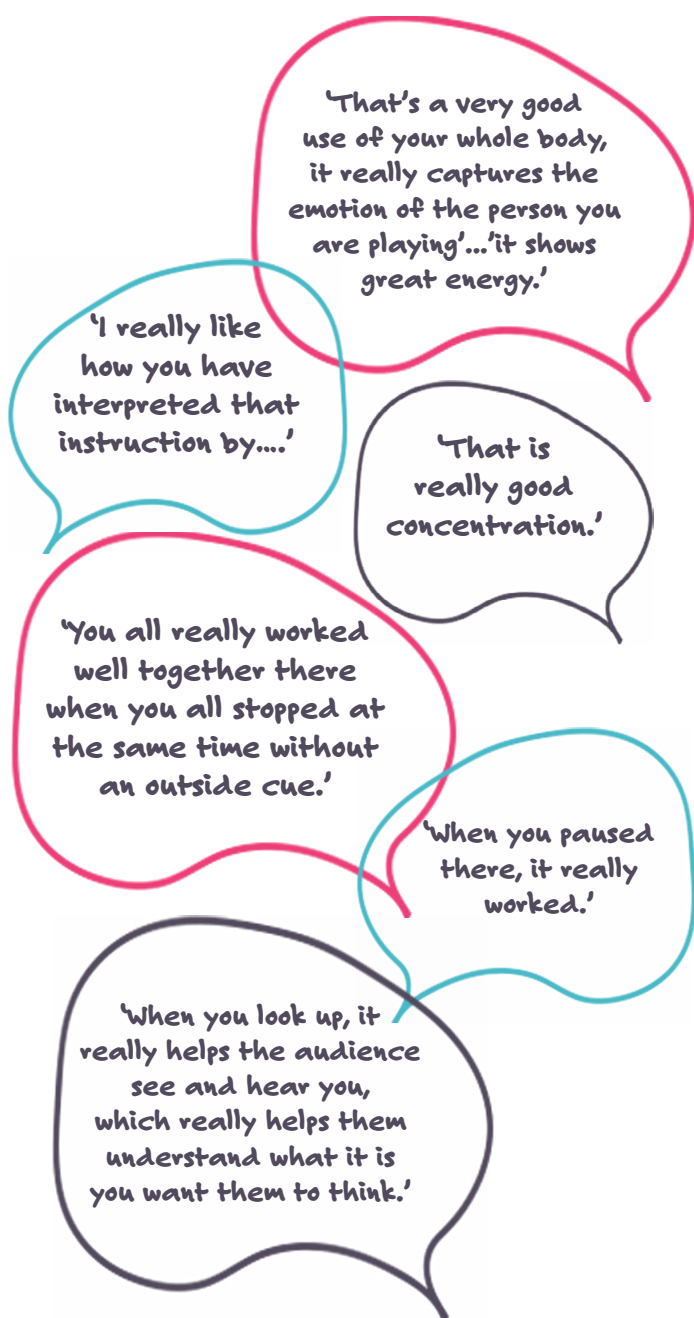
So what happens when there is added distraction? When **A** says a fruit, everyone thinks 'A has said a fruit, is it mine?' By this time, **A** has said it a second time and **B** is now thinking, 'That's my fruit, I need to say my fruit' by which time **A** has said it a third time and **B** will then react by saying their fruit.

This will be the same for most people unless they are exceptionally focussed. This exercise allows us to have a conversation on information processing through the lens of drama and theatre.

Praise

Praise is a very powerful tool in education of any form. We use praise to communicate that a particular behaviour is positive and that we would like to see it happen again. Autistic young people will often respond very well to praise once it is specific and they understand what they are being praised for. Praise can be used in the youth theatre setting to promote difference as a positive attribute.

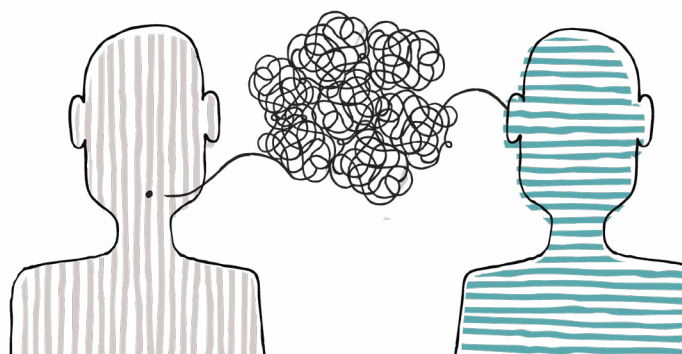
Examples of Praise



However, it is important to note that over-praising for non-specific reasons can often build resentment within a group of young people. Praise should be specific and every member of the group should be aware of the reason for which praise is being given.

Social Communication

Social communication relates to any method of communication that is non-verbal; facial expression, body language, pitch/tone of voice, hand/body gestures, situational context, sarcasm/slang etc. It also forms a significant part of the way in which people communicate generally, especially when they are familiar with each other. Social communication skills are picked up by neurotypical people as they grow up, however for autistic young people this type of communication needs to be explicitly learned. Because of the individual nature of communication style, this can be particularly tricky as the facial expression that one individual uses in one situation could have a totally different meaning when the same expression is used in a different context. If any young person within the group 'mis-reads' instructions given by the facilitator - this 'mis-reading' can be reframed as 'creative interpretation.' Individual and creative response are, after all, what youth theatre aims to foster. However, if instructions need to be followed exactly, then it is important to ensure that social communication is not the primary method being used to deliver any instruction or message to a youth theatre group and is accompanied by clear and concise language.



Example of Creative Interpretation

In the exercise 'Body to Body,' the group work in pairs (A+B). A and B walk away from each other and continue to walk the space. The facilitator will call a body part somewhere between head to toe e.g. hands. A and B should find each other and join by the hands.

The facilitator may say 'feet' and people can interpret this in numerous ways. They can use one foot each, join both feet, join by toe, by side, by arch or by sole, (if by sole, they may do it standing or sitting.)

Once the group start giving different offers back on the instruction, the facilitator lets them know that this is a good thing: 'it's great to see all the different ways we can do that'; 'that's an unusual one'; 'using the floor really is a good idea' etc.

This lets the whole group know that the facilitator encourages creative interpretation and is not looking for one 'right' answer.

- **Be mindful of the volume and tone of your speech around young people who are sensitive to sound/noise.**

A young autistic person who is hyper-sensitive to sound may interpret subtle changes in tone of voice more intensely and feel as though they are being shouted at.

- **Use the young person's interests to promote and initiate interaction.**

Young autistic people's special interests can be harnessed to positively promote participation and friendships.

- **Use specific praise.**

General praise, such as 'well done,' 'fair play,' 'good job,' doesn't give any information on what the young person did that was worthy of the praise. Be specific with praise so that they know what behaviour to repeat.

- **Break instructions into smaller steps.**

Young autistic people can struggle to 'fill in the blanks' when given vague instructions. Think carefully about the steps involved in an activity and explain each step simply and clearly.

Good Practice Communication from the Teach Me AsI Am Early Years Programme

- **Don't use unnecessary words.**

Unnecessarily long sentences and complicated vocabulary lead to longer information processing time.

- **Say exactly what you mean.**

Use clear and concise language, free of irony, sarcasm, figures of speech and social communication.

- **Use the person's name at the beginning of the sentence when speaking to them.**

This draws their attention before the information is given in the sentence – putting the young person in the best position to take in the information.



Social Imagination & Social Interaction

What is Social Imagination?

Social imagination is the ability to imagine the detail of a hypothetical situation. It is related to abstract thought processes and when a person experiences difficulty in this area, it can result in a number of noticeable challenges / behaviours, such as:

- Nervousness to try new things
- Apprehension around visiting new places
- Struggling to create links with previous experience
- Difficulty coping with a sudden change in routine
- Struggling with improvisation / imaginative play
- Copying or rigidly repeating familiar improvisation / imaginative play routine
- Entirely avoiding situations or activities that are not familiar and predictable

How Can We Support Social Imagination in Youth Theatre?

Social Scripts

Social scripts can be particularly helpful for an autistic person who finds new situations or specific situations challenging. A social script is an easy to read document, which includes the following information:

- Clear language and simple pictures.
- Details of how a situation will play out.
- Any expectations that will be placed on the young person.
- Supports that are available to the individual if the young person feels overwhelmed.

Having a social script available which outlines what is involved in a youth theatre workshop would be very helpful for new members on their first day and also for autistic members who may need this support to re-familiarise themselves with the workshop each week. See the end of this section for an example of a social script which could be used in a youth

theatre workshop. This resource can be copied and edited to suit different facilitators, venues and age groups.

Visual Agenda

An autistic young person may not have the social imagination skills to imagine the layout of the workshop and may become anxious about where they are in the structure of the day, what is coming next and how long until they are finished. Having a simple visual agenda on display, which can be put together minutes before the workshop, provides the young person with a strategy to use if they become anxious about what is happening next. In a similar way, there may be a sudden change to the layout of the workshop while the workshop is taking place. This is an example of inclusive practice – it is a support that has been designed to meet the needs of an autistic participant, but is available to and beneficial for all other participants as well. See the end of this section for an example of a visual agenda which could be copied and adapted to suit different facilitators, venues and age groups.

STRATEGY; 'Say-Do-Copy' – individual strategy to support social imagination challenges...

The group can be constantly reminded that if they have difficulty processing or remembering a facilitator's instructions, they can use the 'Say-Do-Copy' strategy.

Say – the facilitator will say what they are asking the group to do, so listen to them.

Do – The facilitator will do what they are asking the group to do, so watch them.

Copy – The young person can copy what the facilitator is saying/doing.

This strategy can be used across all activities and referenced regularly to promote consistency.

What is Social Interaction?

Social interaction is the way in which we understand social rules, behaviours and relationships. A person who struggles with social interaction, may experience the following challenges in social situations:

- May find turn-taking in conversations difficult
- May not ask questions or respond at the appropriate time
- May not have an awareness of personal space or boundaries
- May only engage in conversation about topics which are of interest to them
- May not make eye contact

The above challenges and others associated with social interaction difficulties can often mean that an autistic person may find it very hard to make friends or feel a sense of belonging within a group of people. A lack of understanding and support around social interaction contributes to many autistic people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, and thus dropping out of activities that require social interaction.

How Can We Support Social Interaction in Youth Theatre?

Working in Pairs / Groups

Young autistic people may find working with others to be challenging – however this is a key aspect of youth theatre and an essential life skill to develop, so it is important not to shy away from this challenge. When starting group work, working with people that they like and get on well with will create a positive association with group work. Once this positive association has been built, they will be more resilient in working with different people.

- Notice and utilise **certain individuals or a combination of individuals** that an autistic young person works well with.
- **Slowly introduce other personalities** which are more challenging for the autistic young person to work with.
- **Keep challenging group work short** at the beginning and slowly lengthen the time.

- Check in on group work regularly to see how they are getting on.
- **Support the young autistic person** to share their ideas and get involved in the group.
- **Foster independence** and avoid being over-bearing. If they seem to be getting on well without much encouragement or support from the facilitator, notice this and allow them to continue as they are.

Free Time

The unstructured and unpredictable nature of free time can be anxiety-inducing for young autistic people. Please see below for suggestions designed to make free time a little easier;

- Use a **visual timer** to show how long free time will last for. A sand timer or clock timer can be very effective in clarifying the abstract concept of time.
- ‘Sitting and chatting’ can be challenging for an autistic person so give the option for the young people to engage in a **range of activities** during their free time. Activities, such as a deck of cards, could be provided and/or the young people may bring their own activities for free time too. This will allow the young autistic person to have a familiar activity that they enjoy and makes them feel safe. This also lends itself as a topic of conversation which can make social interaction easier.
- Use a **buddy system** to ensure that each young person has someone to eat their lunch/snack with. The buddies can be changed at each workshop. Buddies can be assigned randomly using a lottery system or pick sticks, or the facilitator can pre-plan the buddy combinations.¹



¹ Pick sticks are lollipop sticks with a young person's name on each one. Commonly used as a classroom management technique

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable when a group of people are working together over a sustained period of time. Sometimes for an autistic young person, conflict can arise with their peers when their communication or behaviour is mis-understood or when their needs are not met. Sometimes emotions such as upset, anxiety or fear can be displayed as anger or defensiveness and this can lead to conflict. If a conflict arises between young people during a youth theatre workshop, keep in mind the following:

- Choose an **appropriate time and place** to address and resolve the conflict, away from those who were not directly involved.
- Allow the young people who were involved in the conflict to have **time and space to reflect** on what happened before addressing it.
- **Hear all sides first**, allow the young people to express their experience of the conflict.
- Encourage the use of **statements beginning with 'I feel,'** as opposed to 'You did.'
- Use **restorative practice** to resolve the conflict – each individual focuses on their part in the conflict, acknowledges any harm they caused to the other person and takes responsibility for repairing the harm caused.
- **Facilitate a solution** rather than imposing a sanction.
- **Discuss what happened with the parents/guardians** of the young people involved, especially if they are in a junior group. This can be done face-to-face or over the phone. Explain clearly each young person's side of the conflict and the solution that was agreed on.
- Emotions often run high for young people and their parents/guardians during conflict, so ensure that as a facilitator you **step back from the situation**, remind yourself of this and **don't take anything that is said personally**.

A key point to remember is that if an autistic young person becomes engaged in a conflict

due to anxiety or sensory overload, they may not be in full control of their behaviour at this time. Ensure that this is taken into consideration when resolving the conflict.

STRATEGY; 'Eyes & Ears' – individual strategy to support social imagination challenges...

The group can be regularly reminded that if they have forgotten to use the 'Say-Do-Copy' strategy when the facilitator is giving instructions and they find themselves confused about the steps involved in the activity, they can use the 'Eyes and Ears' strategy.

Eyes – watch what other people are doing and copy them.

Ears – listen to what other people are saying and copy them.

This means that they do not have to rely on their brain to remember what the facilitator's instructions were, as this can lead to feeling overwhelmed and anxious.



Social Script

This resource is an example of a social script layout, which facilitators can edit and adapt when creating their own. It is a good idea to use real-life pictures instead of cartoons or clip art pictures in a social script.

Insert venue picture

My youth theatre workshop takes place at ...
(insert venue name)

Insert facilitators' pictures

My youth theatre facilitators are ... (insert facilitators' names.) When I arrive, they will be at the main door to greet me.

Insert picture of main room

This is the room where my youth theatre workshop takes place.

Insert picture of toilets / location

The toilets are located ... (insert location.)

I can wait outside the building with my parent/guardian or I can go inside and wait with the other members until the workshop starts. When all of the other members have arrived, the facilitators will start the workshop.

Insert picture of visual agenda

There will be a visual agenda on the wall so if I forget what we are doing or if I want to know what is coming next, I can look at that to help me remember.

Insert picture of group work

Sometimes I will work by myself and sometimes I will work with other people. In group work, I will try to say any ideas I have about how to complete the task that we are doing I will also listen to ideas from other people in my group. We will complete the task together by using parts of their Ideas and parts of my ideas.

Insert picture of help signal

If I am unsure of what we are doing, I can watch the facilitator, can watch other people around me or ask the facilitator for help. I can also use our agreed help signal to show the facilitator that I need help.

Insert picture of Quiet Space / relaxation box / other support

If I am feeling worried or anxious, I can take a break from the group and choose an independent activity to help me feel better. If I am really anxious and want to go home, I can ask the facilitator to call my parent/guardian.

If I am overwhelmed or experience sensory overload, I can ... (insert support here, e.g. go to the Quiet Space, use a relaxation box etc.)

Insert venue picture

The youth theatre workshop ends at ... (insert time.) When the facilitator says it is time to leave, I will collect my belongings and meet my parent/guardian outside the building.

See p. 18 for further information on setting up a quiet space/ making a relaxation box.

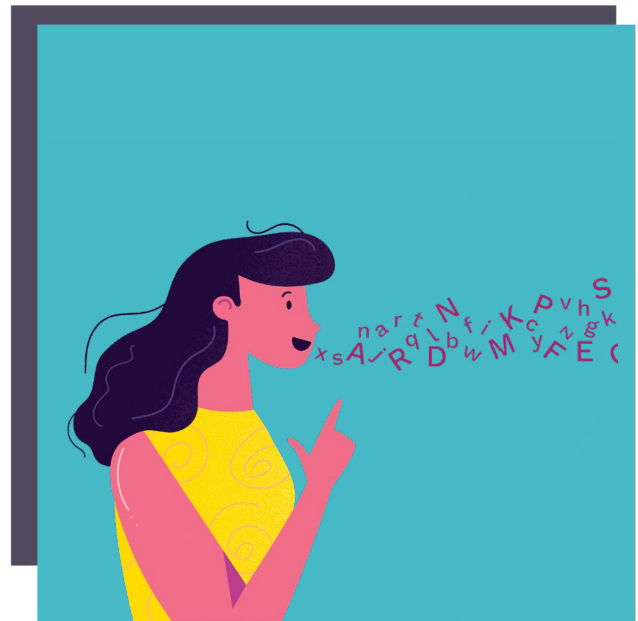
Visual Agenda

This resource is an example of a visual agenda, which facilitators can edit and adapt when creating their own. Display the visual agenda in a place where it will be easily accessible/visible to those who need it and make reference to it when necessary.

WELCOME CIRCLE



WARM UP EXERCISE - PHYSICAL, VOCAL, CONCENTRATION.



WHOLE GROUP ACTIVITIES



PAIR / SMALL GROUP WORK



SHOW GROUP WORK & FEEDBACK



FAREWELL CIRCLE & ACTIVITY



Sensory Processing

What is sensory processing?







Autism affects a person's ability to process their 5 senses - **sight, sound, touch, taste and smell**. This sensory processing difference also affects a person's **vestibular sense**, which affects their **balance**, and their sense of **proprioception**, which affects **body control** and **spatial awareness**. The brain will interpret sensory information from the person's surroundings and will then send a message to the relevant parts of the body, which may result in an experience of discomfort or even pain.

Hypersensitivity & Hyposensitivity

Some people who are diagnosed with autism spectrum condition may **experience painful discomfort** from a particular sense - this is known as **hypersensitivity**. Levels of hypersensitivity can vary from person to person and can also vary in different contexts for the person.

Conversely, some autistic people may be **hyposensitive**. This means that they may **need more stimulation** from a certain sense in order to experience and understand it. Similar to hypersensitivity, levels of hyposensitivity can vary from person to person and can also vary in different contexts for the person. Hyposensitivity can also cause **discomfort and irritation**.

It is important to note that quite often an autistic person will not be either hypersensitive or hyposensitive in all senses. It is more common for a person to experience a mix of sensory sensitivities to varying degrees. See opposite for examples of behaviours and experiences that relate to hyper/hyposensitivity in all seven senses:

Sensory Experience	Hypersensitive	Hyposensitive
 TOUCH or a gentle pat on the shoulder...	Can feel like a hard punch	Needs deeper pressure and may find light touch confusing / irritating
 SMELL that is faint or not very noticeable ...	Can be overpowering and cause headaches/nausea	May not notice at all, may enjoy much stronger smells
 LIGHTS that seem 'normal'	Can be dazzling and disorienting	Can be much too dim and may need extra light to see
 SOUNDS that are distant or background noise	May all build up and overwhelm the person	May need higher volume and may seek out loud sounds
 TASTE that seems neutral or 'normal'	May taste out of date or under-cooked	May seek out stronger / sweeter tastes
 PROPRIOCEPTION/ VESTIBULAR - standing still ...	May cause dizziness and need to stim! ¹	May need to explore space around them to understand it

¹ Self-stimulatory behaviour occurs when an autistic person makes repetitive sounds and/or body movements to improve focus, communicate and/or self-regulate.

Sensory Overload

Sensory overload occurs when an autistic person's brain has received more sensory information than it is able to process at one time. This can cause a person to experience stress, anxiety and even physical pain. This experience can result in an uncontrollable behavioural response, such as social withdrawal, becoming very agitated/upset or having a meltdown.

Common Triggers in a Youth Theatre Setting

It is important for the facilitator to get to know the different sensory profiles of the young people they are working with. Most autistic people will experience sensory sensitivities to some degree, however no two autistic people will experience the same profile of sensory sensitivities. That said, here are some common sensory triggers that have been noted in youth theatre workshops:

1) Movement

When the participants in a workshop are moving around the space, this can be disorienting for an autistic person. There are a number of reasons for this, it could be related to the person's sense of sight and how they process moving objects or their sense of proprioception and their ability to judge their spatial awareness. It could also be related to social imagination and anxiety, they may not cope well if they are unsure of where everyone is going to end up when the movement stops.

What can we do? Strategies such as building the pace, instructing direction of movement and layering instructions and complexity of direction can be very helpful.

2) Stillness

Maintaining stillness for a sustained period of time can be challenging for an autistic person. If they are hypersensitive, they may need to stim regularly to distract themselves from a

sensory trigger in the environment or to self-regulate. If they are hyposensitive, they may need a lot of movement to experience sensory input. If they experience proprioceptive or vestibular challenges, they may feel pain or discomfort from holding their body in one position for too long.

What can we do? Use a visual aid (such as a sand timer) to countdown the amount of time they need to be still for can be helpful. Use physical supports such as cushions or bean bags and allow them to sit if standing is too uncomfortable, or vice versa. Adapt the activity so that the person can participate to their best ability.

3) Noise

Noise that builds up over time can cause an autistic person to experience sensory overload. Sudden noise can cause a stress response. Background noise can make it very difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Some autistic people will need louder sound stimulation than others.

What can we do? Observe the needs of the young people in the group and adapt your practice accordingly. Use a noise-o-meter to help control noise in the room or allow the young person to wear ear buds or ear defenders so that they can participate to the best of their ability. When it is possible, warn the young person that the next activity will be loud or that a loud/sudden sound is coming.

4) Suddenness

Sometimes it is the unexpected nature of sudden noises or sudden change that can affect an autistic person.

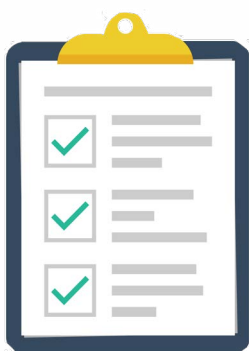
What can we do? Provide a warning to the person before a sudden change, event or trigger. Use countdowns or have a visual signal to ease anxiety around suddenness.

Sensory Aids

Sensory Profile

A sensory profile is a document which contains information about an autistic person's particular sensory sensitivities, triggers and behaviour when exposed to a trigger. It also lists helpful tactics and strategies that can ease the effect of sensory overload for the young person. To foster a culture of inclusion, this document should be available to all participants to fill out if they wish. Please **CLICK HERE** to access AsIAM's Sensory Profile template. (www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-All-About-Me.pdf)

Sensory Audit



A sensory audit is an activity which can be conducted by the facilitator alone or with assistance from others. In the spirit of inclusion, conducting the audit with the group participants is a good idea. It is a template which guides those involved to look at the space from

a sensory perspective. It gives examples of what could potentially lead to sensory overload and suggestions for improvement. Please **CLICK HERE** to access AsIAM's Sensory Audit template. (www.asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Sensory-Checklist-1.pdf)



Quiet / Sensory Space

A quiet/sensory space is a designated area that an autistic person can use if they become overwhelmed by the sensory environment or by

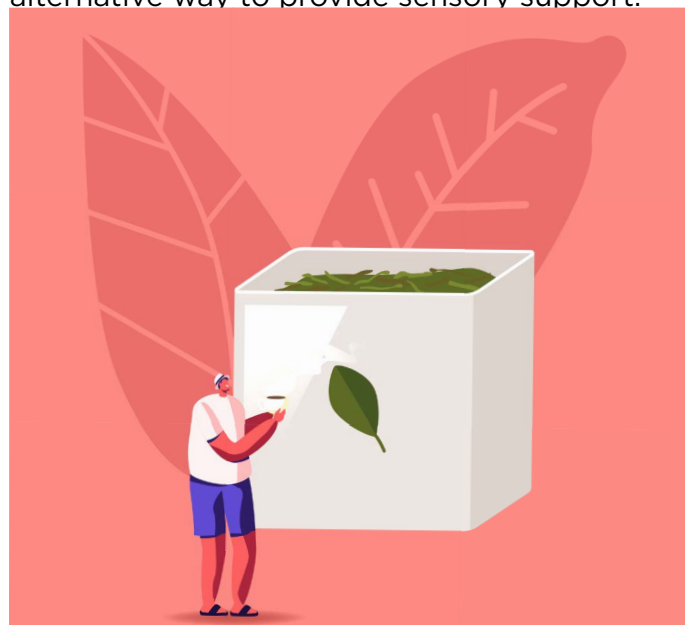
stress/anxiety. What you choose to put into the quiet/sensory space should be directly linked to the autistic person's needs. Below are some examples of what a quiet/sensory space may contain in a youth theatre setting:

- An **empty space** with a **chair** to sit down in, away from the overstimulation of the workshop.
- A **yoga ball** or **mini trampoline** for movement based sensory input.
- **Low lighting, battery operated candles** or a **lava lamp** to create a soothing atmosphere.
- **Soft cushions or blankets** to provide a comforting tactile experience.








All of this equipment can be purchased without huge costs and can be set up, packed away and stored easily. The location of a quiet/sensory space should be near to the main space being used, so that it is easily accessible for the young people and also so that the facilitator can easily monitor it. If there is not a second room, an available youth theatre leader or additional space available, a pop-up tent is a cost-effective way of creating a quiet/sensory space.

Relaxation Box

In some circumstances, setting up a separate quiet/sensory space may not be possible. Creating relaxation boxes that the participants are free to use whenever they need is an alternative way to provide sensory support.



A relaxation box contains sensory equipment that relative to an individual's needs. See below for examples of items that you might include in a relaxation box to support different needs and ages:

Sensory Need	Resources
Visual 	Sensory bottles, kaleidoscopes, liquid/sand shakers
Auditory 	Ear defenders, soothing music, mini rain maker
Tactile 	Putty, stress balls, bubble wrap, tissues for ripping
Olfactory (Smell) 	Items scented with lavender or other calming essential oils
Gustatory (Taste) 	Snacks in different textures
Vestibular (Balance/Movement) 	Skipping rope, yoga pose cards, ball to catch & throw
Proprioceptive (Body Awareness/Control) 	Weighted blanket, bean bags, pillow, resistance bands, hand massager

A relaxation box may also contain aids for communication, cognitive distraction and calming breathing. Although these are not specifically sensory needs, they can often come about as additional needs when an autistic person is sensorially overwhelmed.

Supporting A Young Person with Anxiety

Young people on the autism spectrum are highly likely to experience mental health challenges, especially anxiety issues/disorders. Communication, self-awareness, social skills, abstract thinking, problem solving and perspective are all skills which are necessary to cope with the experience of day-to-day anxiety. The development of these skills is directly affected by autism, therefore it is understandable why autistic young people may struggle with managing their anxiety levels and responses. Common anxiety triggers for young people on the autism spectrum include:

- Speaking in front of/to others
- Fear of judgement / ridicule
- Unexpected changes
- Social demands
- Communication difficulties
- Other highly personal issues

Anxiety Cycle



Signs of Anxiety

- Easily losing patience or temper
- Restlessness
- Increased level of self-stimulatory behaviours or challenging behaviours
- Increased fear, hyper-arousal or irritability
- Fatigue
- Extreme avoidance of or withdrawing from people/places/situations
- Physiological over-reactivity
- Shyness
- Distressing thoughts
- Becoming preoccupied with or obsessive about one subject
- Somatic complaints, complaining about experiencing muscle aches, headaches or generally feeling unwell

If a young person exhibits signs of anxiety in a youth theatre workshop, the following steps can be taken to support the young person in identifying how they are feeling and choosing a strategy to best meet their needs.

- **Stay with the group - observe**
The young person can stay within the group formation, whether that is standing or sitting in any kind of formation. They can observe their peers engaging in the activity but choose not to actively participate themselves.
- **Leave the group - observe**
The young person can step out of the group formation, while staying within the room where the workshop is being facilitated. They can observe their peers engaging in the activity but choose not to actively participate themselves.
- **Leave the group - self-soothe**
The young person can step out of the group formation, while staying within the room where the workshop is being facilitated. They can choose to engage in self-soothing activities in order to self-regulate, such as stimming, breathing, movement and/or distraction activities.
- **Leave the room - self-soothe**
The young person can leave the room where the workshop is being facilitated if an agreed safe space and additional adult is available. They can choose to engage in self-soothing activities in order to self-regulate, such as stimming, breathing, movement and/or distraction activities.
- **Offer to call a parent/guardian**
The facilitator can offer to call the young person's parent/guardian and discuss how the young person feels about this option. Alternatively, the young person can choose to call their parent/guardian themselves.

The steps outlined above are not designed to be followed in a linear process. Facilitators

must remember that they do not know what has happened to the young person that day or that week that has impacted their emotional state. A young person may present with needs that can be addressed using the first step of the anxiety support guide or they may already be at step 4 or 5 by the time they arrive at the workshop. Meet the young person where they are and address the needs that present themselves.

See the end of this section for a visual guide on managing anxiety, which has been designed by AsIAM for use in youth theatre workshops to support both the young person and the facilitator in identifying where they are on the scale and what they need at any given time.

Self-Soothing Activities

Communication cards or an **emotions fan** can support the young person in reflecting on and establishing their thoughts and feelings. It also assists them in communicating this to others if needed.

Cognitive distraction activities can be a helpful strategy to use when a person is extremely stressed and overwhelmed. Examples of these activities include **crosswords, sudoku, Rubix cube** etc., which completely distracts the brain from the anxiety.

Breathing exercises such as counting breaths,



breathing around the circumference of a shape, blowing a balloon, breathing through a straw or blowing mini pom poms using a straw can be very effective strategies in helping a person to regulate and calm their own breathing. These activities can be decided upon based on the young person's age/development.

The young person may be able to access and engage with these activities by using either a quiet space or a relaxation box.

Parental fear / anxiety



In some cases, fear and anxiety about joining a social group can be transferred from the parent/guardian to the young person. Parental fear and anxiety is common among those whose children have additional needs. These parents may have experienced their child being pre-judged, teased or even bullied due to their differences and it can be a hard ask for them to put their trust in facilitators and other young people that they do not know. Facilitators may notice that it is the parent who needs their support in coping with anxiety, not the young person. Ensure to check in with these parents before and after the workshop to let them know how the young person got on that day. Make sure they know that they can approach the facilitator to discuss any worries or concerns they have. Listen to these worries and concerns with patience, understanding and empathy. In cases like these, the parent needs to feel safe with the facilitator in order to trust that their child is also safe in this environment.

Top Tips for Supporting a Young Person with Anxiety

- Contact the parent/guardian if the young person has been missing for more than 2 weeks.
- Check-in with the young person.
- Encourage younger participants to get to the car park of the building. Assure them that there is no pressure to come into the building.
- Make no judgement on behaviour when a young person is struggling.
- Discuss why they don't want to come into the workshop.
- Remind the young person of strategies that they can use during the workshop.
- Encourage and support the young person to go beyond their comfort zone.
- Humour can be very helpful in dealing with fear and anxiety.
- Recognise all forms of participation – it may be the case that the best a young person can do on one particular day is to leave the group and self-soothe. Ensure they understand that this is okay and that their participation has been recognised.



Step-By-Step Process for Managing Anxiety

The following steps are explained fully on p. 14, below is a visual guide which can be used in workshops to allow the young person / facilitator to identify the stage they are at...

**Stay with the
group:
observe**

I can't participate in the activity right now. I can be with the group and watch others participate.

**Leave the
group:
observe**

I can't participate in the activity or be with the group right now. I can watch others participate while being away from the group.

**Leave the
group:
self-soothe**

I can't participate or watch others participate in the activity right now. I can self-soothe in the room where the group are working.

**Leave the
room: self-
soothe**

I can't self-soothe in the room where the group are working right now. I can self-soothe outside the room or in a quiet space.

**Offer to call
a parent/
guardian**

I can't self-soothe outside the room or in a quiet space. I want to call my parent/guardian.



Disclosing Autism / Additional Needs

Disclosing Additional Needs

A person who is autistic will experience a range of different needs around communication, social interaction, social imagination and sensory processing. They may also have needs around motor skills, body control and spatial awareness. Having prior knowledge of these needs within a group is helpful for the facilitator to plan activities and supports accordingly. However, it's important to remember that it is a parent's or young person's right not to disclose personal information and this right may be exercised for a number of reasons:

1. A parent(s) may not yet be at a stage where they are comfortable disclosing this information.
2. They may be aware of their child's needs, but may not yet have begun a formal diagnostic process.
3. They may be aware of their child's needs and are experiencing difficulties with accessing a formal diagnosis.
4. They may be aware of their child's needs and still coming to terms with the diagnosis.
5. They may not fully understand or feel confident explaining their child's needs.
6. They may feel uncomfortable writing down such sensitive information on a form, without full knowledge of who has access to that form.
7. They may be uncomfortable disclosing sensitive information when they do not know how the facilitator or youth theatre will approach difference.
8. A young person may not be aware of any formal diagnosis / additional needs themselves as the parent(s) may have chosen not to share this information with them.

Creating a Safe Space to Disclose

Parents and/or young people may have uncertainties around disclosing their diagnosis or additional needs as a result of a negative experience when they did so previously. Facilitators need to portray a sense of confidence, knowledge and acceptance when interacting with parents in this regard. Ensure

that it is made clear to the parent that their young person will be fully supported without judgement and celebrated for who they are, regardless of additional needs. This will put parents/young people in the best position to disclose. Having empathy for the parent's concerns and fears surrounding the disclosure of their child's needs is key to building a relationship of trust.

Sample Disclosure Section Within a Membership Form

If 'Yes' to any of the below, please write on form or call (insert facilitator's name and number) in confidence. Please note that information may have to be shared with others in the interest of your child's welfare.

Does your child have any additional needs of which we need to be aware?	Yes	No
If 'Yes' please give details		
Does your child have any medical conditions of which we need to be aware?	Yes	No
If 'Yes' please give details		
Does your child have any allergies of which we need to be aware?	Yes	No
If 'Yes' please give details		

A parent(s) may be uncomfortable with writing down sensitive information on a form, so ensure that they have an alternative option to speak to the facilitator on the phone or in person about their child's additional needs.

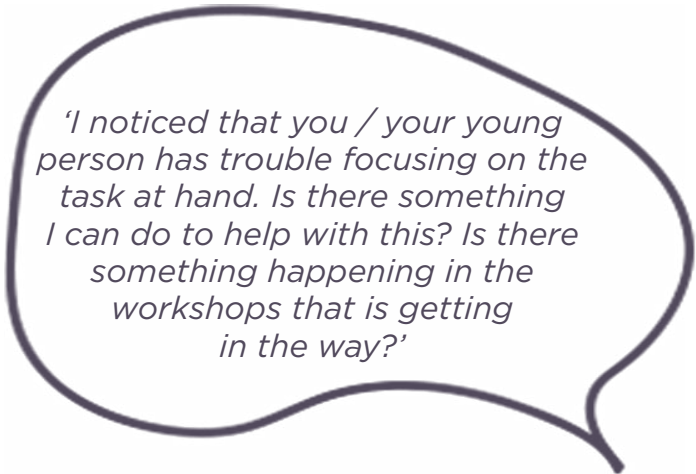
Inclusive Practice

In the event that a parent/young person chooses not to disclose any personal information about themselves, the facilitator must ensure that their practice is inclusive in order to support any undisclosed needs. When needs arise that have not been disclosed, these needs should still be facilitated. A diagnosis or written disclosure is not necessary to give support to a young person when they need it. In fact, there should be a presumption of difference in a new group and this should be taken into account when planning

workshops. Differentiation can be offered to the whole group, for example sending scripts in advance of the next workshop, allowing those who need additional support to make use of the offer without having to disclose why.

Approaching a Parent / Young Person with Concerns

A facilitator may want to have a discussion with the parent(s) if they see that a young person has apparent needs and feels they need further information in order to best to support these needs. They may want to discuss this with the young person first, which can be helpful in gaining extra information before approaching the parent. Having such a discussion requires considered thought around what to say. Using concrete examples and framing questions in such a way that describe what the facilitator has noticed and what they may consider this to mean, can lead to a non-threatening, non-judgemental conversation, for example:



'I noticed that you / your young person has trouble focusing on the task at hand. Is there something I can do to help with this? Is there something happening in the workshops that is getting in the way?'

It is important for the facilitator to generalise the issue and not to suggest any specific needs or diagnosis, as they are not qualified to do so and may end up offending or upsetting the parent / young person. They may not disclose on the first occasion that this conversation has started, especially if they are very protective of their information due to previous negative experiences, however once the facilitator remains consistent with their approach to difference, the parent/young person may feel more and more comfortable.



Promoting a Culture of Inclusion

‘Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.’

Verna Meyers

A culture of inclusion is one in which every person, regardless of their background, their level of ability, additional needs, gender, sexuality, culture, creed or race, is not only invited to participate, but is actually provided with support which enables them to participate. Below are examples of ideals which facilitators can promote in their workshops in order to create a culture of inclusion:

Learn to work to own strengths & see the strengths of others

Teach the young people to identify in themselves what they are good at and to use those strengths to overcome challenges. Once they have this skill, it is easier to transfer this thinking to other people. Teach them to recognise other people’s strengths and acknowledge how when a group of people lend their strong points to one another, this leads to very effective team work.



Deal with mistakes and failures through trying - reflecting - re-trying

Making mistakes is how we learn best. Encourage and celebrate mistakes as an opportunity to learn what not to do or how to do better. Teach the young people to be self-reflective, not self-critical and model this behaviour for them. Model the process of trying something new, making a mistake, reflecting on what happened and trying again. Support the young people in following this model and gradually guide them towards the goal of following this model independently.

Support others when they are struggling

Encourage the young people to support their peers when they are struggling with a task. Promote a climate where everyone does this for each other, so that nobody is left struggling alone. Until the participants are ready to do this for each other, it is the facilitator’s responsibility to model this behaviour and ensure that nobody is left to struggle alone.



Believe in everybody’s potential - hold high but realistic expectations

It is easier for a young person to believe in their own potential when they see that others around them, especially those in a position of authority, believe in them. However, there is a fine line between holding high (yet realistic) expectations for a young person and holding them to a standard that puts undue pressure on them. Walk this line very carefully, it teaches the young person to have high expectations of themselves without falling into the trap of self-criticism.

Respect a person’s knowledge of themselves

The young people in youth theatre workshops are not young children, they are young adults and benefit from being treated as such. Encourage them to respect and believe in their own knowledge of themselves, their feelings, opinions and abilities, by showing them that you believe in this.



Look for and respect an individual's level of participation

Knowledge and strategies are only effective when a person's level of participation is noticed and validated by the facilitator. A low level of participation may be the very best that the young person can do on one particular day because of what they are experiencing. Respect that they have made the effort to show up, in spite of the challenges they are experiencing and view this as the young person trying their best.

Look for progress, no matter how small

Progress does not happen from one week to another, it may not even happen within the first few sessions. The timeline for progress will be different for each individual and what progress looks like will be different for each individual. Approaching progress from a positive position, e.g., assuming that progress is already there before you look for it, makes it easier to find. It doesn't matter if it is something as small as a young person participating in an activity for one minute longer than they previously did – that is progress which can be celebrated. Acknowledging and celebrating progress, no matter how small, will instil a sense of confidence and belonging in the young people.



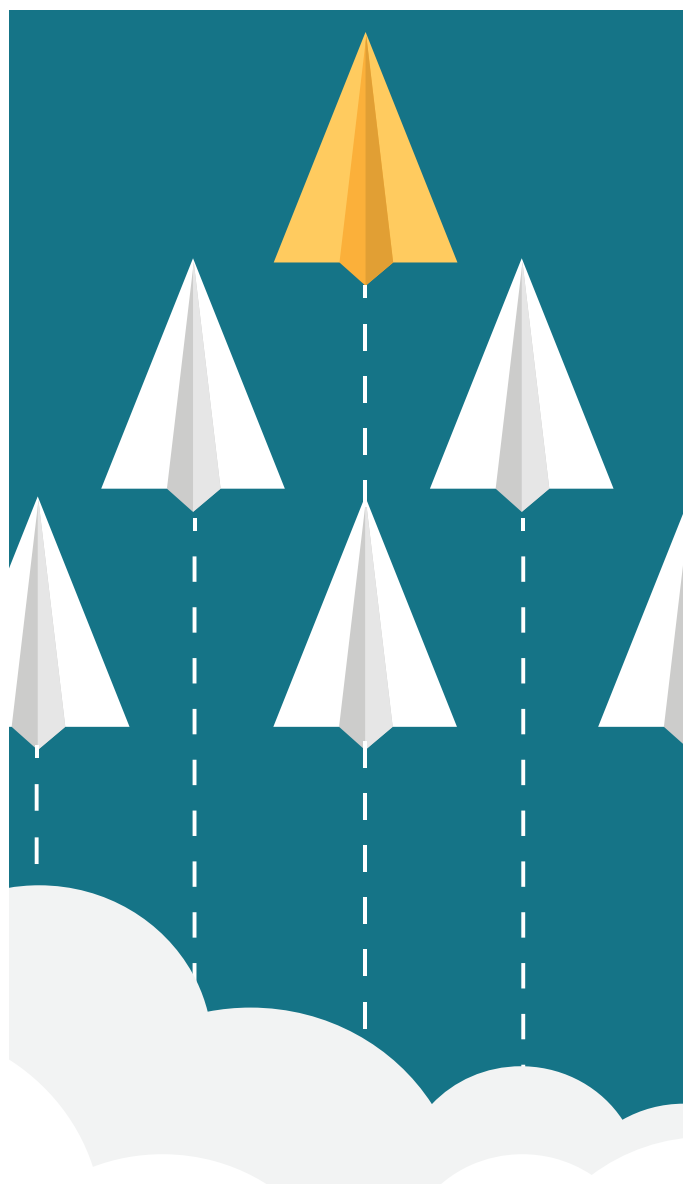
Welcome and celebrate interpretation of instruction

Autistic young people may interpret an instruction in a way that the facilitator had not considered. This creativity and difference should be embraced and praised. Thinking outside the box and making individual meaning

out of something rigid is a key skill that you're trying to teach – so when you see it, celebrate it and encourage this freedom of thought in others.

The group is influenced by the facilitator's attitude – what you want for the young people, you should practice yourself

Role-model the way you want the young people to behave, to work together, to treat each other. The facilitator is the position of authority in the room and has ultimate control over creating a culture of inclusion in the group that will allow for autistic young people to participate and thrive.



Case Studies

Eleanor
Past Participant,
Kilkenny Youth
Theatre

"I began attending the Junior Youth Theatre when I was 11, and then moved on to the Senior Youth Theatre when I started secondary school in 2008. In total I was a member of Kilkenny

Youth Theatre for eight years.

Even before I started the Senior Youth Theatre, I found it hard to wrap my head around the fact that I was starting secondary school so I could move on to the Senior YT, but the age range for Senior YT was 13-18 years and I wouldn't turn 13 until three months into First Year, so where did that leave me?! Did I have to continue with the Juniors until I turned 13 and then join the Seniors? How could I be in secondary school and in the Juniors?! I couldn't work out how I fit in, and worried about it for weeks until I finally asked the facilitator and he said, "You can start the Seniors in September, no worries." It was solved thus, but I did struggle with these unspoken guidelines and assumptions. I think facilitators should explicitly explain unspoken assumptions and contracts to the group at large, and to autistic participants when needed.

In the years in Senior YT where the majority of members were around my own age, I found this difficult - I could talk to people older and younger to me, but things were more confusing with my own peers. I found secondary school very difficult, youth theatre was my only offline social outlet. The valuable experiences of drama workshops, getting up in front of each other and doing drama exercises, and working on productions together did bond us. While I did generally feel different to others as I wasn't aware of my autism diagnosis, I still felt part of a team and respected by fellow members in my youth theatre.

Generally, my experiences in Kilkenny Youth Theatre, and in wider Youth Theatre Ireland programmes were extremely positive and I wouldn't be who or where I am today without them. I texted my mother to ask her for suggestions for this piece, and she replied with "Don't recall any problems, you were at your happiest when there. It definitely brought out

the best in you and your peers at Barnstorm all related to you and each other."

Ann
Parent, Kilkenny
Youth Theatre

"My son Ross has attended Kilkenny Youth Theatre since the age of 10. He is now 18 and in the senior section. When Ross first joined, I met with Anna Galligan (the artistic

director) to explain/ discuss Ross's autistic disabilities. Anna was extremely empathetic and I felt, as a parent, very reassured that she would do all in her power to make Ross's time there a very positive experience which it is. As a parent of a child/young adult with Asperger Syndrome, the biggest concern is how he/she is accepted by other members/peers in the group. I feel knowledge and understanding of autism for facilitators and leaders through training/ courses is vital if people on the autism spectrum are able to access the joy of theatre and explore their potential. My son's experience has been a very happy one, he has gained so much confidence over the years. This would not have been possible without Anna's kindness and willingness to understand my son and promote tolerance and acceptance throughout the membership."

Sinéad
Parent, Kilkenny
Youth Theatre

"I have two children with ASD ages 17 and 15 currently participating in the Youth Theatre. Both started with a Summer camp 6 years ago and

have continued ever since. As ASD is so different for every person, the challenges we faced for each of them were different. Anxiety, low mood, lack of confidence and a feeling of inadequacy were features for one, while the other struggled with accepting changes to routine, need to control and being unable to see other people's points of view leading to angry outbursts and interruptions. Both sets of challenges though so different, lead to difficulties accessing extra-

curricular activities, although both desperately wanted to participate.

The key to the success we have had with Youth Theatre has been the close cooperation between us parents and the facilitators. A flexible approach and a non-judgemental understanding of the reasons for the behaviours were also essential. It was not easy at times but, as a parent, I was reassured that I could contact the youth theatre if I was having any particular difficulties. We worked closely together to overcome any issues which arose. The facilitators also never underestimated the ability of the young people and encouraged them to reach outside their comfort zone and take personal responsibility for contributing to the group, learning lines and attending rehearsals.

Both my young people have thrived in the supportive, inclusive environment created by our Youth Theatre. Their contribution is valued, they have developed friendships, social and critical thinking skills and have overcome many personal difficulties along the way. I find it difficult to think of any improvements that could be made. Simply asking the young people themselves what might help and consulting parents (where necessary) is a great start.”

Aidan, 17

**Senior Group,
Kilkenny Youth
Theatre**

“I was 11 years old when I first joined the Youth Theatre. I am currently still in the Youth Theatre, and I have been there for 6 years. As an Autistic person I personally found the biggest challenge to be my own anxiety. However, it wasn't stage fright. I found it helpful when our facilitator talked to me 1 on 1, and gave me the confidence and responsibility to manage myself. Ask autistic people if there's anything they need. But, most importantly: treat them the same as anyone else and allow them to be responsible for themselves.”

Anna
**Facilitator, Kilkenny
Youth Theatre**

“I have been facilitating for over 30 years and I was a member of Dublin Youth Theatre. Kilkenny Youth Theatre has an inclusive practice and will do all in its power to facilitate a young person's

involvement. All we ask is that they want to be involved. There have always been people on the autism spectrum in the youth theatre. There has been an increase in numbers in the last 10 years and our senior group has around a 25% membership of young people on the autism spectrum, plus around 10% of young people with other neurodiverse conditions, e.g., dyspraxia.

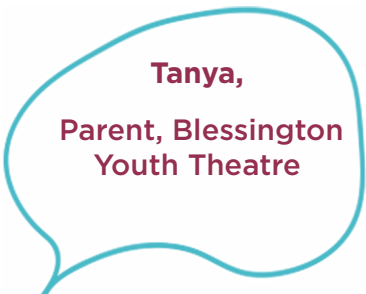
I personally have had no challenges in supporting a young person on the spectrum as I have met a range of young people over the thirty years so have had a chance to build up my confidence and strategies in regards to what might be impeding a young person's engagement. But I have seen challenges that I need to work on with the young person or parent, to help the young person have a positive experience in the youth theatre. This would be part of the youth theatre practice in general, neurotypical or neurodiverse. Once a young person has engaged and wants to be part of the youth theatre, it is my job to make that space as welcoming and safe as possible so that all young people can relax, be who they wish to be during that time and are open to what we are doing.

Challenges for the young people have included: being overwhelmed by noise, movement or light; anxiety in attending or taking part in exercises; and worries about remembering things. Challenges for parents include not wanting their child to be labelled, wanting instead that they are seen as individuals and are accepted. Parents sometimes worry that their young person will 'let themselves down because they become overwhelmed and people won't get to see how amazing their child can be and their child will be judged for something that they may have no control of at the moment' -

that is my interpretation of conversations with parents over the years.

The approach I take is, if the young person has walked through the door (physically or metaphorically), then regardless of what happens in the workshop, they want to be there on some level. It is part of my normal practice to layer exercises, to have ritual in groups, to issue instruction in a concise manner, do and say what is expected, encourage recovery from mistakes but to let mistakes happen to encourage reflection and learning, among many things. But if I were to tie it all up, 'acknowledge the challenge - find the solution.' That might require persistence and consistency and many changes of strategies, but I will always check-in with the young person as we go.

In terms of improvement and help for facilitators, this document is a good start. Anything that helps facilitators gain knowledge and confidence in the area of inclusive facilitation skills - whether it is reading material, exposure to best practice or training - is a great beginning."



Tanya,
Parent, Blessington
Youth Theatre

"All of my children attended Blessington Youth Theatre at some stage, but my daughter Jade attended from the age of 12 until 18.

Jade has Asperger Syndrome, but is highly functioning. It is not a visible disability which has its pluses and minuses. When Jade first began in BYT, I was very nervous. She has had separation anxiety and can get worked up at any time for no apparent reason (but there's always a reason.) Jade didn't want anyone to know she had Aspergers and this was a problem for me as I felt the leaders needed to know. They would not understand her actions otherwise or be able to help her in the correct manner. Luckily, Jade had attended drama classes before and loved it. In fact, I thank theatre for saving my daughter's life - she smiles on stage brighter than anywhere else.

But there are issues for a person with autistic traits in a large group and each person with autism is an individual with different needs. In the end I had to tell the leaders what Jade's issues were. Jade did not like to be touched, so I had to warn them about that. If they were lining up for something, she needed to be at the back or front of the line as she didn't like being in the middle. The leaders always made sure to speak to Jade using eye contact - which helped Jade. They knew about her highly sensitive sensory issues and they always checked with her if costumes were okay.

The leaders were extremely understanding even though they knew nothing about Aspergers. They were also very inclusive of Jade and she excelled in the group, except when it was time for auditions and handing out parts. Jade liked things to be as she imagined in her head so when she didn't get the part she wanted, she would become visibly upset in front of the group. This was hard for leaders to understand, but in time they knew to expect it. I often wondered if it would have been easier to let me know the part she got so I could warn her, but we wanted her to be treated the same so this was part of the experience. It was always a very bad evening in our house after the parts were handed out, but Jade did learn over the years to take it a little bit better.

I think the leaders were great with Jade and she has gone on to college to study drama and has in fact been back to Blessington Youth Theatre to give some workshops. The hardest bit for me, as a parent, was trying to explain to the leaders what Jade's issues were. You don't want your child to be treated differently, but at the same time they need certain supports and understanding. The education of leaders is the best way forward for this I believe. The more we understand in life, the more we can help."



**Matthew,
Youth Theatre
Member**

“I was ten when I first took part in a Summer camp where I lied about my age. I participated for the duration of the camp. Once I was old enough I joined

the Youth Theatre proper for the after school workshops and have continued to do so to this day. I sometimes found it hard to follow the more general instructions and would require clarification from time to time. Patient explanation of what the activity required me to do was, and is, helpful. Although not particularly noise sensitive myself, some autistic individuals respond poorly to high noise levels. If it is possible a reduction of loud noises from the workshops may help them to enjoy the activities more. In addition, for the more unruly sort, having the workshops be run by people who are generally patient and preferably at least somewhat educated on autism would be useful. I would also like to clarify that even those with below average intelligence that are on the spectrum can be quite capable at certain tasks and should not be treated as if they are anything less than their neurotypical peers. To do so would be discriminatory and wrong.”

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