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## Cultural Arts Access for Children with Disabilities via Sensory Friendly Theater

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# Cultural Arts Access for Children with Disabilities via Sensory Friendly Theater



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## BACKGROUND

- Families with children with disabilities participate less frequently in community activities than those with typically developing children
- Community participation for people with disabilities is supported by national initiatives and linked to population health
- Using organization-level consultation, occupational therapists collaborate with community organizations to support participation and population health<sup>1</sup>

## STUDY AIMS




To investigate experiences and perspectives of: 1) families with children with disabilities following a sensory friendly performance, and 2) theater staff who implemented a sensory friendly performance program with occupational therapy (OT) consultation

## METHODS

- Qualitative case study approach
- Parents recruited from sensory friendly show audience
- Staff recruited from theater managers/ administrators involved in sensory friendly program
- Data collected via semi-structured interviews with seven parents and four staff
- Data analyzed via inductive, thematic approach
- Families with typically developing children and children with autism spectrum disorder, epilepsy, cortical visual impairment, anxiety, and developmental disabilities represented

## SENSORY FRIENDLY THEATER

A cultural arts experience developed with occupational therapy (OT) consultation using **environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and trained staff** to promote theater-going access for people with diverse sensory and developmental abilities and needs<sup>2</sup>

Modified Physical & Sensory Environment	Modified Social Environment	Preparatory Materials	Trained Staff
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower volume</li> <li>• Gentle lighting</li> <li>• Small audience</li> <li>• Chill out space</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving and vocalizing allowed during show</li> <li>• Relaxed behavioral expectations</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Storybook guide for children</li> <li>• Show content guide for caregivers</li> </ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability awareness training for theater staff, actors, and volunteers</li> </ul>

## FAMILY THEMES

### Deeply Meaningful Experience

*"She was pointing, laughing, and cheering. She was super engaged in a way she doesn't engage with many things at all." – Mom of child with DD*

### Safety and Belonging

*"I'm supposed to be here; she's supposed to be here. You can give me all the looks you want but this is our performance." – Dad of child with epilepsy and DD*

### Powerful Social Environment

*"For [daughter], the lights don't matter, the louder the better. But this is for me to feel safe bringing her." – Mom of child with ASD*

### Inclusive but Safe Opportunities

*"Anybody who wants to buy a ticket should be able to. But it needs to be made really clear this is a special performance. Parents need to know everybody there is going to be accepting, or we won't come." – Mom of child with ASD*

## ORGANIZATIONAL THEMES

### OT Consultation as Key Facilitator

*"Knowing we had [the OT] and other professionals in the field helping us facilitate this made it very comfortable to embark on this process. If we didn't...it would have been a very different story."*

### Organizational Mission and Personal Commitment

*"The organization is about serving young people, all young people. Access is front and center of our mission, so this is a mission-driven project."*

*"Everyone was just excited to do it. It's a cause that everyone wants to see succeed. I think that makes a huge difference. Everyone comes into it with a really great attitude, really open hearts, which is beautiful."*

### Organizational Capacity Growth

*"What it has done for us as an institution is...it no longer seems insurmountable. When we say, what if we added 'X' [new access program], it's like, we could totally do that. It seems so easy now, which I think is great."*

## DISCUSSION

- Findings align with literature linking sensory friendly program participation to family well-being<sup>3</sup> and illustrate organization-level consultation as a promising OT service model to support population health
- Sensory friendly theater's success may be optimized by prioritizing a safe and welcoming social environment
- Findings indicate families with children with disabilities' desire for more community participation opportunities that are inclusive but safe

## CONCLUSION

- Sensory friendly theater is a promising access strategy with potential to promote community participation and health of diverse populations
- Future research needed to investigate relative value of sensory friendly program components, strategies to build inclusive and safe environments, perspectives of people with disabilities and actors, and best practices for organization-level OT consultation

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup>Umeda, C. J., Fogelberg, D. J., Jirikowic, T., Pitonyak, J. S., Mroz, T. M., & Ideishi, R. I. (2017). Expanding the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act for populations with intellectual and developmental disabilities: the role of organization-level occupational therapy consultation. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(4).

<sup>2</sup>Ideishi, R. I., & Mendonca, R. (2013). *Sensory-Friendly Performances Program evaluation report*. Washington, DC: John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

<sup>3</sup>Silverman, F., & Tyska, A. C. (2017). Supporting participation for children with sensory processing needs and their families: community-based action research. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(4).