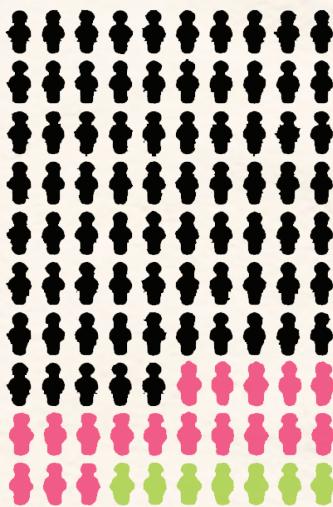


DEVELOPING & IMPLEMENTING RELAXED PERFORMANCES FOR A NEURODIVERSE AUDIENCE

A Guide For Performing Arts Settings

Caledonia Grant
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Barriers to Accessibility



1 in 4 adults have a **Disability**

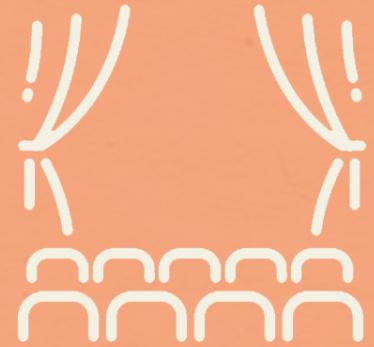
1 in 14 adults have a **Sensory Disability** (2020 US Census)

Individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses have significantly lower rates of performing arts attendance than other demographics.

For a neurodivergent person, traditional theatergoing may entail more stress and anxiety than they can justify. The twists, turns, and effects that thrill others can easily overwhelm those with sensory processing disorders (e.g. Autism, PTSD, ADHD, Dementia). Other common theater conventions – such as a closed house, clapping, sold-out seating – continue to deter many with sensory needs from the performing arts.

The “Silent Audience”

The societal convention of quietly observing a performance was normalized as recently as 1950, with theatergoing prior being perceived as an active social event. Since then, theatre etiquette has grown into a self-policing matter, whereby the venue has little involvement, while patrons will actively shush and judge each other. This learned judgement prevents many neurodivergent individuals and their caregivers from attending live performances.



Social-Emotional Development

Neurodivergent individuals often struggle with understanding social cues and managing their emotions. **While neurotypical children will pick up social skills more easily through everyday interactions, neurodivergent children may need extra support and practice to build these abilities.** In many cases, individuals with autism may associate a bad memory or trauma with attending the theater, discouraging them from further engagement. However, several parents of children with autism that attended a Relaxed Performance of *Jack and the Beanstock* in Newbury, U.K. reported their children happily incorporating the character behaviors, plots, and lessons of the show into their play for weeks afterward.

Joint Attention

This psychological phenomenon describes when an individual coordinates their attention to mimic the attention or actions of another. Neurodivergent children will use joint attention to develop reactionary social cues from fellow audience members and their reactions to the performance.

Planning a Relaxed Performance

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to increasing audience accessibility, so it is important to carefully evaluate the barriers that your venue may impose, the needs of your community, and the scale of modifications you are capable of making.

1 Show Selection

Relaxed performances can be rewarding experiences for neurodivergent patrons of all backgrounds, identities, and ages. Although relaxed programming is most often intended for children, consider exploring adult-oriented material as well. Additionally, discuss how the themes of the production may be enhanced by relaxation – **avoid developing the production and accessibility plan separately from each other.**

2 Forming an Advisory Board

Accessibility is a complex topic that should be approached from diverse perspectives. Along with representatives from the venue and creative team, assemble a group of individuals from your community with backgrounds in neurodiversity, inclusion, sociology, and education. This can include **occupational therapists, special education teachers, neurodivergent individuals, and parents of neurodivergent children.**

3 Marketing & Outreach

Spread the word. Early in the process, begin educating your audience about relaxed performances and how they look different than the traditional show. The goal is to bring in individuals that may have felt left out by mainstream theater practices, so look beyond your typical advertising strategies. **Reach out to local schools, disability resource centers, or church groups to start the conversation.**

4 Company & Staff Training

To create an inclusive space, it is important to educate everyone involved about relaxed performances and their expected contributions to the process. Organizations like **KultureCity can provide standardized training to your venue's staff** – which also allows them to create a list of certifiably accessible venues across the country. Preparing ushers and actors for potentially disruptive audiences helps to avoid judgmental reactions to neurodivergent behaviors.

5 Ticketing

Accessibility also applies to the financial aspects of your production. Consider an **alternative pricing structure** for relaxed performances that allows for the **widest scope of participation**. Additionally, review your refund policies – patrons may be less willing to attend a performance if they fear having to leave early and subsequently forfeiting the full ticket price. The production team should also consider reducing the house count for relaxed performances so that patrons have ample room to move about.

Relaxing the Theatre

When relaxing your performances, it is important to consider the entire theatergoing experience. Modifications should be considered for all common areas that patrons may encounter including the lobby, restrooms, and stairways/elevators.

Lighting

Leaving the house lights on throughout the performance can allow patrons to see ushers and exits, learn from audience reactions, and encourages free movement. Work closely with the lighting designer to **determine a list of unpredictable lighting cues** so a list of "surprises" can be created.

Clear Signage

Make sure that all exits, public facilities, and patron services are clearly labeled to minimize anxiety and confusion. **Signage indicating the relaxed status of the production** should also be highly visible in the lobby.

Sound

With the sound engineer, determine a consistent and appropriate volume for the performance. Work closely with the sound designer to **determine a list of unpredictable sound cues** so a list of "surprises" can be created.

Quiet Zone

Designating an area of the lobby as a **sensory decompression zone** allows patrons to step out of the house if they become overwhelmed. Include a **program feed** in this area so individuals don't worry about missing the performance.

Pre-Show Speech

Include a pre-show speech from a member of the cast or creative team that **introduces the concepts of relaxed performances** and **defines the social expectations** of the audience. Consider introducing actors portraying characters that may be particularly triggering or scary for patrons in this speech.

Facility Modifications

Consider the entire venue in your relaxation protocols. Common adjustments include turning off automatic hand dryers in restrooms and turning off music in elevators.

Sensory Kits

Sensory Kits may help patrons to self-regulate throughout the performance. These sensory tools are popular in neurodivergent communities, with many individuals already bringing their own "kits" to events. By providing these returnable and reusable items to patrons, your theater can normalize their presence in the audience and eliminate a potential financial barrier for patrons.



Content Guide

Includes plot summaries, character biographies, a list of "surprises", venue information, and more.



Participation Cards

Colored cards that can be worn by patrons to indicate consent to audience participation.



Fidgets

Small manipulative objects that can increase a patron's ability to focus by keeping their hands busy and engaged.



Ear Defenders

Headphones or earbuds that can be used to reduce overall volume, muffle harsh sounds, or play a descriptive audio feed.



Sunglasses

Eyewear with a low-tinting factor that can be used to reduce overall brightness or display closed captioning.

Beyond the Performance

To best prepare neurodivergent patrons for the potentially daunting social experience of theatergoing, your venue may choose to host the following programs in conjunction with your relaxed performances.

Meet Your Seat

Front-of-house tours held in advance of the performance that allows patrons to become familiar with the layout, facilities, and make an informed decision about seating.

Touch Tours

Onstage tours held in advance of the performance that allows patrons to interact with the set, costumes, or props – some tours may include a demonstration of “surprises” under work-light conditions.

Primers

Short performances by members of the cast – often held at schools – that can introduce patrons to the production’s plot and characters, all while in the comfort of a familiar setting.

Social Stories™

Informational cards detailing behavioral expectations of the social activities (e.g. clapping, exiting the theater, ticketing) that patrons may encounter when attending an event.

Meet & Greets

Individual or group conversations led by the cast of the production that can help patrons differentiate the characters and their actions from the actors.

Educational Outreach

After students have attended a relaxed performance, enhance their learning by continuing discussions of the production in the classroom. Theaters may coordinate with local schools to develop activities to further their comprehension of the material. Consider offering **field trip packages** (e.g. Touch Tour+Performance+Meet & Greet) to local schools to increase program participation.

Organized Workshops

Neurodivergent individuals often find success in forming relationships over shared interests. Regularly scheduled, relaxed, and well-organized workshops, centered around aspects of the theater (e.g. acting, crafts, writing), may provide a safe space for community members of all ages to form these relationships.

Regular Mixers

Consider hosting a reoccurring, relaxed mixer for neurodiverse adults in your theater community. Common public social spaces (e.g. bars, sporting events, cafes) often impose significant social barriers for neurodivergent adults. **These mixers encourage open and consenting conversations around a known shared interest.**

Professional Resources

When assembling your Relaxed Programming Advisory Board or developing resources consider networking with accessibility professionals within your own community. These individuals can provide informed feedback on existing developments or propose additional programming that could enhance the current standards of accessibility in the arts.

Occupational Therapists



Occupational Therapists (OTs) specialize in the rehabilitation or development of the skills needed to complete everyday routines. For neurodivergent individuals, OT can include situational priming or the development of self-regulation strategies. These professionals would be most helpful in developing the **Social Stories™** and **Sensory Kits**.

Speech Language Therapists

Speech Language Therapists specialize in the rehabilitation or development of speech and the ability to utilize and comprehend language. For neurodivergent individuals, Speech Language Therapy can include practicing conversational skills or developing non-verbal communication methods. These professionals would be most helpful in **advising staff how best to communicate with patrons**.

Special Education Teachers

Special Education Teachers specialize in the education of children with disabilities. They have extensive experience creating educational materials for and supporting the development of neurodivergent children. These professionals would be most helpful in developing **primer materials** and coordinating with schools for **outreach events**.

Caregivers

Caregivers specialize in providing the daily support and needs of an individual. A neurodivergent person's caregiver can be a parent, relative, or hired professional – all of which spend significant time assessing and caring for their needs and comfort. These professionals would be most helpful in **advising the production team regarding light & sound levels and Quiet Zones**.



Organizational Resources

In planning your relaxed performance, some questions or tasks may be best served by consulting a professional organization that specializes in accessibility. The following organizations provide a variety of resources, including professional guidance, industry standards, and training events.

KultureCity

kulturecity.org
Vestavia Hills, AL

"KultureCity® is the world's leading nonprofit on sensory accessibility and acceptance for those with invisible disabilities and sensory needs. Founded in 2014 in Birmingham, Alabama, KultureCity® has since expanded to certify more than 1,800 venues and many more events in the USA and the rest of the world."

Association for Autism and Neurodiversity

Aane.org
Watertown, MA
(617) 393-3824

"The Association for Autism and Neurodiversity (AANE) helps Autistic and similarly Neurodivergent people build meaningful, connected lives. We provide individuals, families, and professionals with education, community and support, in an inclusive atmosphere of validation and respect."

Autism Theatre Project

Autismtheaterproject.org

"We are a group of young adults, with and without autism, who are dedicated to changing the way the world sees autism and related conditions. Our mission is to show the world everyone has a voice. We show how people of all abilities can overcome challenges, and make an impact on the world. Through our productions, we inspire audiences to have faith in people of all abilities, including themselves."

Tangled Art + Disability

tangledarts.org
Toronto, ON
(647) 725 – 5064

"Tangled Art + Disability is dedicated to connecting professional and emerging artists, the arts community, and a diverse public through creative passion and artistic excellence. Our mission is to support Disabled, d/Deaf, chronically ill, neurodiverse, k/crip, Mad, sick & spoonie artists; to cultivate Disability Arts in Canada; and to increase opportunities for everyone to participate in the arts."

American Occupational Therapy Association

Aota.org
Bethesda, MD

"To advance occupational therapy practice, education, and research through standard setting and advocacy on behalf of its members, the profession, and the public."

International Association of Accessibility Professionals

Accessibilityassociation.org
Atlanta, Georgia
(941) 254-1797

"IAAP supports accessibility professionals and organizations with professional training, certifications, and networking. Our goal is to build professional skills and support organizations that incorporate accessibility into their services, products, and infrastructure."

Relaxed Programming Checklist

This checklist has been adapted from The Kennedy Center's 2013 *Sensory Friendly Programming for People with Social & Cognitive Disabilities*.

X	Action Item	Suggested Timeline
	Engage appropriate colleagues in a conversation about the feasibility of developing relaxed programming.	
	Select the production(s) & dates that will feature relaxed performances.	
	Assemble your Relaxed Programming Advisory Board.	As early as possible
	Identify an alternative ticketing process or pricing structure	
	Discuss your marketing plan & determine how patrons will learn about relaxed programming through your website, social media, and in-print materials.	
	Begin production & advisory board meetings to develop your plan for implementing relaxed performances (e.g. which materials to create, training, program evaluation)	4 Months Prior
	Create your preparation materials.	2-3 Months Prior
	Continue advertising and marketing your relaxed performances.	
	Train your cast & rehearsal staff in relaxed programming practices & the potential community benefits.	First Rehearsal
	Preview your production with a test audience to determine areas of success & improvement.	2-3 Weeks Prior
	Disseminate physical copies of your preparation materials to families, schools, and community organizations.	
	Offer pre-visit theater opportunities (e.g. Meet Your Seat).	
	Conduct pre-evaluation surveys with ticket holders and community members.	1-2 Weeks Prior
	Provide your venue staff with training in relaxed programming (e.g. specific house modifications, potential audience reactions, and alternative methods of patron assistance).	
Performance Dates		
	Conduct post-evaluation surveys with attendees and community members.	1-2 Weeks Post
	Hold a production post-mortem meeting to identify areas of success and improvement & discuss community feedback.	1-2 Months Post

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