

A RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT SENSORY FRIENDLY THEATRE PROGRAMMING: A SUMMARY FOR THEATRE ORGANIZATIONS.

What information does this summary provide?

This summary provides theatre organizations with the results of a research study on a sensory friendly theatre program. Results are unique to the specific program studied and are not generalizable to all sensory friendly programs. However, the results offer helpful insights for theatres that currently offer sensory friendly programs and provide a starting point for theatres developing new sensory friendly programs.

THE STUDY

Researchers were interested in learning about 1) the **experiences of families** who participated in a sensory friendly theatre program, and 2) the **experiences of theatre staff** involved in program development or implementation. Researchers interviewed nine parents and four theatre staff.

The sensory friendly program was designed with guidance from an occupational therapy consultant familiar with the needs of children with disabilities. The program incorporated environmental changes and special supports to create a relaxed and accessible theatre experience for children with sensory and developmental disabilities and their families. These included:

- Smaller crowds
- Gentler lighting
- Pre-visit materials and preparatory guides
- Relaxed behavioral expectations (standing, moving, vocalizing allowed during show)
- Trained staff and volunteers

THE RESULTS

FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- ❖ The sensory friendly performance was a **deeply meaningful family experience**. Parents felt safe, children expressed joy, and impacts extended beyond the performance itself.
- ❖ **Relaxed social expectations** had the most powerful positive impact on parents' theatre experiences. Other environmental changes and supports were useful for some but not all families depending on children's needs.
- ❖ Parents of children with disabilities desire **inclusive but safe** sensory friendly performances that are open to the general public but maintain a strong sense of safety and welcome for families with children with disabilities.

"I mean, I knew he would probably like it, but he really just loved it. I mean, he was just beside himself with joy. I mean, it was so fun to see that...it was sort of off the charts."

"It was awesome. And they still talk about it all the time. And we put a poster up in their little play area just so they had it...and had it framed...And she definitely attended better because she played it and acted it out after—which she hasn't done."

"I certainly think anybody who wants to buy a ticket should be able to buy a ticket. But it needs to be made really clear that this is a special performance. This is a special audience. Don't try to sugar coat it... Because the parents that are bringing kids like mine need to know that everybody there is going to be accepting, or we won't come."

STAFF EXPERIENCES

- ❖ **Alignment with the theatre's mission** and staff commitments to inclusion made the sensory friendly program possible and continue to sustain it over time.

- ❖ **Partnership with an occupational therapy consultant** with expertise in serving children with sensory and developmental disabilities was **key to high quality and effective program development** and implementation
- ❖ Challenges related to **funding, staff resources, and marketing** must be addressed to ensure program sustainability
- ❖ The sensory friendly program has resulted in **personal and organizational growth**. Staff reported increased confidence serving families with children with disabilities and described realizations about the feasibility of implementing sensory friendly programs and other access initiatives.

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

"I think knowing that we had [the OT consultant] and other professionals in the field helping us facilitate this, it made it very comfortable to embark on this process. If we didn't have [OT consultant's] help, it would have been a very different story."

"And I think what this program does for us is goes, oh yeah, so it's not that hard and it's actually not that expensive. It's time intensive, and we have to put resources to it, and all of us are way too busy, and we're always understaffed, but it's doable."

TAKEAWAYS FOR THEATRE ORGANIZATIONS

- **Sensory friendly theatre programs can be deeply meaningful and valuable for families with children with sensory and developmental disabilities**
- **When considering developing a new sensory friendly program, examine program alignment with your organization's mission and goals and staff priorities**
- **Creative solutions to funding and staff resource challenges may be needed to maximize program sustainability**
- **Consider focusing resources on creating a safe social environment with relaxed behavioral expectations**
- **Consider partnerships with occupational therapy consultants and other professionals to support program development, implementation, and evaluation**
- **Consider marketing strategies that attract an inclusive audience for sensory friendly shows but set clear expectations, assuring that the sensory friendly environment remains a safe and welcoming space for families with children with disabilities.**

CITATION

Umeda, C (2017). Community Cultural Arts Participation through Sensory Friendly Theatre: Parent and Organization Experiences and Perspectives (unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Washington, Seattle, WA.