

Autism in the Performing Arts

Chana Hunter

Department of Art, Sarah Hartman Women's College of Touro at HTC

ARTH 390: Ralla Klepak Performing Arts Internship

Professors Erlich & Fleischer

June 4th, 2026

Abstract

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often go through challenges in social communication, expressing their emotions, and cognitive development, making it difficult to thrive in traditional educational and social environments. This paper discusses the role of recreational performing arts as an all-inclusive and supportive environment that fosters growth in these areas. Based on research, this paper discusses that theater, such as dance, drama, and music, gives children with autism the opportunity to develop important life skills. Through collaboration, role-playing, and creative expression, children can strengthen their communication skills, build meaningful relationships with peers with similar neural abilities, and practice verbal and nonverbal cues. The performing arts also contribute to emotional development by being a safe space. Additionally, cognitive growth can be improved by engaging in activities that support memory, attention, and problem-solving. Research further shows that by fostering a sense of belonging and allowing creative expression, the performing arts can help children with autism build confidence and self-esteem, and improve their overall well-being. Although there may be funding challenges and limited resources, the benefits of performing arts programs outweigh the downsides and make them a valuable tool for supporting the development and well-being of children with autism.

Autism in The Performing Arts

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a neurological condition that affects how a person perceives, processes, and interacts with those in their environment. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is typically described as a spectrum because there is a wide range of characteristics and challenges that one with autism could have. It is typically diagnosed at a young age, around 1 to 3 years old, when there are pronounced differences in social communication, behavior, and sensory processing. Children with ASD have a hard time interpreting social cues, expressing themselves in ways they feel understood on a specific topic, and adapting to new situations. Many repetitive behaviors are associated with strong interests and with high or reduced sensitivity to certain senses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Autism is often mentioned in terms of the challenges that it brings up, but it is important to note that those with ASD have many strengths, whether it is in creativity, unique ways of thinking, or others. With these strengths in mind, children with autism face many barriers, especially socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Often, children are not in environments that support these needs, which is especially difficult for children on the autism spectrum (Badiah, 2018). Traditional academic and social environments expect youth to build on skills and techniques that children with autism do not have or can not handle. That is why there is a need to provide children with ASD with settings where they can strive and thrive to develop these life skills. The performing arts, including art, drama, and dance, are an excellent outlet. They provide structured yet expressive settings that can support children with challenging limitations. Children with autism who participate in the performing arts gain basic life skills and can express themselves in an environment that supports social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The DSM identifies diagnostic criteria for children with autism as having difficulty

interacting with others and developing social skills, which is an area that needs much support (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This includes basic interactions, maintaining a conversation, making eye contact, interpreting nonverbal cues, and more. They have a hard time in social environments because they struggle to understand social norms and cues. Part of the reason for this dysfunction lies in the amygdala, the brain region responsible for processing emotions and social cues. In this case, a patient with autism lacks the ability to recognize and respond to faces and facial expressions (Lord et al., 2000). As a result, they have fewer opportunities to connect with others and make meaningful relationships (Lord et al., 2000). Therefore, the performing arts can open many doors, providing a structured and supportive environment in which social skills can be practiced and developed. Activities like role playing, group performances, and collaborative rehearsals encourage children to engage with others in positive ways. Research at the University of Bergamo in Italy has shown that because social interactions are multifaceted, including verbal and nonverbal communication, children with autism have a particularly hard time balancing the two. When introduced to creative activities, the performing arts are brought here as a specific example in this study; they help them become more aware of their ability to balance the two. With multiple ways to communicate, the arts offer opportunities to use many at the same time: voice, sound, and visual expression. Over time, these skills can be learned and applied both offstage and in daily interactions, whether through eye contact or by listening and picking up on facial expressions (Giraldo, 2019). It is also beneficial to have a non-threatening environment that provides a structured way to act. For children with autism, skill-building in the particular setting of theater, a warm, non-threatening environment, is important, as it enables them to practice and strengthen these skills in a safe environment and transfer them to situations well beyond the theater (Giraldo, 2019). In addition to learning social

skills, children with autism learn to collaborate better with others. In a study conducted at Northwest University in Washington State on the impact of the performing arts on community development, the author, Mercy Lay, shows that communities generally feel empowered by the social benefits of the performing arts. It is because the arts are a “natural starting point for collaboration, which then leads to many positive social relationships” (Lay, 2017). She also says that creativity is a skill which can be strengthened by interacting with others. In performing arts settings, these dialogues occur naturally through group performances and shared spaces, such as when performers collaborate to create a script, offer each other compliments or feedback on their performances, or choreograph parts of a dance together. They can learn these important social skills in real time (Lay, 2017). Another study by a high school music teacher, “The Benefits of Engagements in the Performing Arts” (Johnson, 2023), finds that performing arts activities, such as dance, drama, and music, contribute to a child’s overall development. It has even been proven to boost academic performance. Additionally, to prove the statistical significance between music and academics, researchers found “striking results. Each year, the mean grades of the students who had chosen a music course in their curriculum were higher than those of the students who had not chosen music as an optional course” (School et al., 2013). But more than that, it is also essential to a person’s mental well-being because of all of the social benefits to a student’s well-being. It has been shown to reduce stress in a healthy environment and to be a creative outlet for self-expression. The Johnson (2023) study concludes that for high school adolescents to be successful, the performing arts are essential to education. One reason is the academic success it fosters, but mainly, it is the sense of belonging each student feels when they participate in the performing arts (Johnson, 2023). The goal of school is for each child to succeed in all areas, and this can only be one of many tools to help them get there. If these are the needs of

neurotypical children, then the benefits may be even greater for children with autism, who may also face additional challenges with social interactions and communication. Many children with autism struggle to find places where they fully feel included, understood, and able to fully express themselves. The performing arts can provide a place where their ideas and emotions are valued and celebrated by others. They can be seen and heard by collaborating on ideas, taking turns talking, and bringing their vision to life. Because this is happening within a structured and supported environment, their confidence grows, and they can build relationships they would not be able to in natural settings.

The performing arts also allow the learning of these skills in a low-pressure environment, outside the classroom. According to the study on “The Importance of Social Skills For Autism,” social skills are essential for everyday functioning, and children with autism have significant challenges in this area. This is particularly true with communication, social cues, and appropriate interactions. Because these children do not acquire these skills naturally, they must be taught them through structured interventions. The study recommends modeling and repetition as a way to learn these social behaviors. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of social skills for all children, including those with autism. This will help them lead successful and fulfilling lives (Badiah, 2018). The nature of the performing arts is modeling and repetition: done by dancing a set routine, rehearsing lines, practicing songs, and more. The learning style of many children with autism is also repetition, which provides them with a built-in opportunity to gain confidence in their social skills. Once confidence is acquired, it leads to much success in other areas as well. Research on children with autism shows that when they work to develop social skills, they also show success in other areas, such as academics (Badiah, 2018). With consistent

participation in the performing arts, children can generalize the skills gained to other basic areas of functioning, improving daily communication and their ability to interact more effectively.

In addition to social skills, self-esteem is extremely important to adolescents' growth. In a study conducted to find out how people feel about themselves after being diagnosed with autism, researchers found that it has a very strong impact on a person's identity and sense of self for some. Others were relieved because they could now explain past behavior. The research showed that "a stronger sense of autistic social identity was associated with more positive self-esteem, and noted that greater autistic social identification could link to better mental health via increased self-esteem" (Corden et al., 2021). The more one feels proud of their diagnosis, the higher their self-esteem is. Their mental well-being is better off than that of those who also have autism but feel the need to hide and dissociate from it. People with negative feelings are reported to have lower self-esteem. Regarding their diagnosis, social factors also play a role. If they feel accepted by others after the diagnosis, then they will also report higher levels of self-esteem (Corden et al., 2021). While this study was conducted on adults, a similar principle can be applied to children. If children with autism feel good about themselves and know their self-worth, they will have better social skills and self-awareness. The performing arts are a great outlet for making this happen and fostering an environment that helps children with autism feel understood. For example, a child may be encouraged to contribute their own creative ideas to a scene, receive positive feedback about a number or dance, or sing on stage, which makes them feel recognized by the group. If they are in a group that makes them feel good about who they are, they will gain a sense of pride regarding their diagnosis, thereby boosting their self-esteem. A study was conducted at Harvard University to examine the effects of the performing arts on self-esteem and self-efficacy. Achieving self-efficacy, which is when a person believes they are

able to perform the necessary behaviors and specific goals, which is believing in their ability to succeed, was more statistically significant than self-esteem, which is defined more broadly than self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, however, contributes to a person's self-esteem over time. Therefore, the study shows the significant impact of the performing arts on one's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Manorothkul, 2021). They found that performing arts programs are directly correlated with increased self-efficacy, with students having a stronger belief in their ability to succeed and perform tasks effectively (Manorothkul, 2021).

Dance is an effective tool for supporting the emotional development of children with autism. Emotional development is another critical area in which children with autism often need support. This is particularly applicable in recognizing, expressing, and regulating their emotions. All adolescents have intense emotions, but those with autism struggle to identify or communicate them to other people. When this happens, there is a very high likelihood of leading to frustration and anxiety when situations become overwhelming (Lord et al., 2000). In an academic work on how effective self-instruction is in the performing arts, specifically dance, the author Dominic Leong writes how "individuals with ASD exhibit behaviors that can be dangerous and disruptive," potentially as a result of the anxiety from not being understood by others. But over time, "introducing dance as a form of replacement behavior provides a positive outlet and reduces potential danger and disruption in their lives" (Leong, 2024). Through movement and creative expression, dance offers a constructive way to communicate emotions that may be difficult to express verbally. Because the performing arts are a unique outlet for self-expression, children can express their feelings creatively rather than in a traditional sense. Opportunities such as acting, music, or dance provide times to express emotions. Because the performing arts are, by nature, a safe and accepting environment, children are more willing to take emotional risks in

expressing themselves without fear of judgment. It is important to note that artistic activities help children, or really anyone, with autism express emotions that are difficult to communicate with words. This is evident in art therapy, where creative processes are used to express emotions. Through this, children learn to regulate intense, indescribable emotions. Children with autism can develop a better understanding of themselves through the skills they have gained. As a result, they can better process their emotions, reducing anxiety that stems from their inability to express themselves, as they have fixed or are working on the problem. (Karkou et al., 2022). While the performing arts are not labeled as therapy in a clinic, the benefits can be the same. Over time, a child with autism, or anyone really, can gain improved emotional awareness and regulation, which is necessary for everyday functioning.

Beyond processing emotions, the performing arts allow children with autism to empathize with others. This can be accomplished through theater activities, when one takes on the role of a character and has to get inside their head. This allows them to think beyond themselves in a non-conventional way. A study was conducted by researchers Chen Lee and Wei Weng Wang to better support children with autism in their imaginative play. The researchers combined theater role-playing with virtual reality video games to see if they could teach kids about emotions and communication in an engaging way. They took four children with autism, ages seven to nine, and broke up the process into three stages: before training, during training, and afterward. During each stage, they measured their emotional and communication abilities. They found that these children's performance went from around 23% to 59% during and 69% after. They saw major improvement in all areas of study (Lee & Wang, 2025). The study shows that role-playing, commonly done as a performing arts activity, can help children with autism learn to think, empathetically stay attuned to their emotions, and be more like their peers. They

can also learn appropriate responses to others' feelings and gain a deeper understanding of why others feel this way when they take on these roles. Even more, these experiences can help them express their emotions and perspectives, giving them the confidence to develop their own voice when communicating with others.

Cognitive development, which involves brain processes such as thinking, learning, and memory, is also an important area of growth for children with autism. Children with autism, often co-morbid with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), experience challenges in areas such as planning, attention, and information organization (Lord et al., 2000). The performing arts are valuable in supporting structured, yet creative activities that promote flexibility and problem-solving. For example, when rehearsing scenes for a play, a child is forced to learn stage directions and know where the sets belong on stage. They also have set lines to rehearse by a certain time, yet if they forget them, they can improvise, allowing them to be creative on the spot. When children with autism practice these skills in a motivating, comfortable environment, they are more likely to grow and develop cognitively successfully. Leong, when discussing the benefits of ABA therapy, praises the use of positive reinforcement, in which a reward follows the desired behavior. While this concept can be applied to any area of learning, here it is illustrated with a dance class example, in which children, autistic and non-autistic alike, were acknowledged and rewarded verbally for demonstrating a specific correct behavior. When this happened, they were more likely to repeat the desired behavior in response to the specific compliment (Leong, 2024). The analysis goes on to explain that modeling, copying one's behavior, which is commonly done by children with autism (Subiaul et al., 2010), has “shown significant results, concluding that modeling is an effective method for teaching gross motor methods to students” (Leong, 2024). Modeling is easier to facilitate in a dance studio or on stage

than in a traditional classroom, and allowing children with autism who learn well through modeling to build on their information-processing skills is very important for their cognitive development. For example, learning to read music, rhythms, and patterns, as well as recalling music, are skills that are a part of musical training, and these activities contribute to improvements in children's memory and attention. (Johnson, 2023). These are necessary for everyday functioning, and even though the conclusion was found on neurotypical adolescents, this is an area in which children with autism are especially lacking and can benefit from.

Beyond specific, crucial developmental benefits, the performing arts are a welcoming, inclusive environment that can benefit anyone, particularly kids with autism. This is because the performing arts naturally are warm and welcoming. A study was conducted in South Africa focusing on a group of disabled children with all kinds of disabilities that are often excluded from social settings. The disabilities ranged from deaf, blind, bipolar, and osteogenesis imperfecta, and they are excluded from neurotypical settings. The researchers interviewed participants of the study and asked them about their experiences. They found that, because of the encouraging, positive environment, these people had hope and aspirations for the future. They were not getting inspiration from the world around them but rather from the arts themselves, which made them feel hopeful and empowered simply by participating (Roux et al., 2021). While the study is on a broad range of disabilities, the results are the same. When the environment is particularly welcoming and positive, one can focus on one's strengths and talents. This is not guaranteed in a typical classroom setting, but it is something that children with autism need to hear regularly (Badiah, 2018). And studies are being conducted to determine the best way to improve these programs, making them as welcoming as possible. Another study was conducted to demonstrate the effectiveness of participatory arts. There was research using

surveys and questionnaires; however, these methods were not particularly useful for this research because they reflected a more scientific approach, whereas the outcomes being examined are artistic and experiential. Therefore, a new framework, the Participatory Arts Play Framework (PPF), was developed to evaluate the benefits of the arts, to be developed by psychologists, scientists, and researchers. The PPF evaluates participation in real time by focusing on observed behaviors and live experiences. Researchers concluded that it is a more appropriate way to study the success of the arts in real time, beginning by fostering a warm, welcoming environment and ensuring that everything is successfully implemented (Shaughnessy et al., 2014). Science recognizes how important the environment is for these types of children, so many efforts have been made to provide the best possible experience in the performing arts. From personal experience and observations of inclusive performing arts programs, these programs are designed to support children with developmental disabilities. These types of programs avoid making casting cuts, ensuring that every participant has the opportunity for involvement. They also prioritize training staff and volunteers to be welcoming, knowledgeable, and responsive to the participants' needs. Additionally, the program fosters a supportive environment where children with similar abilities can connect and share experiences, helping them feel accepted and included while also having fun.

While the benefits of implementing the performing arts in institutions for autism are many, there are a few downsides that can make this task slightly challenging. One of them is the cost and resources required to effectively create and run performing arts programs. Speaking in terms of general theater, research on performing arts institutions has shown that labor is one of the significant expenses in theater, because manual labor is heavily relied on rather than automated machines. Costs and productivity do not increase at the same rate, so alternative

funding is heavily relied upon (Smolny, 2021). This raises concerns about whether these types of programs can be implemented in therapy or special education environments. Even more labor and training are needed to properly run programs for children with autism. This is one of the challenges that they face. This is important to keep in mind, but do not overpower the benefits that this field has on children with autism. The major benefits outweigh the financial concerns. The essential skills discussed in this research significantly improve and enhance a child with autism's ability to function. While additional funding is required, the performing arts are building skills and, in a sense, reducing the need for intensive services, making this investment potentially more cost-effective given its benefits. They gain invaluable life skills, and that is most important.

Children with autism face challenges in social, emotional, and cognitive development. The performing arts can help them in all of these areas by providing structured, expressive environments that support their growth. They can develop skills in all of these areas. When kids feel happy and comfortable, they can reach their full potential. By recognizing the creative value of expression, communities can work together to create environments where children with autism can thrive.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.).
- Badiah, L. (2018). The Importance of Social Skills for Autism. Atlantis Press.
<https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/indoeduc-18/25906687>
- Cabanac, A., Perlovsky, L., Bonniot-Cabanac, M. C., & Cabanac, M. (2013). Music and academic performance. *Behavioural brain research*, 256, 257-260.
- Corden, K., Brewer, R., & Cage, E. (2021). Personal identity after an autism diagnosis: Relationships with self-esteem, mental wellbeing, and diagnostic timing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 699335. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.699335>
- Giralso, M. (2019). Breaking Myths About Autism Through Performance-based Practices. An Exploratory Analysis of the Imaging Autism Approach. Pensa Multimedia.
<https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sipes/article/view/3711/3425>
- Johnson, A. (2023). *The benefits of engagement in performing arts*.
<https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/kh04dx234>
- Karkou, V., Sajnani, N., Orkibi, H., Groarke, J., Czamanski-Cohen, J., Panero, M., Drake, J., Jola, C., Baker, F. (2022). Editorial: The Psychological and Physiological Benefits of the Arts.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.840089/full>

- Lee, I., Weng, W. (2025). Applying theatre-based role-playing combined with AR and VR game strategies to enhance imagination and symbolic play skills in children with autism spectrum disorder. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10209-025-01206-6>
- Leong, D. (2024). The effectiveness of self-instruction procedures in teaching performing arts to children with autism spectrum disorder (Order No. 31294494). ProQuest One Academic. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/effectiveness-self-instruction-procedures/docview/3065922951/se-2>
- Lord, C., Cook, E., Leventhal, B., Amaral, D. (2000). Autism Spectrum Disorders. [https://www.cell.com/neuron/fulltext/S0896-6273\(00\)00115-X](https://www.cell.com/neuron/fulltext/S0896-6273(00)00115-X)
- Manorothkul, N. (2021). Performing arts education for university students: Does training in the performing arts improve self-esteem and self-efficacy? (Order No. 28320443). ProQuest One Academic. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/performing-arts-education-university-students/docview/2539514198/se-2>
- Roux, M., Kathard, H., Lorenzo, T. (2021). Creating Inclusive Performing Arts Practices For Development of Youth With Disabilities: A Critical Ethnological Study https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S2226-72202021000100012&script=sci_arttext
- Shaughnessy, N., Herbert, R., Williams, E., Walduck, J., Jungenfeld, R., Newman, H. (2024). Playing With Data Differently: Engaging With Autism And Gender Through Participatory Arts/Music And A Performative Framework For Analysis.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1324036/full>

1

Smolny, K. (2021). The productivity of performing art organisations versus labor costs.

<https://apcz.umk.pl/EiP/article/view/37118/31433>

Subial, F., Lurie, H., Romansky, K., Klein, T., Holmes, D., Terrace, H. (2010). Cognitive

Imitation in Autism. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2818295/>