Sensory-friendly Theatre Research

Accommodations for these performances include:

- Lower sound level, especially for startling or loud sounds;
- Lights remain on at a low level in the theater during the performance;
- A reduction of strobe lighting or lighting focused on the audience;
- Patrons are free to talk and leave their seats during the performance;
- Designated quiet areas within the theater;
- Space throughout the theater for standing and movement;
- Limited crowds and visitors during the day and timing of the performance
- staff trained to be inviting and accommodating to families' needs.
- Pre-prepared information available on layout of theatre, content of the show, actor information, when sudden moments are happening in the show, etc. This will help those on the spectrum prepare for surprising moments so that they are not as startled or overwhelmed.
- Some way of preparing people in advance for sudden changes in noise or light levels, whether that be by visual cue (ushers) or by providing a list to patrons in advance of those moments and when they occur
- Offering earplugs, fidget toys, weighted blankets/lap dogs, etc. to help calm those with sensory needs
- Preparing actors for what the performance will be like so that they aren't thrown
- Keeping the integrity of the piece, so that the experience for these patrons is not lessened
- Fostering a safe and accepting environment
- Really just giving patrons as much info in advance as possible, detailed below, makes a world of difference. The more patrons are prepared for, the more they are able to tolerate

---

Higginbotham advised on the procuring of fidget toys, weighted stuffed animals, and other calming objects for children on the autism spectrum. And she aided in creating online resources for families, training -theatre staff and volunteer ushers, designating a quiet room, and identifying sensory-friendly moments in scripts and productions.

The theatre also reached out to others that present sensory-friendly performances, such as Chicago Children's Theatre and Stages Theatre Company in Hopkins, Minn., for guidance.

We are regularly trying to find self-guided activities, ways families can interact online with the shows we do, through a program called Theatre 360."
That initiative provides outlines for the productions, as well as games and stories that explore the show's themes. "Whether families are in our building, at home, or online, they can interact with the shows," says Long.

The program also includes an online tour of ImaginOn, which leads viewers through the building—from the ramp leading up to the entrance to the box

Prepared by: Jesse Desrosiers

office, from the restrooms to the seats in the two performance spaces—so that children on the autism spectrum can be prepared before visiting.

Loud sound cues and flashing lights are sometimes pulled back, and a script of signal cues is created for other sensory moments that may be over-stimulating for children on the spectrum. With the signal cue script in hand, house staff will stand at the front of the stage and wave glow sticks to signal to the audience that a sensory-rich moment is approaching.

Aside from some design tweaks, sensory-friendly performances are no different from others. Actors are instructed to deliver the same performance, and are simply made aware that some of the audience members may be up and moving around, or making noise during the show.

“We don’t want actors to change the way they do their show,” says Diener. “What we are hoping for is that it is the same show onstage, and then we just adjust how the audience experiences it.”

When children arrive for a sensory-friendly performance, they are greeted at the entrance with headphones, fidgets, and weighted lap dogs to choose from before they enter. Volunteer ushers, who are informed of possible scenarios that may occur during the performance, lead children and families to their seats. The children can switch seats, visit the quiet room, or move around if need be.

Long adds that patrons have expressed relief that they are able to experience entertainment as a family in a judgment-free setting.

“As much as you want everybody to be able to come, with these performances you have to hold steady at maybe selling only half the house so that there is space and room for families—otherwise it can get very overwhelming for the children on the spectrum,” says Long, noting that the packed holiday show led to a lot of “energy” in the house.

First and foremost, sensory-friendly performances must have non-judgmental, supportive environments so that all patrons feel comfortable attending. Before shows, arts organizations frequently train front of house staff and performers to ensure that everyone is ready to interact with patrons in as helpful and friendly of a manner as possible. So that patrons can freely respond to shows in their own way and without judgment, organizations also relax house rules. Convention requires attendees to remain quiet and seated throughout most shows, but during sensory-friendly performances, patrons are welcome to do things like sing or dance.

Prepared by: Jesse Desrosiers

patrons usually receive pre-visit materials that can help them become familiar with what to expect at an event. These materials might include stories explaining what will happen on the way to and during a show, tip sheets containing information about logistics to make the experience go as smoothly as possible, and visual schedules showing a sequence of activities with pictures. In addition, performance halls often provide quiet rooms that patrons can access when shows become too stimulating. Patrons may receive fidgets they can use to center, as well as headphones to block out unwanted sounds. Most venues also keep the house lights up slightly during shows so that patrons can easily move around when needed. Modifications are generally environmental rather than artistic so that patrons can enjoy the same artistic product seen during other shows; however, most sensory-friendly performances typically do omit any strobe lights or sudden, loud noises that could startle patrons, since patrons do not have time to plan how they will respond to these surprising stimuli.

Although some patrons with sensory sensitivities may prefer coming to an organization's conventional performances, others would rather attend performances designed to meet their particular needs. By offering both options, arts organizations can empower patrons by letting them choose to attend the performances where they feel most comfortable.

For every show—ATI has had four this season—the organization relies on two trained autism specialists and one individual with autism to provide criticism on the original show. The ATI then works with the producer to incorporate suggested criticisms. Major changes to the show usually address sound, lights, and noise.

Many individuals with autism can be sensitive to light and sound, and some are prone to epileptic reactions in the presence of strobe lights. To accommodate these potential needs, sound in the show is capped at 90 decibels. Strobe lights are cut. Surprising elements like sudden blackouts are toned down. House lights are increased by 30 percent. Advance notice of all scenes in the show with significant noises or lights is given to parents and caregivers in special guides to the performance. For example, in *Aladdin*, the audience knew to watch out for the voice of the Cave of Wonders. Firework effects were kept, but with the sound reduced. With the house lights on, the magic carpet still swooshed magically above the children, who clapped, jumped, and waved.

The script is never changed. "Our goal is always to maintain the integrity of the show. Even with certain lights and sounds, we'll veer on the side of giving the audience a warning about it, rather than changing it, if it's something that's essential to the show," Dallmann says. "We want them to see the same show as their classmates and peers." The ATI negotiates a price with the producer before buying up one show, and Carling says the organization tries to keep it heavily discounted for families, from 40 to 50 percent off. It offers 200 seats

free to low-income New York City schoolchildren and their caregivers through donors. “We are very cognizant of the fact that families raising kids and adults on the spectrum have enormous expenses connected with that individual, and we try to make the tickets as affordable as possible for those families,” Carling says.

The online seating chart shows the location of speakers in the theater, and the incline of areas like the balcony—relevant information that is not automatically provided in the typical theater ticket-buying experience. All ticket-buyers are sent a “social narrative” of the show, a preparatory script for children with autism to help them understand what to expect. The social narrative for Aladdin showed the Disney and on-stage actor picture for each character, as well as a description of his or her role in the show. It provided a summary of the show for children and their families. The ATI also recently released a social narrative video called “Getting to the Theater,” to prepare children and families for the sometimes jarring walk through Times Square to the theater.

Every autism-friendly show is staffed with at least 30 volunteers who are either autism specialists or have had personal experience working with people with autism. They hand out stress balls that children can use as fidget toys, they help families find the elevators and special family-accessible bathrooms, and they direct children who need to leave the show to special “quiet areas” where they can play with toys, draw and color, or sit still. The volunteers also have earplugs and noise-canceling headphones to hand out to children who want to see the show without experiencing the noise. “We are expecting all of the behaviors that may happen in the day, and we welcome them,” says Tessa Hersh

Cast and house staff members are also trained in advance to know what to expect. A staple of this training is a pre-show speech by Harry Smolin, the TDF's 16-year-old consultant who provides the perspective of someone with an autism diagnosis who is also an avid theatergoer. "My experience with TDF has shown me me that I can use my autism to help people enjoy the theater as much as I do,” Smolin says. He tells the cast and staff, “One of the biggest problems I have is that I don’t

like the unexpected. The more information you give me ahead [of time], the less likely it is that anything will upset me….If the show is going to start five or more minutes late, you should make an announcement and tell the people not to worry."

"We were warned that maybe some kids might throw things on the stage, and it happened a couple of times, but we were very well-prepared for it, and for us, it meant that they were engaging," she said.

Corbett's research, published in the journal *Autism Research* in 2014, has shown that engaging in this peer-mediated theatre program yielded significant improvement in face processing, social awareness, and social cognition, as well as duration of interaction with familiar peers.

"Instead of looking at video or television like they often do at home, if our children on the spectrum are able to embrace and to observe social communication in this broader, wider, and live context, that's very valuable," Corbett says.

According to Michael Rosen, the executive vice president of strategic communications at Autism Speaks, an autism science and advocacy organization, "it helps decrease stress levels to get people with autism out of the house and out of normal routines, to go out and have a special experience with their families." Rosen has a 27-year-old son with autism who is non-verbal. His son has attended many of the ATI's autism-friendly shows. "Now my son gets excited when he sees Broadway marquees, and a while ago, he didn't really know what they were," Rosen says. "He loves it. He starts rocking back and forth and humming because he knows the music so well, and it's just so comfortable."

Perhaps the most invaluable part of these shows is the non-judgmental environment created by an audience of people with similar experiences. As the show was about to start, one young man starting yelling and shaking from side to side. As his mother tried to calm him, his father put his hand on her shoulder and smiled.

“In this crowd, maybe no one even notices,” he said.

https://www.kennedy-center.org/pages/accessibility/sensory

https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/10/13/extra-sensory-crafting-autism-friendly-performances/

https://wellness.pittsburghsymphony.org/what-is-a-sensory-friendly-performance/

https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/04/making-theater-autism-friendly/388348/