

# Terrific Ways Theater Can Help Kids With Autism Communicate

By Kate FOLEY

*“The word theatre comes from the Greeks. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation. The theatre is a spiritual and social X-ray of its time.”*  
— Stella Adler

**T**he truth is, theater is just a mirror. We hold mirrors up to ourselves every day. We look to see if our lipstick is straight or double-check our hair. Sometimes we may even notice the little spot on our sweater that indicates the haste with which we brushed our teeth. We may acknowledge the benefits of drama in many areas—what great things dramatic play does for childhood development. Why not use drama to help develop social skills, increase social perceptiveness, and encourage emotional regulation? Some of us are great in social situations, and some more so with problem-solving. So what? We can still learn to appreciate each other. We can still belong. That’s all any of us wants—myself, my daughter and my five-year-old little boy with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Seven years ago, I had returned to school thinking that an education certification was the perfect way to continue working after my husband and I started a family. I had my undergrad in communications with a focus on theater. I loved working with children, and I was never opposed to looking ridiculous—one of my strengths. A strength which most kiddos really seemed to like. I became completely engrossed in the research pertaining to the arts and had not enjoyed anything near as much since I had enrolled in theater nearly 20 years earlier. The human connection had always been a draw for me.



Empathy was simply a communication tool. The theater was just a form of compassion. Compassion was the thread of human connection. During my tutelage, I had focused on research pertaining to the use of the arts in helping children who were struggling in different areas of education. Music seemed to assist with language and logic where theater appeared to help children with social-emotional development. I had no idea at the time that this information would later become tools I would use to help my own son, whom I was pregnant with at the time. It would be three years later that my own child would be diagnosed with ASD and would one day need those tools, that someday he would help me see all the ways in which my life had been guiding me towards solutions to problems I had not even contemplated.

Early on in my son Brady’s life, I would use much of my theater and education training to teach my children. I believe reading to children is essential to early language development, and there are enough studies out there to substantiate that claim without

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my mentioning it. When I found our son had autism, I investigated all avenues to help him function in life. I always went back to theater. It just made sense. No one can possibly be great at everything, but with enough practice, anyone can learn to do just about anything. Why not use drama to practice social situations? Theater, aside from dramatic play in center-based programs, was less supported than many of the other programs, or at least not as mainstream as, say, applied behavior analysis (ABA) or even music and art therapy. So, my trying it was just part of our process. We didn’t do any one exercise over and over. We talked about what happens when someone feels sad or mad or happy. We used puppets and dolls, and I was indeed lucky to have a little girl who was so intuitive that she seemed to play right along almost from the start. I began my college career as a theater major, and I am of Italian and Irish heritage, so I’m a pasty gal surrounded by black hair and black eyebrows. It doesn’t take much for me to look like a cartoon. My kids loved it! We read books focused on emotions, such as *Pete the Cat* and *Meet the Emotions from Inside Out*, *Sophie Gets Angry*, *Calm Down Time*, and any other book we could find. We played feelings games to help increase vocabulary and give both of my children the opportunity to express what emotions feel like within themselves. My daughter, now four years old, was only six months old when we received the diagnosis, and she, too, benefitted from being able to recognize her own emotions as well as those around her.

In a [study](#) published in the *Journal of Developmental Science*, Mathew Lerner and Thalia Goldstein set out to prove the effectiveness in using dramatic play therapy in a New York City Head Start program. They randomly assigned the children to three different groups all making use of practical interventions used to help children develop. What they discovered

was that the drama games had a direct effect on the emotional control of the young students (D’Amico, Lalonde, & Snow, 2015).

“Something about the drama games specific to embodying characters’ emotional and mental states...caused the children to get better at controlling their own emotions.” (D’Amico, Lalonde, & Snow, 2015)

Empathy is a learned behavior; just because some children may be more able to pick up on another’s emotions doesn’t mean other children aren’t capable of developing the skill themselves. Theater and play acting allow us to place ourselves in situations where we can build our empathic muscles. They also have the abilities to help us regulate our reactive responses to those around us by helping us to understand our own feelings, recognize them, and identify what may be causing them.

A year-long study done at the Centre for the Arts in Human Development aimed specifically at pre-adolescent children with high-functioning autism concluded that the use of drama therapies was successful in helping children on the spectrum engage in appropriate social activities while experiencing fewer problem behaviors as well as less hyperactivity (Goldstein, 2017).

I’m certainly not the first person to think of this, and in fact, there is a woman named Mike-la Moore here in Northeastern Pennsylvania who has had tremendous success with adolescents and adults with disabilities by putting on productions based in a devised theater, a collaborative approach to drama, at her [Camp Create](#). Some of the best information I found for myself came from blog writer and autism support teacher Hailey Deloya, who has seen marked improvements in her students by the

introduction of an excellent drama program she has developed herself. I highly recommend her site [Autism Tank](#) if you get a chance.

Brady is a very social guy, and I noticed early on that he wanted to please people. He didn't seem to be aware of his own strength or control over himself when he became overly excited to meet new people. He was a little guy who wanted to befriend other children but seemed to struggle when it came time actually to do so. He would pull hair because he loved some girl's curls or throw something to gain the attention of a nearby child. He couldn't seem to understand when his sister was sad and/or why something he did was wrong. We began working on ways to instill a sense of empathy while giving him tools to use when he felt overwhelmed. He taught himself to turn his hands around and touch the people with the back of his hands so that he couldn't hurt them. I wanted to help him make friends and understand emotions.

A teacher friend of mine, Katie Lane, and I set out to put this in practice for preschool-aged children both on and off the spectrum in a program we called Drama Play for Social-Emotional Development. I felt that at the very least it would help Brady make some new friends in a class where everyone is learning how to dramatically play together. I have also written and illustrated a book for my son and anyone else who seeks to belong: *You May Never Be French*. In it, I hope to continue the message that just because we do not find something easy, it does not mean we cannot find our own way to succeed and belong. We may be from different social cultures, but we can learn to appreciate the differences in perspective and hopefully learn each other's language. After all, we are just human beings coming at life with different strengths and different points of view. My family has been very lucky to have had a great support system of family, friends, and professionals who have helped my son to flourish. We could not have done this alone. This was just one of the many things that seemed to cultivate strengths already there, and I believe it truly has.

*"I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being."*  
—Thornton Wilder



*Kate Foley is an author/illustrator with a background in communication, education, and theater, whose personal experience parenting a child with autism as well as a child without has led her to create stories to help children navigate their complex emotions while teaching them to celebrate the uniqueness of themselves. Kate has a degree from Keystone College in communications as well as an elementary education certification for K-6. She studied theater at Mansfield University and for her professional development was grateful to have received training in effective leadership and communication skills from some of the best in their fields at Lehigh University's Iacocca Institute. In college, she and some friends ran a nonprofit theater group, the Footlights Players, which earned money for local charities. She also heads up a local group for parents with children on the spectrum, teaches a small, inclusive preschool class based in drama and play therapy for children both on and off the spectrum, and is also a committee member of CHATID, a local advocacy group for all people with disabilities.*

*Kate lives for both the quiet moments and those filled with wild, raucous laughter. She has been known to indulge in too much coffee and even more chocolate while living in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, with her husband, two beautiful children, and her cat, Mrs. Norris.*

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CHATID: <http://chatidnepa.org>

### Resources:

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mind-stage/201710/drama-games-help-kids-gain-emotional-control%3famp>

Evaluating the efficacy of drama therapy in teaching social skill...: Ingenta Connect

<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/dtr/2015/00000001/00000001/art00003#expand/collapse>

Goldstein T.R., & Lerner M.D. (2017). Dramatic pretend play games uniquely improve emotional control in young children. *Developmental Science*. e12603. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12603>

Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., & Palmquist, C. M. (2013). The impact of pretend play on children's development: A review of the evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(1), 1.