Promoting Cultural Arts Access through Sensory-Friendly Theatre

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Promoting Cultural Arts Access through Sensory-Friendly Theatre

by

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A culminating capstone project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Children with sensory processing differences have “reduced participation in recreational and community activities compared to children with both typical development and other developmental disabilities” due to their difficulties with social communication, and strict social settings (Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020). Sensory friendly theatre programs aim to dismantle social participation barriers for individuals with sensory processing differences by creating a relaxed theatre experience that includes preparatory materials, environmental modifications, and specialized training (Umeda, 2017). We implemented a pilot sensory-friendly performance of Willy Wonka, Jr. in collaboration with youth actors at the Throckmorton Theatre in Mill Valley, CA on February 13th, 2022. Approximately 80 total tickets were sold, half to the sensory friendly community and half to the general public. Our sensory friendly performance offered preparatory materials of a social story, environmental modifications including dimmed house lights, zones (movement, tech, chill out, quiet) within the house, relaxed behavioral expectations, and specialized training for the youth actors including an educational video about sensory friendly performances. Program evaluation data were collected through post-performance surveys for audience members and performers, interviews with audience members, and a debrief with the theatre program director. Audience members indicated that they were likely to attend another sensory friendly show and valued the accommodations, meanwhile suggesting a more thorough explanation of the purpose and possible noise, and relocation of the zones. Our program illustrates occupational therapists’ ability to collaborate with theatres and contribute knowledge on sensory processing differences and environmental modification to increase community cultural arts participation for people with disabilities and their families.
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This project would not have been possible without the support we had received over the past year. The success that we have achieved from this project is all credited to the people that believed in our vision, our goals, and trusted in our efforts to make a great impact on the community we were serving.

Thank you Reba Gilbert, the theatre director at Throckmorton Theatre, for your willingness to collaborate with us on the ideas we had for the theatre. We are also grateful to the young performers of Little Throck for your openness to learn about the sensory friendly program while adapting to the new changes of the show and still giving a great performance of Willy Wonka Junior. We also appreciate the audience members that showed up to our performance, were flexible in theatre adaptations and provided valuable feedback.

We want to show our appreciation to Amy Arenberg, the insight and guidance you shared with us truly helped create and develop the successful program we were able to put forth and give us more ways on how to best support the cultural arts community. To our amazing capstone advisor, Caroline Umeda, you have never failed to show us the faith that you had in us since the start of our capstone journey. We truly valued the constant positivity and encouragement you have always shown us and it has motivated us to accomplish many things in our program more than we imagined. You have role modeled for us what it means to be a hands-on and compassionate occupational therapist in the future.
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**Introduction**

In the Bay Area and beyond, there is a high prevalence of children with sensory processing differences, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, as well as a limited amount of resources and programs within the community to support them. We will use the term “sensory processing differences,” to describe our target population and will define sensory processing differences as difficulty with interpreting and processing one’s own sensory input (Wood, 2020). This definition is inclusive of children with formal diagnoses such as Sensory Processing Disorders (SPDs) or individuals who may exhibit behaviors that present as a sensory issue that include but are not limited to Autism, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and more, as well as those without a formal diagnosis. The prevalence of sensory processing issues is reported to be around 1 in 20 to 1 in 6.25 children in the U.S. general population (Ahn et al., 2004; Ben-Sasson et al., 2009). Children with sensory processing differences have “reduced participation in recreational and community activities compared to children with both typical development and other developmental disabilities” due to their difficulties with social communication and interaction, and the strict settings and rules (Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020).

Programming to specifically address the community participation deficits among people with sensory processing differences is needed. Therefore, the purpose of our project is to collaborate with a local theatre to create a sensory friendly performance to increase and support participation among individuals with sensory processing differences by reducing environmental barriers and creating an inclusive experience. Sensory-friendly theatre programs are defined as “access programming that incorporates environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and trained staff to create a theatre-going experience flexible and supportive enough to promote
participation of individuals and families with diverse abilities” (Ideishi, 2013). Sensory-friendly theatre performances can include accommodations such as low light and sound levels, designated rest areas, and/or allowing audience members to talk and move around as needed during the performance (Umeda et al., 2017). Though increasing in visibility and prevalence, sensory-friendly theatre programs are still not widely available in the Bay Area.

Occupational therapists (OTs) can provide their expertise in developing sensory friendly programs because they are well equipped to address these barriers due to their knowledge of sensory processing differences and ability to create occupation-based programs that are centered toward the client’s needs. In the 4th edition of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF), Occupational Therapy is defined as “the therapeutic use of everyday life occupations with persons, groups, or populations (i.e., the client) for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation” (AOTA, 2020).

The following paper will discuss key topics synthesized from the literature review, a critical appraisal of the review, and a thorough description of the process we used to develop and implement a sensory friendly performance in collaboration with the Throckmorton Theatre in Marin County, CA. We will also discuss community programming implications and future directions for the sensory friendly pilot program we created.
**Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to inform the reader about children/adolescents with sensory processing differences and the challenges and barriers that these youth face when attending a cultural arts event. Additionally, readers will gain more knowledge of how OTs have been involved in this area of practice. This literature review will support the value of increasing inclusive cultural arts opportunities for children with sensory processing differences and their families.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Sensory Integration Theory**

Sensory Integration Theory (SI Theory) is used by OT practitioners in explaining behaviors, planning interventions, and providing specific intervention strategies to remediate underlying sensory issues that may be affecting an individual with sensory processing differences as well as their functional performance. Sensory integration can be applied at the individual level, but also at a group or community level that is created for universal design. SI theory is built on a premise that active engagement in meaningful, sensorimotor activities at the just-right challenge and in a playful or meaningful context has a positive impact (Lane & Schaaf, 2010). Processing sensory information plays such an important role in development, especially in a child’s daily life. “SI Theory postulated that adequate processing and integration of sensory information is an important foundation for adaptive behaviors, where adaptive behaviors mean actions such as play and activities of daily living” (Lane & Schaaf, 2010). SI theory is used in sensory friendly programs in looking at the different sensory needs of children, in order to create an inclusive environment. This theory values the importance of creating an enriched environment, which meets the needs of clients who need to be in a setting where they can fulfill
the expectations of their occupation. We are using SI Theory to understand how different sensory aspects of the environment may be challenging and difficult to process and can make a large impact on a child’s ability to exhibit an adaptive response in that setting. Therefore, we will keep in mind the sensory needs of our population when creating our program to be sensory friendly.

**Social Model of Disability**

This project was grounded by the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 2013) by focusing on dismantling environmental and social barriers that impede theatre-going for diverse audiences. The Social Model of Disability is used by healthcare professionals in understanding the world through the lens of disabled people. This model was developed by people with disabilities in identifying systemic barriers, derogatory attitudes, and social exclusion that make it difficult for those with disabilities to engage in their community (Oliver, 2013). A crucial goal of this model is to identify the causes of disability as environmental barriers rather than impairments and to relocate disability from residing in the individual to inheriting in societal attitudes and actions (Oliver, 2013). This model is important as it frames our program development to get a better understanding of how to identify environmental barriers that may exclude a person with disabilities when developing a sensory friendly cultural arts program. Using this model, we aim to focus our program development on modifying the social and sensory environment of theatre performances to create inclusivity and accessibility. This model hopes to transform social conditions that create barriers and oppression (including cultural beliefs and attitudes and public policies) (Oliver, 2013).

**Sensory Processing Disorders**

Sensory processing dysfunction is a neurological disorder in which the brain has a difficult time processing (detecting, modulating, interpreting) input from one’s senses (tactile,
olfactory, gustatory, auditory, visual, proprioceptive, vestibular, and interoceptive) (Wood, 2020). When there are persistent atypical response patterns to sensory stimuli that also cause dysfunction in everyday life activities, the condition is considered SPD (Wood, 2020). “Sensory processing disorder refers to those individuals who experienced difficulties in the participation of activities of daily life, as a result of alterations in sensory processing” (Pérez-Fonseca et al., 2019). People with ASD and ADHD can also experience sensory input differently and have difficulties in social and behavioral situations. For instance, the diagnostic criteria for children with ASD from the DSM 5, now includes deficits in sensory processing such as hyperreactivity or hyporeactivity to sensory input (Crasta et al., 2020).

**Challenges and Barriers to Community Cultural Arts Participation Among Children with Sensory Processing Differences**

Children with sensory processing differences face many challenges when interacting within a community cultural arts event. Some barriers include sensory overload, environmental barriers, and lack of accessibility to resources/accommodations that individuals with sensory differences might need to participate in this setting. Children can easily be overwhelmed or experience sensory overload (Langa et al., 2013; Fletcher et al., 2021). Especially in cultural arts settings, there are several sensation factors that are elevated such as bright colors, fluorescent lights, and loud sounds. Children can show sensory overload in a few different ways. For example, children with sensory processing differences may have trouble sitting still (Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014) or may act out in frustration. For some children, sufficient time is needed for them to become comfortable with a new space (Fletcher et al., 2021). When in a new social environment, it is typical that one doesn’t have sufficient time to get comfortable, which can impact learning and focus, and thus, their optimal level of arousal. For example, an unprepared
recital environment may cause distractions; however, a well-planned recital environment that students are familiar with can assist students with autism to ease their fear, nervousness, worry, and stress (Sunghun, 2021). Children with ASD and others with sensory processing differences have “reduced participation in recreational and community activities compared to children with both typical development and other developmental disabilities” due to their difficulties with social communication and interaction (Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020). With these difficulties, they are unable to fully experience and participate in cultural art activities because of the lack of inclusive cultural arts programs and experiences.

**Role of OT in Creating Sensory Friendly Programs**

The occupational therapy profession is unique in creating client-centered interventions that allow clients, such as children with sensory processing differences, to be independent and engaged in their own occupations. While keeping in mind the theories and current research that has been done in regard to sensory processing differences, OTs play a role in addressing sensory processing differences at a community level by collaboratively creating programs that can enhance their participation and engagement in cultural activities which can have a positive impact on families and children (Silverman & Carr, 2017). OTs use organization-level occupational therapy consultation to grow community organizations’ capacities to serve a broad population of people with diverse needs. Specifically, occupational therapy practitioners have started partnering with administrators and staff in these community settings to develop “sensory friendly” programs that incorporate environmental modifications, preparatory materials, and trained staff to support the participation of children with sensory processing and developmental disabilities (Ideishi, 2013). The emerging body of literature shows that OTs have had a role in creating sensory friendly theatres, museums, concerts, classrooms, and other various settings.
Families’ Experiences of Sensory Friendly Cultural Arts Programs

Literature documents numerous positive experiences that emerged from the various sensory-friendly programs in theaters, science museums, musical experiences, and classrooms (Umeda, 2017; Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020; Ferziger et al., 2020; Silverman & Carr, 2017; Langa et al., 2013; Fletcher et al., 2021; Deng, 2017; Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014; Sunghun, 2021; McAllister & Maguire, 2012; Zulkanain & Mydin, 2019). At a theatre, audience members were able to enjoy the immersive theatre experience with the visual and physical supports provided by the performers; the supports included a visual schedule, environmental modifications, pre-teaching strategies (social stories and pre-show materials), and sensory aids (Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020). Parents wished more settings had similar events/adaptations as the adaptations allowed their kids to be more independent and be themselves (Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014) in exploring and experiencing the setting (Langa et al., 2013), and they allowed their child(ren) to stay longer at the event (Silverman & Carr, 2017). At a sensory friendly day at the museum, one parent said, “We are not afraid to be here with our children. For once, we have our guard down and we are not met with hate or chaos” (Fletcher et al., 2021). Data collected from a sensory friendly theatre performance (Umeda, 2017) found that parents of children with disabilities described their family’s sensory friendly theatre experience as deeply meaningful. They found meaning in the safe atmosphere, their children’s joy during the show, and positive experiences before and after the show (Umeda, 2017).
Considerations and Concerns in Creating a Sensory Friendly Program

A growing body of literature illuminates key considerations to explore when creating sensory friendly programs. Firstly, the health and safety of the participants and the workers is greatly considered in the implementation of the program. Establishing COVID-19 precautions for a safe community friendly experience is highly important in this day and age in order to prevent the spread of disease (Fletcher et al., 2021). Next, another consideration in creating a program is to ask for direct feedback from the community that one is trying to provide for (Fletcher et al., 2021). Before creating the program, it is important to determine what aspects of the environment provide a more welcoming environment for family members, how to make educational resources more accessible, and how to efficiently train the staff that would be involved in the sensory friendly performance (Ideishi, 2013, p. 9). The considerations that can greatly influence the theatre experience are when the performances are scheduled, seating and ticketing, house rules, environmental modifications, staff training, preparing the performers, educating on show strategies, and utilizing various approaches for marketing (Ideishi, 2013, p. 9-12). Additionally, staff at the community site should be trained in understanding sensory needs and addressing challenging behaviors in order to best serve the population (Deng, 2017). Overall, each program should be tailored to the individual community in response to their wants and needs.

There are other environmental ideas and considerations that past events have found successful for children with sensory processing differences to help support them. Children with sensory processing differences can be extra sensitive to sensory outputs, so experiences with low-sensory places are key to making a successful program. Children need a quiet, safe environment to calm down, or the ability to “bail out” if needed. Children would benefit from
fewer crowds, interactive kiosks, and manageable spaces which would create an environment where they can be more independent (Langa et al., 2013; Silverman & Carr, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2021). Pressure-weighted items like chairs can be helpful because they are often calming for a child’s sensory integration system (Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014). Other environmental factors include adjusting light at the normal or low level (Mcallister & Maguire, 2012), organizing special seating arrangements, avoiding the use of loud sound (Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014), and arranging sensory adjustments on the stage (Sunghun, 2021). The organizers must also consider environmental factors when giving equal access to participants who are visually impaired, such as transportation, escort availability and theatre location (Ferziger et al., 2020).

Critical Appraisal and Integration of Current Research

Many strengths and weaknesses were identified within the broad existing body of literature that grounds our project. Strengths of the existing body of literature include that there is emerging evidence to support the success and promise of sensory friendly programs and that there is indeed a need for these types of programs due to the challenges that people with sensory processing differences face. Some weaknesses included that most of the literature lacked rigor as they were descriptive or exploratory studies and had relatively small sample sizes, and many used convenience sampling. Also, many articles focused on the experiences of specific diagnoses such as autism or other developmental disabilities, instead of being inclusive of all sensory processing differences.

Themes that were consistent throughout the literature included the consideration of environmental factors when creating a sensory friendly program, and parents of children with sensory processing differences had positive experiences when they attended a sensory friendly performance. For example, it was helpful to have low-sensory rooms and program timing set for
families with sensory processing differences across most studies. There were no identified inconsistencies analyzed in the literature.

**Gaps in Knowledge and Programming**

The literature supports the promise of sensory friendly experiences for people with sensory differences; yet there are not enough sensory-friendly programs in the Bay Area and there is a need for OT involvement in the programs. Currently existing programs have shown to be successful, and in order to support the sensory processing differences community, more programs would be beneficial for them.

**Purpose Statement**

The goal of this project was to collaboratively develop and implement a sensory friendly pilot program with the Throckmorton Theatre to address inclusivity for children with sensory processing differences in the greater Bay Area.
Methods

Partnering Organization

We collaborated with the Throckmorton Theatre’s “Little Throck” youth theatre program to pilot a sensory friendly performance of Willy Wonka Junior on February 13, 2022. The Throckmorton Theatre is a multidisciplinary arts organization in Mill Valley, California that hosts plays, musicals, comedy shows, concerts, and art exhibitions for people of all ages all year round. The “Little Throck” hosts different age groups and teaches children acting, singing, and dancing. They then have a big theatrical production put on by each age group. The sensory friendly Willy Wonka Junior performance was put on by the oldest “Little Throck” age group of about thirty 11-14 year olds.

Needs Assessment

Our needs assessment consisted of the following components: an internet search of cultural arts venues in the Bay Area specifically noting which ones have accessibility modifications and OT involvement, a review of existing literature and guidelines for sensory friendly theatre programs, collaboration with faculty advisor and theatre program director, and a needs assessment survey.

We discovered that there is no existing, accessible evidence based literature for Bay Area sensory friendly programs and that there are limited sensory friendly programs that exist in the Bay Area. All preliminary information was gathered through database research in finding articles/reviews that were in relation to sensory friendly programs and sensory processing differences. We reviewed the literature to identify key themes that guided our research. Some notable sensory friendly cultural programs in this literature review include Sensory Tote Program in Texas (Fletcher et al., 2021), Sensory Friendly Concerts in Colorado (Shiloh & Lagasse,
2014), and a Sensory-Friendly Sunday Program at a museum in an undisclosed location (Silverman & Carr, 2017). After diving into the literature and researching different cultural arts programs in the Bay Area, it was concluded that there were many programs that were not sensory friendly and there is a lack of accessibility to cultural arts programs for children with sensory processing differences. Therefore, we decided to create our own program in the Bay Area. In regards to existing literature, we utilized The Kennedy Center’s *Guide for Performing Arts Setting for Sensory Friendly Programming For People with Social & Cognitive Disabilities* (Ideishi, 2013) to guide our decision-making for the accommodations that we would provide. Additionally, we made effective use of the expertise of our faculty advisor who has developed, implemented, and conducted research on sensory friendly theatre and provided specific guidance on key components of this pilot performance.

Our team sent out a needs assessment survey (see Appendix A) to gather information from families who have children with sensory processing differences on how to best accommodate their needs when implementing a sensory friendly program.

**Program Development Process**

We collaborated with the Throckmorton Theatre, located in Mill Valley, working with the staff and theatre director Reba Gilbert to design and implement the sensory friendly pilot program. In preparation for the show, we had weekly meetings as a team and met regularly with Ms. Gilbert to create this performance by discussing what resources were going to be provided to the theatre patrons, and how we would conduct the needs assessment and post-survey to understand the community’s experience and needs with the sensory friendly performance.

Based on the needs assessment survey (Appendix A) responses and the literature review, we decided to implement accommodations including environmental modifications of creating
zones, having the house lights on during the show, and having relaxed behavior expectations. We utilized supplies such as bean bags, floor mats, Rody horse, fidget toys, and wiggle seats from the occupational therapy department at the Dominican University of CA and from our faculty advisor. Lastly, we collaborated with the theatre program director to discuss organizational vision, priorities, and available resources such as placement of the zones, and ticketing.

In marketing the event, we sent performance information and the show flyer (Appendix B) to faculty and staff within the Occupational Therapy department at our University, and they assisted in marketing our program by forwarding and spreading the word to pediatric clinics and families with a member with sensory processing differences. The Throckmorton Theatre shared the sensory friendly performance information on their social media pages on Facebook and Instagram. We shared the pilot performance information with our personal connections and encouraged them to share with others that would benefit from an accessible performance.

Our program was developed and created in 2021, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we reinforced Throckmorton’s existing COVID guidelines to ensure safety of both the performers and audience members who attended the show. Audience members were required to wear a mask and had to show proof of COVID vaccination or a negative COVID test upon entry to the theatre.

**Program Description**

We implemented a pilot sensory friendly performance of *Willy Wonka, Junior the Musical* on February 13th, 2022 at the Throckmorton Theatre in Marin County, CA. The one-act, 60-minute show was performed by a cast of youth actors between the ages of 11-14. There were approximately 40 audience members who bought tickets for the sensory friendly community and 40 audience members who bought general admission tickets. Our sensory friendly pilot offered
three unique features of preparatory materials, specialized training for staff/actors, and environmental modifications to the theatre. In addition, we provided an educational video to the youth actors and gave time for Q&A so the students were ready for a sensory friendly performance. Prior to the show, we met with the theatre to view the dress rehearsal, and note any last accommodations to implement before the sensory friendly pilot showing.

**Preparatory Materials**

We created and provided a social story (see additional resources on Dominican Scholar) for audience members to access on the ticketing website, and it was targeted towards those who have never been to a theatre showing before, which provided an overview of what to expect at the show and behavioral expectations for the theatre performance. The social story addressed some general topics such as parking, the lobby, and restrooms, and offered insight and expectations as those with sensory differences may have a difficult time adjusting to a new, unfamiliar setting and could be easily overwhelmed. The social story addressed the theatre topics such as entering and exiting the theatre, finding your seats, the purpose of the stop signs, and general stage information. It provided information regarding the several zones in the theatre and the purpose for each zone. We created two social stories: one original version and one modified one that is more accessible for individuals who may need a screen reader or easier to read formatting.

**Specialized Training for Staff/Performers**

Prior to the show, we created a 7-minute educational video for the performers to understand what sensory processing differences are, how children in the audience may act differently than in a general showing, what their role as a performer is, and how we modified the house. We also attended one of their rehearsals and hosted a Q&A to give the performers an
opportunity to ask any questions they had about the sensory friendly performance. Some of the
questions the actors asked were “what noises would the audience be making and would it be
distracting?” and “how different would this performance be compared to a general audience
performance?” The overall purpose of the video is to educate the performers on what to expect
for the sensory friendly performance and to understand the needs of theatre patrons that do have
sensory processing differences. The video was shared with the theatre director who then sent it to
the performers prior to our Q&A session.

**Physical Environmental Modifications**

Inside the theatre, we modified the environment by creating four different zones:

movement, tech, chill out, and quiet (see Appendix E), which audience members could move
freely between the zones to meet their needs. The movement zone (Figure 1), which was located
at the back of the theatre on the right, allowed more space for people to move around freely. The
tech zone (Figure 2), which was located in the back of the theatre on the left, allowed people to
use their devices during the show with headphones or no audio. The chill-out zone (Figure 3)
was located in an adjacent room to the lobby which had mats, bean bag chairs, a Rody horse, and
fidget toys if people were getting overstimulated from the show and needed a space to calm
down. The quiet zone (no photo available) was located in the crescendo, a room that was located
outside the theatre if someone truly needed an isolated, quiet place to calm down. Additionally,
some other environmental modifications that were featured include stop signs taped at restricted
areas, and dim house lighting during the show.

At the beginning of the show, there were three children using the chill out space and a
total of three families that asked OT students about the different zones. OT students also
observed parents pointing out the stop signs and signs for the zones to their children. During the
show, the zones that were utilized were the movement and chill out space. In particular, the Rody horse and the fidgets were the most popular items in use.

**Social Environmental Modifications**

The relaxed behavior expectations were the major social environment modifications that were very noticeable for this pilot performance. These expectations allowed people to make noise and move during the show. Prior to the performance, one team member went on stage to explain the behaviors that our sensory friendly audience may exhibit including noise, clapping, yelling, etc. and how these are acceptable behaviors during the show.
Program Evaluation

Following the performance, we evaluated the sensory friendly pilot through post-performance surveys and interviews with audience members, performers, and the theatre program director, as well as our own team’s debrief between the OT students and professor. During the show, programs that were given to audience members contained a special insert we provided with a QR code to a feedback Google Form. It was marketed to ask audience members to “tell us about your experience” in a brief survey. From the Google Form, we received three responses that contained positive and constructive feedback. The major themes we recognized from the survey and interviews were in relation to education, preparatory materials, and zones.

Audience Feedback

See Appendix C for audience survey questions. Of the seven individuals who participated in the survey, all had expressed a strong willingness to attend a sensory friendly performance again in the future. When receiving feedback on the accommodations we had implemented, we were advised by one individual to shift the onstage introduction to an educational opportunity to explain what sensory processing disorders are and explain why accommodations, zones, and relaxed behaviors were implemented to aid accessibility in the cultural arts. Some members noted that they still did not understand why we had a sensory friendly show. Another key suggestion from one audience member’s feedback was to consider relocating or removing zones into the main house, to enhance the inclusivity of the physical space such as creating more open space in our movement zone and providing more interactiveness. An interview was also conducted between two audience members and our faculty advisor in gathering feedback on their experience and preparedness. In the interview, two audience members suggested possibly having a live stream option available in the chill out zone so that the audience doesn’t miss the show that
they came and paid for. Additionally, the two interviewees recommended for the educational script to be included in the pamphlet for individuals to follow along to, or read on their own time to understand the important inclusiveness of a sensory friendly show.

**Performer Feedback**

See Appendix D for performer survey questions. After the showing, we provided the staff with a survey to distribute to the performers. In this survey, four performers provided feedback on their experience and how prepared they felt. The four performers that completed the survey had shared in the survey their enjoyment of performing in an environment that was inclusive and created accessibility as well as described the educational video to be helpful to their preparedness. Two performers of the show expressed “wanting more preparation for noise during the performance” as there was noise that was occurring during a majority of the show coming from audience members and to create more time for the performers in their rehearsal to ask questions regarding the sensory friendly performance.

**Debrief with Theatre Program Director**

Following the performance, the team met with the theatre program director to discuss an evaluation of the show and future directions. The director reported feeling that everything went smoothly and that the performers had positive feedback about the sensory friendly show. She appreciated hearing the results from the audience and performer surveys and agreed that there could be a better educational opportunity in the beginning of the show. Additionally, the director opened up the idea of another sensory friendly show for later in the next year or two to further increase accessibility of theatre to all individuals.
Discussion

The results from our sensory friendly performance pilot of Willy Wonka Jr. yielded overall positive feedback from both the audience and performers. They provided suggestions for future performances at the Throckmorton Theatre including the replacement of the zones and a more elaborate community education portion. The success of this pilot performance sparked conversations between the OT students and the theatre director to have another sensory friendly performance at the Throckmorton Theatre, possibly with an older audience, all of which is still currently being discussed.

There were a number of parallels between our program evaluation findings and the findings found in the current existing literature on sensory friendly performances. When receiving feedback on our program evaluation from audience members, they found our pre-teaching strategies helpful but we were advised by one individual to shift the onstage introduction to an educational opportunity to explain what sensory processing disorders are and explain why accommodations, zones, and relaxed behaviors were implemented to aid accessibility in the cultural arts. Some members also noted that they still did not understand why we had a sensory friendly show. Our outcomes were similar with the literature as audience members found our social story and pre-show announcement helpful but it is also contrasting as they found the pre-show announcement to not be enough in terms of education. According to the literature found from Giserman-Kiss et al. (2020), audience members were able to enjoy the immersive theater experience with the visual and physical supports provided by the performers; the supports included a visual schedule, environmental modifications, pre-teaching strategies (social stories and pre-show materials), and sensory aids. This feedback informs us to provide
deeper education for audience members through providing more handouts, infographics, and creating a better educational opportunity during the pre-show announcement.

In our program evaluation feedback from the performers, two performers of the show expressed “wanting more preparation for noise during the performance” and to create more time for performers during a dress rehearsal to ask questions regarding the performance as well as how to be better prepared when encountering certain behaviors. When having our dress rehearsal with the actors, we opened up time at the end for questions with our team. There was not enough time as there were also many actors that had questions. In our education video we did not address how to be better prepared for these encounters, but mainly educated the performers on what these behaviors may look like. Umeda et al. (2017), documented that some of the barriers the disability community faces are inadequate training and education of staff in community settings. This barrier was illustrated in our program evaluation with the performers.

In our program evaluation, we found that audience members and performers involved in our sensory friendly pilot reported the experiences being positive. One audience member from our pilot program said, “[The sensory friendly show] was nice that kids that couldn’t ordinarily enjoy time at the theatre were able to be there without any judgment.” Similarly, in the literature, many audience members of sensory friendly shows reported positive experiences. Giserman-Kiss et al. (2020), stated that audience members were able to make the most out of the theatre experience through the visual and physical supports that were provided including movement, chillout, and cozy corner zones. According to Kempe (2014) “parents have described sensory friendly performances as providing rare and valuable opportunities to participate in a community activity within a safe and supportive context.” Similarly, parents acknowledged how the
adaptations allowed their children to be more independent and be themselves in the theatre experience (Shiloh & Lagasse, 2014; Silverman & Carr, 2017).

While our program held similarities to findings in the existing literature, there are unique differences in our findings that offer new perspectives for sensory friendly theatre. In contrast to the older concert performers in Shiloh & Lagasse (2014) and Giserman-Kiss et al. (2020), in our sensory friendly performance, the musical was performed by Throckmorton Youth performers in partnership with the after-school program which consists of 11-14 year old children. This younger audience is different from what was found in the literature, which consisted typically of older performers and audience members. As we worked with youth actors, we gained perspective on the knowledge that the young population has on the community we are trying to reach and advocate for. The youth actors enjoyed the opportunity to create accessible theatre, which is new evidence that supports youth involvement in accessibility of the cultural arts. Therefore, we can conclude that creating accessibility is not just for older performers, but can also include younger performers. By working with youth, we had the opportunity to expand their knowledge early on of sensory processing differences and what it means to be sensory friendly. The sensory friendly pilot program allowed for more opportunities to educate and advocate for the role of OT and for people with sensory processing differences to be included in the cultural arts community.

Additionally, in our sensory friendly pilot, we integrated general admission and the sensory friendly population for one inclusive showing, while many past sensory friendly programs were exclusive to only those who have sensory processing differences. Many existing sensory friendly programs such as Fletcher et al.’s (2021) sensory program provided special times strictly for only families with sensory differences. Our sensory friendly pilot program was
catered to accommodate both those with sensory differences and the general public to promote inclusivity within the cultural arts community.
Conclusion and Future Directions

Overall, our sensory friendly pilot performance at the Throckmorton Theatre was successful in promoting an inclusive theatre experience for the sensory friendly community and provided great insight into how we could improve in the future. Based on feedback from audience members and cast, future sensory friendly performances at the Throckmorton staff should include more thoroughly explaining the purpose of a sensory friendly performance in the on-stage introduction, further elaborating on the possible audience noises, and justifying the reasoning for the environmental modifications to educate the audience. Explaining the philosophical purpose (which is to increase accessibility and inclusivity for children with sensory processing differences in the theatre), allows for more education into why these modifications and types of shows are so important for the sensory friendly community. Next, in the future, we suggest that future Throckmorton sensory friendly performances include can better preparation of performers and audience members for possible noise. During the evaluation, one of the performers specifically mentioned that there was more noise than expected. Lastly, future sensory friendly performances can educate the audience on the purpose of environmental modifications. Each environmental modification was intentional and purposeful, and it would be beneficial to explain the placement of each zone. There is a possible opportunity to create another sensory friendly show at the Throckmorton with an older cast in a musical performance in the Spring of 2023 to incorporate these suggestions and further promote inclusivity for individuals with sensory processing differences.
References


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Appendix A: Needs Assessment Survey
**Sensory Friendly Theatre Programming**

Hello! Thank you for your interest in participating in our brief survey about you and your child’s experiences in community programs. It will take about 5 minutes of your time to complete.

We are 5 Occupational Therapy students at Dominican University of California, and we are looking to create sensory friendly programming in our Bay Area community. In order for us to do this, we want to hear about the current experiences of families in our community.

Your participation in this survey is anonymous and voluntary. We will NOT be collecting any personal data for this survey. This survey helps us to create programming that you and your family would benefit from. If you are interested in helping us further in a possible interview or would like to know more about our project, there will be a space at the end of this survey for you to add your email address. This section is optional. Thank you again for your valuable time, it is greatly appreciated.

1) Do any children in your family have sensory processing challenges?*
   a) Yes  
   b) No  

1a) If yes to the previous question, please briefly describe your child's sensory processing challenges.

2) What, if any, challenges do you experience going out into the community?

3) Have you attended a sensory friendly performance? (These performances are created to be accessible theatre experiences for people with sensory processing differences and their families, with include accommodations including light and sound levels, designated chill out spaces, and relaxed behavioral expectations)*
   a) Yes  
   b) No  

3a) If yes to the previous question, please share your experience.

4) What would you like to see at a sensory friendly performance? Select all that apply*
   a) Headphones/ Earplugs  
   b) Sensory Toys  
   c) Chill Space (A separate space for your child to take a break if overwhelmed)  
   d) Preparatory Materials(Visual map, Caregiver guide, social story, etc.)  
   e) On stage pre-show announcement describing what is allowed during show and modifications  
   f) Other (with space to define)
Appendix B: Show Flyer
Join Us For a Sensory Friendly Performance!

What is a Sensory Friendly Performance?
An inclusive theatre experience for people with sensory processing differences and their families, as well as anyone who wants a more relaxed theatre-going experience.

Saturday, February 12, 2022 at 2:30pm
Approximate run time is 1 hour with no intermission

Get $10 Tickets Here

Accommodations:
- Chill-out space
- Movement Zones
- Can Bring Your Own Fidgets
- Preparatory Materials
- Relaxed Behavioral Expectations

COVID-19 Policy:
- Must show proof of Vaccination or negative test if over 2 years old
- Masks are required at all times

Additional info:
https://www.throckmortontheatre.org

Throckmorton Theatre
142 Throckmorton Ave.
Mill Valley, CA 94941
Appendix C: Audience Survey
Sent out as a Google Form:
* = Required

1) Is this your first time attending a sensory friendly theatre performance? *
   a) Yes
   b) No
2) Which of the following best describes your reason for attending this sensory friendly performance of Willy Wonka Jr.? *
   a) I intentionally chose to attend this performance because of it being “sensory friendly”
   b) The “sensory friendly” nature of this performance was not the reason why I chose to attend today’s show
   c) Other:
3) Do you or someone in your party identify as having sensory processing differences? *
   a) Yes
   b) No
4) Please check the box next to each support that you or someone in your party utilized. *
   a) Social story on Throckmorton website
   b) House lighting during the show
   c) Movement Zone
   d) Tech-Friendly Zone
   e) Chill-Out Space
   f) Volunteers
   g) Relaxed Behavioral Expectations (freedom to move, talk, enter/exit the theatre freely)
   h) Quiet Zone
   i) N/A
5) What did you like best about your experience at the sensory friendly show? *
6) What suggestions do you have to enhance future sensory friendly shows? *
7) How likely are you to attend another sensory friendly show or recommend someone you know to attend? *
   a) 1 - not likely
   b) 2 - likely
   c) 3 - very likely
8) How did you hear about this sensory friendly performance? *
9) Any other comments you would like to share:
Appendix D: Performer Survey
Sent out as a Google Form:
* = Required

1) Is this your first time performing in a sensory friendly show? *
   a) Yes
   b) No

2) On a scale of 1-3, how prepared did you feel for the sensory friendly performance? *
   a) 1- Not prepared
   b) 2- Somewhat Prepared
   c) 3- Prepared

3) Did you view the educational video before today's performance? *
   a) Yes
   b) No

4) On a scale from 1-3, how useful was the educational video? *
   a) 1-Not useful
   b) 2-Somewhat useful
   c) 3- Useful
   d) N/A (I didn't watch the video)

5) What other materials or resources would have been helpful in preparing for a sensory friendly performance? *

6) Did you face any unique difficulties when performing in the sensory friendly performance vs. a typical show? *
   a) Yes
   b) No

7) If yes to the previous question, please explain *
   a) Your answer

8) Did you enjoy performing in the sensory friendly performance? *
   a) Yes
   b) No

9) If yes to the previous question, what did you enjoy most being apart of this performance?

10) Any other comments you would like to share:
Appendix E: Zones
Figure 1 Movement Zone
Figure 2 Tech Zone
Figure 3 Chill Out Zone