

**Excerpts from the article, "The Arts and Disability," by Sally Dorothy Bailey
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The arts can greatly enhance every aspect of our lives: learning, work, play, relationships and identity formation. In fact, because they are so basic and so life-affirming, the arts often open up new avenues for stimulation, communication and growth. If this is true for people who don't have disabilities, it is equally so for people who do have them.

Disabilities—whether physical, cognitive or emotional—cause a great deal of frustration in the lives of those who have them. The arts break through barriers and limitations. They offer participants many possibilities and options for successful expression of feelings and ideas. Difficulty on one level of perception or communication does not negate enjoyment or participation on another.

For example, someone who has difficulty expressing herself in words because of a speech disorder or learning disability may be able to express herself through pantomime or dance. A student who can't write about something that happened to her might be able to act it out or sing about it. If an individual can experience success, be valued for her ideas and have her feelings validated, her self-confidence and self-esteem begin to grow. When attitudes about the self change, obstacles become surmountable.

Making friends and sharing experiences creates a sense of belonging to the community, of having the right to exist and enjoy life alongside everyone else. To be acknowledged for artistic creations leads to the desire to contribute more—to the self, family, friends and community.

Specific Skills Which Drama Develops

Each art form helps student artists develop specific skills. A look at some of the skills that drama enhances will show how participation in theater arts might benefit a person who has a disability.

Listening: Directions to games must be listened to in order to play. Stories must be heard before they can be acted out. While acting out a scene, each actor must listen to the other actors in order to know when to say her line and what to say.

Eye Contact: Many children who have cognitive disabilities or low self-esteem have difficulty making eye contact with others. Eye contact is part of listening and receiving information from others. It is also part of sharing information with others about what you are thinking and feeling. Being able to make eye contact with another person enhances trust as well as communication.

There are many drama games that stress eye contact and therefore develop the ability to use it on stage and in real life. Awareness of the Body in Space: Some people need a lot of "personal space" and some need just a little. If someone breaks the boundaries of your personal space without your permission, you probably will feel threatened. Sometimes students are aware of their own personal space, but not of the fact that others have it as well.

Awareness of personal space is a cultural concept that is taught non-verbally. Children normally learn it through observing their parents as they interact within the family and in the world at large. Children who have special needs sometimes miss out on a lot of information-processing concerns. This lack of awareness of body and personal space boundaries can lead to personal misunderstandings and fights.

Shape-shifting or transformation exercises stress changing your physical self into other animals or objects, both large and small, and moving in different ways. Slow motion/fast motion exercises can create the awareness of how your body moves through space and at which speeds you have more or less control.

Once a student understands how her body inhabits the space around her, she can begin to learn how her body interacts with other bodies in space. Many movement games teach spatial relationships. Others teach how to touch appropriately and in a non-aggressive manner.

Physical Expressiveness: Guessing games and transformation games require students to use their bodies in different ways to communicate an idea to others. Pantomime necessitates that students imitate an action

as clearly as possible. Creating a character different from oneself encourages expressing emotions in different ways and exploring how other people move and express themselves.

Facial Expressiveness: For humans, the face carries more emotional information than any other part. In fact, communication begins with the face. Working with facial expressiveness in drama class develops ease and appropriateness of expression as well as the ability to interpret the meaning of facial expressions in others.

Verbal Expressiveness: The most obvious way drama can enhance verbal expressiveness is by training students to speak clearly and understandably. Through improvisation, students can learn to translate thoughts and emotions into words. Expressing how a character in a fictional context feels can provide a student with enough emotional distance to be able to sort through her own feelings and choose appropriate words.

Focus and Concentration: Focus and concentration are crucial for an actor to develop in order to create an exciting performance on stage. Focusing on drama games and activities, which are of short duration, but which create intense, enjoyable feelings, a student begins to learn how to focus her attention. The immediate positive feedback from her body, her emotions, the teacher and her fellow students reinforces focused behavior and encourages her to pay attention to what is going on in the classroom.

Flexibility and Problem Solving Skills: Many children with special needs, in trying to cope with physical, relational or educational situations that seem to be out of their control, can become very tight and rigid in the choices they are willing to make. They stop taking risks and limit themselves to a narrow range of behavior that may or may not be appropriate to the current moment.

For example, a child who has difficulty controlling her body movements because of cerebral palsy could develop an inflexible need to always be in control of every interpersonal interaction. Things have to go her way or no way at all. If she can't call the shots, she might whine, complain, protest, have a temper tantrum or refuse to participate. Obviously, these are not productive coping strategies. No one can always control other people's behavior or choices.

In drama class, students have the opportunity to try out different roles and behaviors in a safe situation. Different strategies for solving a problem can be acted out and the pros and cons of each evaluated and discussed. Changing points of view on a situation through role reversal often helps students open up their personal perspective on a specific problem or on their general orientation toward themselves and others. Just the experience of standing in another's shoes for a little while teaches flexibility and opens up the possibility that other choices do exist and might be considered.

Social Interaction: Sometimes children who have special needs have poor group interaction skills because they don't have enough opportunities to practice them.

A wide variety of group experiences are available for students in a drama classroom. The entire class might act out something together in a parallel fashion, expressing different versions of the same idea side by side without interacting. The teacher might lead the group in a transformation game where everyone changes from elephants to monkeys to thorn bushes. Individuals can take turns getting up in front of the group and pantomiming different activities or singing a song. Partners can work together on games and exercises. Small groups can invent an improvisational scene or play a game in which they have to work together to solve a problem. In each type of group experience, students have the opportunity to make positive contact with other students, to give and take ideas, to resolve conflicts and to make friends.

Self-Esteem: Because they are different from other children in their neighborhood or school and because they may not succeed in academic and social settings--the two main arenas of childhood--children with disabilities may not feel good about themselves.

Drama is a self-esteem builder. Through dramatic experiences in class and in performances, children can share the creative, vulnerable, and absolutely unique aspects of themselves with others. They can explore who they are, experience success, and begin to feel proud of themselves.