

A Guide to Educating Young Performers with Down Syndrome
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Authors' Note:

I am not a certified expert in theater or accessibility. My background does not include formal education in either field. This guide is based on the insights and knowledge I have gathered during my academic journey and research project focused on accessibility for children and teenagers with Down Syndrome in theater. The information presented here is derived from the expertise of those more knowledgeable than myself.

This document serves as a flexible guide to help educate theater creators on establishing accessible environments and including individuals with Down Syndrome in performances. It is my hope that this guide will inspire more inclusive practices and foster a greater understanding of the importance of accessibility in the arts. I encourage readers to further explore and engage with this critical topic, and to continually seek out new knowledge and perspectives to enhance their efforts in creating inclusive theatrical experiences.

Key Principles for Accessibility in Theater

1. **Belief in Potential:** The foundation of creating an inclusive theatrical environment starts with the belief that all performers, regardless of their abilities, can thrive on stage. This belief fosters a supportive atmosphere where performers can build self-confidence.
2. **Time and Patience:** Teaching performers with disabilities often requires more time and patience. Repetition and consistency are essential, as many children with Down syndrome may need additional time to form neural pathways and connections.
3. **Individualized Support:** Each performer's needs are unique. Some may need more time, while others may benefit from specific teaching aids or adapted methods. It's important to assess and cater to these individual needs.
4. **Extra Resources:** Providing extra hours for practice, offering materials for independent study, and using tools that aid in learning (like visual aids or step-by-step instructions) can make a significant difference.
5. **Repetition:** Repetition is especially critical for students with cognitive disabilities. The more opportunities they have to practice and repeat their parts, the more comfortable and proficient they will become.

Practical Steps to Implement These Principles

- **Planning:** Before starting a production, assess the specific needs of the students and plan accordingly. This may involve scheduling extra rehearsals, adapting scripts, or modifying choreography.
- **Adaptation of Materials:** Use accessible materials such as simplified scripts, visual aids, and recorded instructions to support learning.

- **Inclusive Practices:** Ensure that rehearsals and performances are conducted in an inclusive manner. This includes making physical spaces accessible and using inclusive language and practices.
- **Training for Staff:** Provide training for directors, choreographers, and other staff on how to work effectively with students with disabilities.

By integrating these principles and practices, theaters can create an inclusive environment where all performers can shine on stage.

Introduction: Fostering Inclusivity Through Patience

The concept of "accessibility" in theater is not universal—there is no comprehensive, step-by-step manual that can perfectly outline how to create accessibility in every theatrical context. This is because every scenario is unique. The requirements of a specific show, the individual needs and abilities of participants, the ultimate goal of the performance, the resources of the producing organization, and countless other factors all influence the path to accessibility in any given performance. Nonetheless, certain elements are essential for producing a performance that includes disabled actors, chief among them being time and patience.

As mentioned, the definition of “accessibility” varies. In this guide, I will focus mainly on the practice of creating accessibility for children with Down Syndrome.

The first step to helping students with Down Syndrome thrive on stage is to *believe* that they can thrive on stage. Once a director or educator has faith in a student, it gives them permission to have faith in themselves. What remains is putting in the extra effort and extra hours of time to help them learn. Time is the most important factor when it comes to teaching a show to children with disabilities. They can be challenged and succeed center stage, but it requires patience and repetition, much more than may be needed for children without disabilities. Children with Down Syndrome generally take longer to learn new things than other kids their age. Therefore, repetition is key. Teaching accessible theater is not easy, and it never will be. It requires a lot of extra time. If a talented and hardworking student wants to learn a dance, they will learn that dance. But they must be provided with extra hours, extra repetition, and the materials they need to practice on their own.

This manuscript will outline some of the strategies and resources you will need to create accessibility on your stage.

Section 1: What is Down Syndrome?

To effectively work with and educate students with Down syndrome, it's essential to understand what Down syndrome is, its causes, and its specific physical and behavioral characteristics.

Down syndrome is a genetic condition that occurs when a person has an extra copy of chromosome 21. Chromosomes are tiny structures within our cells that carry genes, which guide how the body grows and functions. In people with Down syndrome, the extra chromosome affects their physical and cognitive development, causing delays and challenges.

Some common physical characteristics of Down syndrome include a flattened face, almond-shaped eyes that slant upward, and a tongue that may stick out. People with Down syndrome may also have a short neck, small ears, hands, and feet, as well as poor muscle tone and loose joints. These features are typically noticeable at birth and become more prominent as the child grows.

Behaviorally, Down Syndrome presents itself in multiple different ways. Some common traits that may be more prevalent in children with Down Syndrome are stubbornness, shyness, short attention spans, and even temper issues. For younger children with Down Syndrome, they may be much more prone to shyness. Many of the kids I have worked with have a behavior of 'shutting down' when taking criticism or harsh directions from an adult they do not completely trust. Later, we will talk about gaining the trust of an entire community. However, trust of individuals is equally important. Patience is key. It will not come quickly or easily, and it may take a few shows with them to fully gain trust. But you can start by treating them like a valuable member of your program. They will trust you to teach them if you can trust them to be taught.

It is important to note that these characteristics are oversimplifications. Every child is different. Some children may struggle with speech more, others may struggle more with behavior. The most essential way you can go about creating a space for these students is to understand their specific needs.

In addition to developmental delays, such as slower speech development, individuals with Down syndrome may experience health problems like congenital heart defects or hearing loss. Despite these challenges, with the right support, people with Down syndrome can live fulfilling lives and participate in various activities, such as theater, where inclusive programs can make a significant difference.

Section 2: Modifications

Creating a space for students with disabilities to thrive in theater requires being willing to make some major changes. This manuscript will outline both specific modifications and general rules for adapting to each individual situation. Every child learns and behaves differently, so nothing is universal. However, there are certainly strategies and ideas that every director should keep in mind when working with these students.

The first and most important step when casting and teaching a show for students with exceptionalities is accepting that the show is not going to look the same as every other stage show. Yes, children with disabilities can do anything other children can do. However, they cannot always do things in the same way, and oftentimes need either a little extra help, or some modifications to accommodate their physical or mental setbacks. You need to go into the rehearsal process with the knowledge that things will likely have to be adapted, and the willingness to put in the time and effort necessary to make those changes and decisions.

I have had the privilege of speaking with Stephanie Barton-Farcas, an actress and theater professional based in New York City. Ms. Barton-Farcas is the author of the book *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* and founder of Nicu's Spoon Theater in New York City. Nicu's Spoon Theater is an off-off-broadway theater with a focus on inclusion in the arts. In a recent production of *Richard III* by Nicu Spoon Theater, the role of Richard was portrayed by an actor with disabilities. To adapt the fight scenes, the choreographer worked closely with the actor to integrate the use of arm crutches into the choreography. This required considering realistic scenarios: if a person with arm crutches were genuinely in a fight, how would they defend themselves? The actor might use the crutches as weapons, rely on them for balance, or even lose them during the confrontation. Such adaptations not only make the scenes believable but also help the scene resonate with the audience by showcasing the actor's unique physicality. The message of this anecdote is to embrace these differences of your actors, rather than always trying to hide or 'work around' their disabilities.

In this production, instead of the traditional stabbing of Richard, the scene was altered to have Richard strangled. This change was made to ensure safety and practicality while maintaining dramatic impact. Taking artistic license is essential in such adaptations, but it is equally important to maintain open and ongoing communication with the disabled actor. Regular check-ins to ask, "What would you do? What do you feel comfortable with?" ensure that the actor's input is valued and incorporated into the performance. This collaborative approach fosters a supportive environment where all perspectives are respected.

Inclusive dance choreography also plays a significant role. Options for adapting dance scenes include making the choreographer available to work one-on-one with the disabled performer, ensuring that their movements are effectively integrated into the overall performance. Alternatively, allowing the disabled actor to dance in their own way and having the rest of the cast follow their lead can make a powerful statement about individuality and inclusion. Such an

approach not only highlights the actor's unique abilities but also challenges traditional notions of choreography and performance. More specific modifications must also be made, catering to the specific needs of the people involved in the project.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify any possible modification needs that may arise during the rehearsal process. There is, however, a certain mindset you must have as you implement these principles. I spoke with a student named Mia, a talented high school actress and singer, about her experience in theatrical education settings. Mia shared that the challenges she faces in theater are not about her abilities, but about how others perceive her. The real barrier is often the fear of the unknown, which leads to hesitation and lack of patience. "I don't understand why people speak down to me, like I am nine – I am not nine," Mia said, expressing frustration at being treated as if she is much younger. She emphasized that people need to take the time to work at her pace, understanding that while she might need more repetition and preparation than other students, she is fully capable of performing at a high level. Her parents echoed these sentiments, stressing that shows move quickly, and kids with special needs benefit from extra time and tailored challenges. It is crucial for directors and teachers to push these students beyond preconceptions, not placing them with younger children or expecting them to fit into a mold. Most importantly, parents should trust that their children can belong, can be challenged, and can succeed in these environments without constantly feeling the need to ask for permission for inclusion.

Monologues

Let's talk about monologues. For many kids with Down Syndrome, communication can be very difficult. So when working with an actor on a monologue, take baby steps. Start by boosting confidence. Children with Down Syndrome have likely spent their entire lives being told that they can't do certain things, talked down to, or shunned for their communication skills. The best way to boost their confidence is by believing in them. But what does this mean? Believing in an actor does not mean lack of criticism or aiming towards comfort. As an educator, it is your job to bring students out of their comfort zones and push them to be their best. This should not change when working with a child with Down Syndrome – but neither should anything else. The only way this will work will be if you believe that they can create an authentic, nuanced character for their monologue. After you have established a level of confidence and trust, there are a few guidelines you can use to help you teach a monologue:

- Start by chunking it down: divide the monologue into smaller sections or even sentences. Working with shorter chunks of text will make it easier for the child to focus and memorize. You can even try teaching one sentence at a time, and adapt your pace depending on the student's ability.
- Children with Down syndrome often benefit from repetition and consistent routines. Repeating each part multiple times will help reinforce memorization.

- Storyboarding: Create visual representations (like pictures or drawings) for each section of the monologue. This helps the child understand the meaning and context of the lines.
- Highlight key words: Use colorful markers to highlight important words or emotions in the monologue. Visual cues can help them remember the flow and key elements.
- Incorporate movement: Turn the words into actions or gestures. For example, if a line talks about feeling happy, have the child use a happy gesture or expression. This physical association can help with memorization and understanding.
- Use props: Give them something tangible to interact with while saying their lines (a simple object that relates to the monologue). This can help with engagement and focus.
- Rephrase lines: Ask the child to rephrase the lines in their own words. This can help them process and understand the content before moving on to memorization.
- Create a Routine: Set up a consistent, short, daily practice routine. Regular, brief rehearsals for the child to do on their own (e.g., 10-15 minutes) will be more effective than long, occasional sessions.
- Follow a pattern: Repeating the same pattern of practice each day—like starting with a warm-up, reviewing previously learned lines, then introducing new material—can help the child feel comfortable and confident.
- Record the monologue: Record yourself or someone else reading the monologue aloud. Play it back for the child regularly to help with auditory learning. You can also record them performing it, so they can listen to their progress.
- Create a video: Make a video of someone acting out the monologue, using gestures and expressions, for the child to watch and mimic. Visual learners may find this helpful in picking up cues and memorizing lines.
- Explain the feelings: Help the child understand the emotions behind the lines. Use simple, relatable examples from their life to connect the feelings in the monologue to something they've experienced.
- Make it fun: Bring enthusiasm to the practice. Use positive reinforcement, and celebrate each step they successfully complete. Building confidence through small wins will motivate them to keep going.
- Teamwork: If possible, involve another student or a peer who can help practice with them. Having a "buddy" to cue lines or rehearse together can make the process more engaging and social.
- Group recitation: Practice saying the monologue together at first. Then gradually let the child say it on their own, giving them confidence to perform solo.
- Celebrate progress: Celebrate each small victory, whether it's remembering a line, using the right expression, or performing a section independently.
- Stay patient and encouraging: Be patient throughout the process, and keep the energy positive. If the child gets frustrated, take a break or shift to something fun before returning to the material.

- Move at their speed: Don't rush. Allow the child to progress at a pace that feels comfortable for them, reinforcing each step before moving on to the next.
- Check for comprehension: Periodically ask the child to explain what's happening in the monologue in their own words to ensure they understand both the lines and the meaning.

Being willing to adapt and embrace flexibility is crucial in creating an inclusive theatrical environment. It involves acknowledging that traditional methods may need to be altered and that these changes can lead to innovative and enriching experiences for both performers and audiences. Not only is this essential for working with individuals with Down syndrome in any capacity, but it embodies the very essence of theater. Theater, regardless of its form or audience, demands flexibility, adaptability, and creative problem-solving. The theater environment is inherently designed for this kind of work—it's in its nature. Creating an accessible theater space just requires tapping into this. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all participants feel valued, included, and able to contribute their best to the production, regardless of their physical abilities.

Section 3: Casting

Creating an inclusive and intentional casting process in theater is not just a trend but a necessity for the evolution of the art form. Ensuring that people with disabilities are represented on stage is an essential step toward a more equitable and authentic theatrical experience.

I was able to receive insight on this topic from Danielle Pretsfelder Demchick. Demchick is a casting director and advocate for inclusivity, dedicated to amplifying underrepresented voices in entertainment. As co-VP of Advocacy for the Casting Society of America and an active leader in industry organizations, she promotes equitable casting practices and champions diverse talent across all abilities. Demchick shared her philosophy that casting should be an authentic reflection of society, especially considering that 1 in 4 Americans has a disability. In casting for a commercial with four actors, for example, the odds would suggest that one of those actors might have a disability. To her, inclusive casting isn't simply "good practice" but a standard that reflects reality. Demchick emphasized that inclusive media from a young age sets lifelong expectations for authenticity, with viewers who won't settle for representation that falls short. Her vision moves beyond tokenism, advocating instead for intentional inclusion that sees disabled actors as a core part of the storytelling landscape.

When casting a show in which actors with disabilities will be auditioning, there are two major ‘forms’ of casting to consider: cross-disability casting, and intentional casting.

Cross-Disability Casting

Cross-disability casting refers to the practice of casting actors with disabilities in roles where the character's disability is different from the actor's own, or casting actors without disabilities in roles where the character has a disability. For example, casting a person who is deaf to play Jo from *Little Women* (or any other character that does not struggle with hearing) is an instance of cross-disability casting. Conversely, casting a fully hearing person to play Helen Keller is another example. A notable case study of cross-disability casting is the Deaf West Theater Company in Los Angeles. Founded in 1991, the Deaf West Theater Company is a nonprofit organization dedicated to showcasing deaf voices and stories. Productions at the Deaf West Theater Company feature deaf actors and actresses in roles not traditionally given to people who struggle with deafness. The company has taken off since their founding, and is known for winning two Tony Awards. I mention the Deaf West Theater Company for inspiration. They are a success story — by providing a marginalized population with the space and access required to shine, they have become a huge success.

With cross-disability casting, many theater programs face challenges due to a lack of initial trust and understanding. Casting someone with a disability—especially into a role not traditionally played by an actor with a disability—can feel scary. There's often a sense of uncertainty, leading directors to choose a ‘safer’ option. Why would a casting director cast an actor with Down Syndrome when they could cast someone without? The answer lies in the richness of culture and perspective that an actor with a disability brings to the performance. Their experiences, often marginalized, add layers of meaning that deepen the story and resonate with diverse audiences.

However, cross-disability casting is difficult, and in many cases, may seem like the more risky option. It takes time and dedication to build a program that can effectively and respectfully include actors with a range of disabilities. But this initial risk is necessary for growth. The hesitancy often comes from a lack of trust—not in the ability of the actor, but in the ability of the program to accommodate and support them.

Actors with disabilities bring their own culture and lived experiences to the table, adding an authenticity and emotional depth that wouldn't otherwise exist. Their unique perspectives can challenge audiences and theater professionals alike, pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling and contributing to more inclusive narratives. This is not just about casting actors in roles that “fit” their disability; it's about showing that they can inhabit any role and bring new insights to it. This is important to keep in mind during the casting process.

Although building a program that supports cross-disability casting takes time, resources, and effort, the benefits far outweigh the risks. Accessibility training, adaptable rehearsal techniques, and a commitment to inclusivity in decision-making are all part of creating an environment where actors with disabilities can thrive. The inclusion of these voices is essential, not only to the progression of theater but also to the development of a more just and equitable society.

Taking these risks can lead to some of the most innovative performances in modern theater. While it may seem easier to stick to traditional casting choices, the true risk lies in maintaining exclusionary practices. It's through challenging these norms that theater has the potential to become a powerful force for change.

Gaining the trust of the disability community is a long-term commitment that requires consistent outreach. This involves engaging with disability organizations, attending community events, and creating open forums for discussion. The process must be large-scale and ongoing, demonstrating a genuine commitment to inclusivity rather than a temporary initiative.

So, how does cross-disability casting work? It is actually much simpler than you might think. First, preparation is the most important aspect of your audition process. You need to create a space where you yourself can feel comfortable enough to judge without bias and gate talent. Make sure your space is physically accessible (plenty of chairs, large bathrooms, adequate stage space) before you can focus on creative accessibility. You will also find that a common theme of accessibility is time. Adequate time for all aspects of the rehearsal process is of utmost importance when working with children with Down Syndrome. This includes the audition process. Certain performers may need more time than others to audition, so it is important to ensure that you have extra time built into each audition slot when auditioning children with Down Syndrome. Even if the children do not require the extra time, it can be a good opportunity to ask questions and understand their performance styles more.

Before implementing cross-disability casting, it's crucial to outline what is absolutely necessary for your production and what would be desirable but not essential. This clear differentiation helps in planning resources and accommodating needs without compromising the artistic vision.

Questions are always a good place to start. In any production, you will have plenty of questions as a casting director as you put together the puzzle of a cast list. Here are some questions to keep in mind:

What logistical support would this actor need to play this role?

What could this actor bring to this role that other actors could not? What would that look like?

What strategies can I implement if the actor has trouble with focus, impulsivity, or regulating emotions on set?

Is this actor right for the role? Why or why not?

What adaptations would I have to make to the vision of the character? How might these adaptations affect the storytelling?

Have I consulted with the actor, their family, or a caregiver about specific accommodations or support they may need during filming or rehearsals?

Am I aware of any legal requirements (e.g., working hours, support provisions) when casting actors with disabilities?

Do I have a clear understanding of how to handle situations if behavioral challenges escalate, and do I have a plan in place to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone on set?

Do I understand that actors with Down syndrome may need extra time to memorize lines or cues, and can I accommodate that by offering additional rehearsals or line readings?

Can I create a flexible rehearsal schedule that includes breaks for rest, as people with Down syndrome may experience fatigue more quickly or need shorter working hours?

Am I aware of any common physical traits associated with Down syndrome, such as low muscle tone or joint flexibility, and can I adapt the role's physical demands (e.g., choreography, stunts) accordingly?

Have I taken into account possible sensory sensitivities, such as discomfort with loud noises or bright lights, that may affect the actor's performance, and can I adjust the environment to be more comfortable for them?

Am I prepared to modify the set, costumes, or props if the actor has specific physical needs related to Down syndrome, such as difficulty handling small objects or standing for long periods?

These questions are good places to start. You can answer these questions by forming a game plan with your casting and production team, as well as by speaking with the actor themselves throughout the casting process (without violating any rules of the theater or exposing casting decisions). At the heart of these questions is the goal of helping you figure out what you want your show to look like, and how different performers can take part in the show. Then, all you have to do is cast, and keep in mind that you may have subconscious biases.

A crucial question to ask during the casting process is "Why not?" This mindset shift challenges the default assumptions and barriers that often exclude disabled actors. By questioning why a role couldn't be played by a person with a disability, directors and casting panels open up new possibilities for authentic representation and storytelling. For instance, if a character who is not written to be played by someone in a wheelchair does not dance or make sudden movements, why couldn't that character be played by someone in a wheelchair? When casting and including these considerations, one must go back to the idea that your show is *not* going to look the same as every other performance of that show. If you cast "Jo" to be deaf, of *course* your show is not going to perfectly mimic the original Broadway performance. But is that not how all theater is? Theater would be quite boring if every production company produced nothing but clones of each other's performances. Remembering this idea when casting is essential, as is constantly thinking about how to *include* individual differences in order to enhance your storytelling. Productions that include disabled artists and address accessibility leave a lasting impression on audiences. When audiences leave the theater talking about the access and the inclusion of disabled artists, it means they are thinking critically about representation and equity. Promoting these thoughts and conversations is important, and theater serves as a powerful tool for doing so.

Intentional Casting

Inclusion should not be an afterthought but a fundamental aspect of every discussion within the theater. If you have Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, ensure that accessibility is a key component. This means considering whether people can access the physical space, the performances, and the broader theater environment. Sometimes, with cross-disability casting, decisions should come naturally and be made purely because the actor is best fit for the role. Oftentimes, however, your casting does have to be intentional.

What does this mean? The need for intentional casting stems from the stigma surrounding children with Down syndrome and other disabilities. Historically, progression toward inclusion and diversity has always required intentionality. For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 didn't happen by chance; they were the result of deliberate efforts to challenge segregation and promote racial equity. Similarly, the inclusion of women in various fields, from business to sports, was driven by intentional policies, such as Title IX, which ensured gender equality in education and athletics. In the arts, movements like #OscarsSoWhite and advocacy for more roles for people of color in film and theater were also intentional efforts to break down barriers.

In disability advocacy, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was a landmark moment in securing accessibility rights, but it took years of intentional activism to push it through. More recently, movements for better LGBTQ+ representation in media have pushed for intentional casting and storytelling, leading to more diverse and authentic portrayals. These

examples show that meaningful change doesn't happen passively; it requires a conscious commitment to breaking through societal norms and challenging systemic exclusion.

Simply by reading this manuscript and focusing on creating inclusive spaces, you are already making the deliberate decision to uplift stories of individuals with Down syndrome. Like other movements for inclusion, this requires a conscious effort to recognize the value and talents of actors with disabilities and provide them with the opportunities they deserve.

However, intentionality must continue throughout the casting process and beyond. This does not mean engaging in precasting, biased casting, or favoring actors with disabilities simply for the sake of appearing inclusive. Instead, it means making a conscious effort to recognize the potential in actors with Down syndrome—not in spite of their disability, but by valuing the unique perspective and talents they bring to the table. It means deciding to look beyond any perceived limitations or societal assumptions about their abilities and instead focus on the richness they can contribute to the story.

Intentional casting requires breaking down barriers and working to reverse decades of exclusion. It involves examining our own biases and making deliberate choices to expand opportunities for actors with disabilities. By doing so, we challenge the status quo, foster true representation, and open doors to narratives that might otherwise be silenced. This conscious effort helps to create a more diverse and vibrant theater that reflects the richness of all human experiences—including those of individuals with Down syndrome.

The key is to recognize that inclusion is not just about meeting quotas or ticking boxes, but about creating an environment where everyone's voice and talent is valued, and where casting reflects the diverse realities of the world we live in.

Section 3: Being Aware of Biases

What is a bias?

The textbook definition of a “bias” is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group, generally lending itself to unfair scenarios. Biases have always existed, and likely will continue to exist, as they are rooted deep in our human psychology. You likely both experience bias and perpetuate your own biases on a daily basis, perhaps without even realizing it. Biases exist everywhere, whether large or small. When it comes to bias surrounding people with disabilities, many people experience what is known as “internalized ableism.” Internalized ableism is simply the subconscious belief that a person with a disability can do less than those without. You may be thinking that you do not have internalized ableism, but you are wrong. We all do. The key to checking your biases is recognizing this.

Biases, both conscious and subconscious, have always had a significant impact on people with disabilities. casting decisions. It is essential to address these biases head-on, starting with the directors and extending throughout the organization.

The artistic director and the director of the school or program must lead by example. They should be vocal and proactive about the importance of inclusive casting and bias awareness. Behavior begins from the top down. Artists involved in any production will follow the example of their director. Therefore, it is crucial that the director not only knows how to handle accessibility issues but outwardly demonstrates knowledgeable and inclusive behavior.

Before auditions, directors should meet with the casting panel to remind them to check their biases at the door. This meeting serves as a space to discuss the potential for subconscious biases and to reinforce the importance of evaluating all actors based on their talent and suitability for the role, not preconceived notions about disability.

Transparency in the casting process builds trust and accountability. Regularly remind everyone involved that subconscious biases exist and that it is a collective responsibility to mitigate their influence. By fostering an environment of openness and continuous education, theaters can work toward more equitable casting practices.

Working with Children vs. Adults

In any educational setting, especially when working with a population that includes individuals with Down Syndrome, it's crucial to understand and effectively navigate the differences between working with children and adults.

The first major thing about this I would like to address is that when working with children with Down Syndrome, it is important to understand age the same way you would

Children with Down Syndrome, like any children, are prone to larger emotions during rehearsals.

Stephanie Barton Farcas, a seasoned theater educator and author known for her insights on youth performance, emphasizes a crucial aspect of working with child actors: "When you cast a child, you're not just casting a child; you're casting a parent." This statement highlights the deep involvement many parents have in their child's theatrical journey, often bringing their own ambitions and expectations into the mix. While parental support can be invaluable, it can also

lead to overly demanding or “helicopter” parenting, where parents become too involved in the process, inadvertently overshadowing their child's experience and growth.

To address this challenge, it's essential to implement an extensive casting process that not only evaluates the child's talent and fit for the role but also assesses the dynamics of parental involvement. Directors must learn to recognize signs of parents taking over the process and work to establish clear boundaries. Teaching parents to navigate the fine line between support and direction is crucial, as it's important for them to understand that their role should be to encourage and uplift their child without dictating their creative choices.

Communication with parents is vital in this regard. Open dialogue can help set expectations and clarify the supportive role they should play, ensuring that the focus remains on the child's artistic development. By fostering a positive relationship with parents and providing them with the tools to support their children effectively, directors can create an environment that nurtures the child's growth and creativity while also respecting the delicate balance between involvement and autonomy.

When working with individuals with Down syndrome in theater, it's essential to recognize that children and adults have different needs, approaches, and supports that can foster their success and enjoyment in a creative environment. The checklist below provides key considerations for working with children, highlighting how they may differ from adult performers. By incorporating these strategies, theater educators and directors can create an inclusive space that nurtures growth, creativity, and a sense of belonging for young performers:

- **Use Clear, Simple Language:** Avoid complex instructions; break tasks into small, manageable steps.
- **Visual Aids:** Provide visual cues or demonstrations, as children often benefit from seeing rather than just hearing instructions.
- **Repetition and Reinforcement:** Repeat key points to reinforce understanding, especially for children learning new concepts.
- **Minimize Loud Sounds:** Sudden noises can be overwhelming; use gradual or anticipated sound increases.
- **Sensory Breaks:** Include planned breaks to help children regroup if they become overstimulated.
- **Fidget Tools or Comfort Items:** Offer small items that children can hold to stay calm and focused.
- **Shorter Sessions:** Schedule shorter, frequent rehearsals to prevent fatigue and maintain focus.
- **Consistency:** Maintain a routine as children with Down syndrome often respond well to predictability.

- **Movement Adaptations:** Modify dance or movement exercises to suit individual mobility levels.
- **Accessible Spaces:** Ensure that all rehearsal and performance spaces are physically accessible. The definition of an ‘accessible space’ will differ depending on the student. Be sure to ask specific questions with parents about their child’s accessibility needs before beginning the process.
- **Buddy System:** Pair children with supportive peers who can model behaviors and offer assistance when needed.
- **Encouragement:** Foster a positive environment where each child feels valued and appreciated.
- **Regular Updates:** Keep parents informed about progress, challenges, and successes.
- **Incorporate Feedback:** Ask parents about strategies that work well at home, as they often know what their child needs best.
- **Creative Exploration:** Allow for play and exploration rather than focusing only on traditional performance standards.
- **Individualized Goals:** Set personalized goals for each child to help track their progress and celebrate small achievements.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Use praise and rewards to encourage desired behaviors.
- **Clear Boundaries:** Establish clear rules and expectations, reinforcing them with simple reminders.
- **Flexible Adjustments:** Be prepared to adapt the plan based on the child's mood, energy, and engagement on any given day.
- **Empathy and Understanding:** Remember that children may need more time to acclimate to new routines and experiences.

Drama vs. Theater

When working with or educating any group of students in theater, it’s crucial to understand your specific goals. This is particularly important for students with Down Syndrome, as it’s essential to recognize the nuanced differences between drama and theater. The key distinctions between the two can primarily be found in their respective goals. So what are the differences?

Drama: The primary goal of teaching drama is to focus on the educational process and the valuable lessons that emerge throughout this journey. This includes fostering theatrical skills, building confidence, enhancing public speaking abilities, and unlocking many other positive educational benefits associated with theater. A drama class or workshop prioritizes learning and exploration over performance, emphasizing the importance of creating a safe and supportive

environment where students can express themselves freely. This approach encourages creativity and self-discovery, allowing children to engage with their emotions and ideas without the pressure of a performance setting. Typically, very young children are introduced to drama as their initial experience in the theatrical world, paving the way for them to transition into performance-based theater as they grow and develop their skills.

Theater: Like drama, educational theater is designed to enhance skills and provide valuable learning experiences. However, the key difference lies in its primary focus on performance. In an educational theater setting, theatrical directors must balance their efforts between fostering education and managing the logistics of putting on a show. This includes important considerations such as casting, time constraints, and making decisions that best serve the overall success of the production. As a result, while educational theater still promotes skill development and personal growth, the emphasis on performance can shift the focus from individual exploration to creating a cohesive and engaging production.

When considering the goals of different theater programs, it's clear that some prioritize performance as the ultimate objective, focusing on delivering polished productions. Others emphasize the journey of drama, valuing the educational process and allowing for a slower, more comprehensive path of development. Both approaches play vital roles in shaping the theatrical landscape and offer unique benefits to students.

For programs centered around theater, the emphasis on stagecraft, teamwork, and audience engagement fosters essential skills that can lead to successful productions. These programs often inspire students to strive for excellence, providing them with a clear vision of the high standards associated with theater. This is not a negative. Keep in mind that the goal in educating kids with Down Syndrome is to help them strive for excellence for themselves. Performance based approaches can be incredibly valuable for students with Down Syndrome because it allows them to grow and learn the responsibility of theater. Don't downplay the difficulty or the rigor of your program - simply support and teach your students as you would any student. Combining the goal of your production's excellence and the goal of student growth is the best approach.

Conversely, programs that prioritize drama create an environment conducive to exploration, creativity, and personal growth. By focusing on the learning process, these programs allow participants to delve into character development, storytelling, and emotional expression, cultivating a deeper understanding of the art form. To truly enrich the theatrical experience, it is crucial to blend the strengths of both approaches. Programs should not only prepare students for the spotlight but also prioritize education, ensuring that participants of all ages develop critical life skills such as confidence, collaboration, and resilience. By incorporating the principles of drama into performance-focused programs, we can create a more inclusive atmosphere that nurtures creativity and builds a lifelong passion for the performing arts, especially in school settings where the foundation for future artists is laid.

In this way, the mission becomes clear: it's not just about sending everyone to Broadway; it's about fostering a holistic educational experience that empowers students to grow as individuals and artists, no matter where their journey in theater may lead them.

Exercises

To end this manuscript, I would like to offer a few examples of exercise and game modifications for implementing in your theater. While the few I will offer have been used by places like schools and professional theaters with people with Down Syndrome, that does not mean they are universal. Again, remember that your modifications will depend on the people you are working with individually. Also remember that these are in no way the only exercises that can be implemented! Modifications can be made to every game, exercise, and aspect of theatrical learning as long as you are aware of the specific situation and needs.

“Zip-Zap-Zop”

How to play the game ‘zip-zap-zop’ when working with students with Down Syndrome?

Start with clear instructions:

- Begin with a very simple, visual explanation of the rules. Instead of explaining all at once, model each step one-by-one, using gestures to reinforce the instructions.
- Example: “We’re going to pass a sound and movement around in a circle. When it’s your turn, you’ll say ‘Zip’ and point to the next person!”

Many kids with Down syndrome respond well to multi-sensory learning. Visual, auditory, and physical examples help solidify understanding.

Adjust for comfort and accessibility:

- Allow each child to participate in a way that works best for them. For example, if a child has difficulty with speech, let them substitute “Zip” with a thumbs-up or another simple gesture.

- Use accommodations like tapping if a child has visual impairments, but **ask permission first** to ensure comfort: “Would it be okay if someone taps your hand to let you know it’s your turn?”

Kids with Down syndrome can have a range of abilities, and this flexibility ensures that each participant can join in their own way without feeling left out or pressured.

Use structured visual cues

- Provide a visual guide with the sequence of actions (e.g., a sign with “Zip,” “Zap,” “Zop” in a row and an arrow showing the direction).

Visual cues offer a strong reference point, helping children track the sequence and direction, especially if they might struggle with memory or processing delays.

Assign a helper role for clarification

- Have a peer or adult “helper” join the circle to gently prompt any child who seems unsure. For instance, the helper can model the next move by saying “You can say ‘Zap’ and pass it on!”

Helpers reinforce the flow of the game and gently support children without putting them on the spot.

Modify the tempo and add practice rounds

- Slow down the game pace and add practice rounds. Repeating the steps slowly with intentional pauses ensures each child feels comfortable and builds confidence.
- Celebrate each successful round with encouragement: “Great job! You passed the ‘Zip’!”

Kids with Down syndrome often benefit from a slower pace and repeated practice, building familiarity before increasing speed or complexity.

Allow for personalized signals or words

- Some kids might prefer unique words or gestures, like using their name, a favorite word, or a sound they enjoy making. For example, “Zip” could become “Go” or “Woohoo!”
- Encourage each child to personalize it, then encourage the group to use that version, fostering individuality.

Giving kids choice and control empowers them, creating a more inclusive and enjoyable experience.

End with positive reinforcement

- Finish the game with high-fives, claps, or positive affirmations to recognize each child's participation.
- Example: "You did awesome passing it around! Let's play again or try a new one!"

Positive reinforcement celebrates success, helping children feel included, valued, and motivated to engage in future activities.

This structure prioritizes clarity, comfort, and personalized support, creating an inclusive experience for children with Down syndrome while respecting each child's individual needs.

Note that you may not have to use all of these suggestions, or any of them, depending on the child or children you are working with. When it comes to accessibility, nothing is universal. However, these suggestions can help modify the game 'zip-zap-zop' if needed.

"Whoosh"

How to play the game 'Whoosh' when working with students with Down Syndrome

Start with clear instructions:

Begin with a simple, visual explanation of just one move — "Whoosh." Demonstrate the motion (a sweeping arm gesture) and sound as you model it around the circle.

Example: "We're going to pass a sound and motion around. When it's your turn, sweep your arms like this and say, 'Whoosh!'"

Only add new motions (like "Woah," "Zap," or "Shh") after the group is confident with the first one. Model each new move one at a time, using expressive gestures and repeated examples.

Kids with Down syndrome often benefit from step-by-step modeling and repetition. Keeping the focus on one movement at a time reduces confusion and encourages success.

Adjust for comfort and accessibility:

Let each child express their version of "Whoosh" in a way that works best for them. If speaking is a challenge, encourage a physical gesture like clapping, thumbs up, or even using eye contact and a nod to "pass" the whoosh.

If a child has limited mobility, adjust the gesture to fit their range — even a small hand movement or noise can count.

Ask permission before using physical cues like a tap on the shoulder or hand, and always respect personal space: "Would you like someone to tap your arm when it's your turn?"

Use structured visual cues

Create a simple visual board or flashcards that show each move (e.g., a swirl for Whoosh, a

bounce for Boing).

Having a visual chart posted in the room or placed on the floor can help the group remember what each sound and motion looks like.

Visual structure helps children who process information more slowly or who rely on pictorial reinforcement.

Assign a helper role for clarification

Choose a peer buddy or adult to sit in the circle and act as a gentle cue-giver.

For example, the helper might whisper “Whoosh!” to a child who forgets the word, or demonstrates the motion alongside them: “Let’s Whoosh together!”

Helpers can guide without taking over, giving kids the confidence to join in without fear.

Modify the tempo and add practice rounds

Start slow — go around the circle practicing “Whoosh” at an easy pace. Allow time for kids to process, observe, and repeat.

Use lots of pauses, check-ins, and repetition. After each full circle, celebrate progress before adding new moves like “Woah” or “Zap.”

Example: “Great job everyone! You each passed the Whoosh around! Want to try adding another move?”

Allow for personalized signals or words

Some kids might prefer to use a different sound or gesture that feels more natural or exciting to them — like “Zoom!” or a favorite movement.

If a child invents a move that works for them, encourage the group to adopt and celebrate that variation.

Choice fosters ownership and excitement, and reinforces that every contribution is valid and fun.

End with positive reinforcement

Wrap up the game with group praise — high-fives, claps, or a shared “Yay!”

Example: “You were amazing with your Whooshes today! Want to try again or play a new one?”

Recognition helps every child feel seen and valued, and keeps motivation high for future participation.

This structure centers clarity, creativity, and individualized support, making ‘Whoosh’ a flexible and inclusive activity for children with Down syndrome.

Note: You may not need to use all of these strategies. Every child is different. Use what feels right for your group, and adjust as needed. The goal is joyful inclusion — not perfection.

