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Circus Arts and Activities Affect for Children With Autism to Improve Art Therapy

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ABSTRACT

This project is concerned with how circus training can benefit children diagnosed on the autistic spectrum and, in turn, their families. Many “special needs” children spend a great deal of time in physiotherapy, speech therapy, osteopathic therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioural therapy. The thesis explores how circus can open a new world to such children, enabling them to take risks, physically and emotionally; to stretch the capacities of their bodies in an environment that enriches their social development. Not only do they gain in strength, coordination and physical awareness, but they can also gain confidence, opportunities for creative expression and a sense of “fitting in”. The results offer insights into how their circus rehearsal influences their wellbeing. These findings highlight that artistic expression, physical abilities, and personal growth collectively contribute to the comprehensive development of young individuals during this crucial life phase.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Using the tools of circus training to 'un - lock the body' can also open up new social and emotional worlds to such children. Not only do they develop strength, coordination, and physical awareness, they also gain confidence, opportunities for creative expression, and a sense of 'fitting in' somewhere. Many 'special needs' children have spent much time in their young lives involved in physiotherapy, speech therapy, osteopathic therapy, and behavioural therapy. It is possible to use circus training to develop the same motor skills and muscle memory outcomes that are most often targeted in occupational therapy and physiotherapy, with the important difference that there is another especially creative and playful layer that is more likely to enable children to enjoy the therapeutic process.

Physically they are challenging themselves, developing body awareness and fitness. Mentally they are achieving feats that at first, they regard as impossible, gaining confidence in themselves and learning to trust their bodies to hold them up and so learning to balance themselves safely. Circus, also by definition, is a group activity. Whether it is a troupe of professional acrobats learning to trust each other with their creative ideas and bodily safety, or a group of amateurs learning tricks for fitness and fun, circus sets up a creative space that is chaotic and inclusive, relying at once on individual talent and group cohesion.

Although similar in movement and technique, the practice philosophy of circus differs significantly from gymnastics, athletics, and even ballet. These latter strive for perfection/excellence in individual performance, producing elite athletes or dancers, even when there is a troupe involved. Circus is an inclusive, non-competitive, pluralistic and quirky, multi-sided art form in which any individual can become part of the group, no matter their size, shape, or age, as long as they have or develop skills that contribute to the creative potentials of the whole. Because of how the practice philosophy contributes to the 'energy' that circus generates, the art form tends to attract people who may not feel a sense of identity with the 'creative worlds' produced by more mainstream performance arts.

Circus adopts performance processes, narrative devices, and conceptual frames in which all kinds of people can sit comfortably, without compromising their sense of themselves. Their idiosyncrasies, quirks, and eccentricities seem to be welcomed by the art form and its practices. For children with autism, this highly sensory experience of embodiment is often a crucial contribution to their physical therapy. To be able to 'locate' their bodies in the space; to feel their hands grip the ropes on a trapeze; coordinating their left from right when they are upside down – all of these embodied practices can activate the brain in specific ways that aid their development. The bonus is the confidence and joy that the children express, and the joy that their parents and siblings can experience from seeing them enjoying the sensory embodiment characteristic of the circus.

In terms of children on the autistic spectrum, the latter includes, of course, variations in sensory preoccupations, physical limits, and self-perceived boundaries in relation to both. People begin from their own embodied self-perception to discover how they might contribute to the social circus community. For autistic children, however, we simply need to remain aware that their beginning points are more highly individualized than most people's. In becoming comfortable in the circus community, children with autism come to be participants in a community of outsiders, and to understand that they are in a space and a community where their belonging, such as it is, can belong.

Momentum, timing, trust, athleticism, and a consciously embodied awareness of distance and gravity all work together in a complicated balance in order to make a somersault to the catcher look apparently effortless. For an aerialist, momentum, body, and thought work together as s/he flies, in what needs to be recognized as embodied cognition – that is, understanding-action that does not acknowledge any mind–body split. Juggling, while less dangerous, holds even more imminent chaos than flying trapeze: patterns and numbers and momentum and timing and, once again, gravity all connects the body to the art, making jugglers look as though they could ‘do it in their sleep

This is particularly the case for children with autism whose behaviour is often monitored closely in the classroom, the play-ground, indeed in most aspects of their lives. They have frequently become hypersensitive to the ‘need’ to monitor their own behaviour, especially in public, quickly learning that their own bodies and actions are ‘not to be trusted’ among ‘normal’ people. In strong contrast, as participants in a circus workshop they are encouraged to let quirky behaviours and excesses of energy ‘out’ while learning how to control and harness them in positive ways towards creative ends.

Circus needs both to suggest and utilize a chaotic process in order to deliver the expected experience, or – when professionally conceived – the required product. Underneath the creative chaos is a structure. It is a matter of looking more acutely in order to see it. As an art form circus is not, of course, out of control, despite the persistence of the cliché ‘the place is like a three-ring circus’ that is used to suggest unproductive chaos overseen by unprofessional people. In an actual circus, there is an astutely devised and carefully managed overall plan: a structure, a formula

It could be said that many children with autism live in an almost perpetual state of controlled chaos (that from time to time can tip out of control). They tend to be chaotic beings in the sense that they ‘bounce’ through their days, often swinging from being very active and highly strung to being quiet and completely reclusive. So, working against these feelings of personal disorder, they will frequently find ways to order themselves, such as only eating green food today, only walking in straight lines this morning, ‘windmilling’ in the backyard or playground for the next two hours, or refusing to walk on carpets this week.

Suppose we place these children in a circus class that is, in effect, a parallel controlled state of chaos? They find themselves in a situation in which, for example, in preparation for walking on the tight-wire they are encouraged only to walk on the one rope stretched out on the floor, over and over. Training exercises like this obviously allow children with autism to utilize their techniques of control in ways that also help them to focus their bodies on balancing, on connecting left and right brain, and concentrating on a task devised by someone else. Training for a circus trick in such a way invites them to make positive uses of embodied needs, actions, habits and expressions that in other situations appear odd or compulsive. Thus, in a circus class they are encouraged to spend extensive periods embracing their desire for repetitive actions and movements, which in turn enhances a comfortable sense of embodiment.

The creative energy that circus culture produces, along with the physical risk it promises, provide a unique environment for many special needs children to grow and embrace their ways of being in the world: their singularity; their difference.

Autistic children participating in circus training have the opportunity to step into a world where risk and defiance of the 'norm' are encouraged; where imagination and aspiration are expected to be operating at full force – almost 'out of control'; and where idiosyncratic, repetitive bodily expressions may well be recognized as providing a basis for new skills and new ideas. To enter this world, even just for an hour a day, can bring a beneficial change of pace and an experience of affective engagement for autistic children and their families

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research approach, employing various methods such as observation in a familiar environment, solicited journals, and interviews. Qualitative research focuses on understanding subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings attributed to phenomena rather than relying on numerical measurements or statistics. This study will delve into the realm of contemporary circus rehearsals and performances. More specifically, I will observe how participants involved in a circus performance will affect them, from its inception and rehearsals to the final presentation. The primary objective of the study is to explore if circus performances can have a positive impact on the lives of adolescents. It will be an opportunity to study closely what generates these benefits.

This study also helps us better understand the reasons and mechanisms through which the practice of circus arts positively impacts adolescents, leading them to desire to continue the circus as a regular activity, even if they don't make a career out of it. This study also addresses a recurring question in various educational circus performance settings: Why does it offer such significant benefits to its participants? As well as trying to uncover new insights and establish a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

As mentioned, this study aims to understand if, how, and why circus performance and its practice have an impact on adolescent wellbeing. Part of my observation focused on the positive interactions and actions that adolescents engaged in during rehearsal. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify any underlying negative issues and examine how participants learned from those challenges. Direct observation offered a firsthand understanding of the participants' behaviours, movements, nonverbal cues, and social dynamics within the context of the circus school. It provided an opportunity to witness the authenticity and genuine expressions of the performers as they engaged in various circus arts activities. This direct observation of their actions, emotions, and interactions offered valuable insights into their wellbeing, skill development, and the overall impact of the performance process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study asked the following question: How does adding circus arts to an art therapy program affect a child's emotional regulation? It was anticipated that if circus arts were added to an art therapy program, then there would be a positive increase in kinesthetic awareness, emotional regulation, and sense of self in the client. The research participant was asked to complete body map directives and answer questions about how his experience of the circus arts made him feel.

Circus activities. At the start of the session, the instructor and Ian began with a warmup, including some light cardio and stretching. This lasted approximately 15 minutes. During this time, Ian was very resistant to participating. The instructor was informed by his mother that he was not in a good mood when he came to the studio that day and would tell her that he "didn't want to do aerial today". However, after the warm up, he began to engage.

He started working on handstands and tumbles on the mats, before moving on to the aerial apparatuses. He started with the single-point trapeze. He practiced getting up into the trapeze, hanging from the bar, and performing a trick called candlestick, wherein he hooked one leg on the bar and the other on one of the ropes and hung upside down. He then proceeded to move on to the aerial silks. More specifically, he was drawn to the aerial sling, an aerial silk that was rigged like a hammock. He stated that he enjoyed stretching out in the sling and inverting. At the end of the session, he and the instructor cooled down with some stretching.

This study sought to examine how the addition of circus arts to an art therapy directive affected a child's emotional regulation. It was anticipated that if circus arts were added to an art therapy program, then there would be a positive increase in kinesthetic awareness, emotional regulation, and sense of self in the participant. The participant was asked to complete two body map directives, with one of those body maps happening directly after engaging in some circus arts activities. Through the body maps and post-art interviews with the participant, it was found that there was some evidence to support the presence of the circus arts components leading to increased kinesthetic awareness, emotional regulation skills, and sense of self.

When Ian spoke about his feelings towards circus arts and how he physically engaged with the circus arts equipment, the word choice, length of sentence, and inflection in his voice indicated a shift in mood. During the first session, Ian was short with his responses, using "yes" and "no" a lot to answer most of the questions. The research facilitator implemented some motivational interviewing techniques to get him to answer the questions more in depth. This could be due to the amount of rapport established prior to the research session. During the second research session, Ian was more forthcoming with his answers. He was more relaxed in general, through his open body language and the presence of laughter. He spoke at length about his previous experiences in with circus arts activities and boasted about some of his physical achievements. This ability to communicate and express his emotional states may have been stimulated from the use of the creative coping strategies examined here (Zeman et. al, 2006).

However, after the warmup, he started to join in with the activities. When given the chance to demonstrate his physical skills, his demeanor changed overall, including his body language and tone of voice. By the end of the physical activities, his mood and behavior had shifted significantly. He was more cheerful and social with the research facilitator, the circus instructors, and his mother. Ian confirmed this change in his attitude with his body maps, and the large presence of the feelings of "excited" and "happy" on his human figure outline.

Another reason for working with children for this study was due to the development of emotional regulation skills. The development of coping skills was necessary for successfully navigating the world and interacting with others, and this learning process was seen to begin at an early age. The development of emotional regulation skills was influenced by family influence and the emotional climate surrounding the individual (Gross, 2015). Opening the channels of communication with the participant about his coping skills helped to continue to develop more refined emotional regulation techniques that may be implemented in the future.

The roll-on results of circus training that can lead autistic children to enjoying the physical adventures of childhood, such as using playground equipment, and can also see them being able to achieve ordinary tasks such as doing up their own buttons or tying their own shoelaces. Surely these small but significant achievements bring a ray of hope and a new perception of what is possible not only for the child, but also their parents.

For children with autism, circus can provide an opportunity to have the kind of childhood experiences that they may have come to understand that they cannot have – experiences that hold risk, adventure, and magic. Circus can allow them to share in the “normal” rites of passage that other children can take for granted: to play in increasingly risky ways and develop increasingly competent skills; to connect their bodies with those of other children in an adventurous and creative activity; to achieve things together that build their confidence and encourage them to grow physically and emotionally; and to help them cope with change

The participants offered diverse definitions of wellbeing, encompassing multiple dimensions. They articulated four distinct aspects of wellbeing. Firstly, they emphasized that wellbeing is experienced when their needs were met, underscoring the significance of fulfilling their fundamental necessities. Secondly, they highlighted the importance of feeling safe, both physically and emotionally. Thirdly, they underscored the role of relationships in wellbeing, emphasizing the value of social connections and supportive networks. Lastly, they identified the pursuit and attainment of goals as integral to wellbeing, suggesting that a sense of purpose and 93 achievement contributed to overall wellbeing. These varied perspectives illuminated wellbeing’s intricate and multidimensional nature, demonstrating that it can be understood and experienced in diverse ways.

Creating healthy relationships played a crucial role in fostering various aspects of development among participants, including autonomy (Deci et al., 2006), receiving support (Furman & Rose, 2015), and enhancing social development (Molden and Dweck, 2006). During the interviews, participants expressed the significance of relationships in their lives, particularly friendships and connections with authority figures. Graham et al. (2022) noted that relationships with peers were perceived as essential for feeling safe and well at school.

The participants in the study identified four key aspects that contributed to their wellbeing: meeting their needs, experiencing safety, cultivating relationships, and achieving goals. Remarkably, these aspects closely aligned with the elements found in circus performance. 97 This demonstrated how circus performance encompasses these crucial aspects that positively impacted the wellbeing of adolescents. It highlighted the potential of circus performance to promote happiness, fulfillment, and overall wellbeing among participants.

The performance practice provided adolescents with a space to build trust and rely on each other, fostering a sense of security and enhancing their wellbeing. Members of the group automatically stepped in to offer support without needing to be asked, creating a safe and supportive environment. In turn, offering help to their peers contributed to their own wellbeing and learning. Children often learn more effectively when they can apply what they have by doing 108 it, or in other words, they need to be “hands-on” (Dewey, 1938). In this very physicalized case, they practiced with and learn from others. Participants understood the importance of being there for each other, whether catching them during performances or simply being supportive. This empathetic and supportive environment ensured the participants’ safety and overall wellbeing.

Circus performance shares similarities with everyday life in various aspects. Children or students were taught skills and were expected to apply what they learned during their performances. Just as in life, having the ability to rely on a parent or coach for guidance is essential in circus performance. By establishing an emotional connection between the student and coach, a symbiotic relationship started to develop, fostering mutual support and collaboration. Both the coach and student produced behaviours that aimed at the wellbeing of each other (Poczwadowski et al., 2002).

4. CONCLUSION

Circus can bring the entire family unit together in a creative experience that supports them emotionally and connects them to a community that celebrates their difference. With its magic and mayhem, it breaks down the barriers that the social has placed upon them and makes it okay for them to sit outside the square.

For children with autism, circus can provide an opportunity to have the kind of childhood experiences that they may have come to understand that they cannot have – experiences that hold risk, adventure, and magic. Circus can allow them to share in the “normal” rites of passage that other children can take for granted: to play in increasingly risky ways and develop increasingly competent skills; to connect their bodies with those of other children in an adventurous and creative activity; to achieve things together that build their confidence and encourage them to grow physically and emotionally; and to help them cope with change.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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