

# Developing Impactful Sensory Friendly Theatre Programs via Collaboration with Occupational Therapists

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*“Art is a constant agent of transformation and is indeed the soul’s drive to health.”*

*- Cathy Malchiodi*

# Session Overview

- Introductions
- Occupational Therapy (OT) & Its Role in Community Access for People with Diverse Abilities
- Sensory Friendly (SF) Theatre
- SF Theater Research Summary & Implications for Theatre Organizations
- Interactive Small Group Visioning & Problem Solving

## About Me

- Clinical experience in pediatrics; served children with developmental differences and their families in non-profit clinics, homes, schools since 1999
- Assistant Professor, Dept. of Occupational Therapy, Dominican University of CA
- Private practice focusing on accessibility consultation for community organizations (Seattle Children's Theatre, 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Theatre, Seattle, WA)

# About You

- Current role
- Familiarity with occupational therapy
- Familiarity with sensory friendly theatre programs
- Desired takeaway from this session



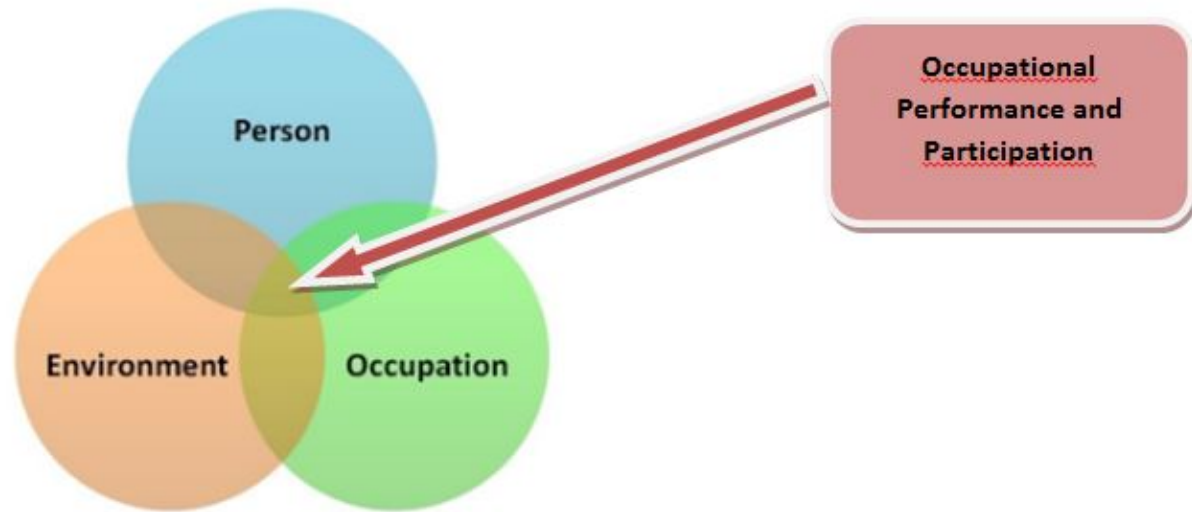
# Defining Occupational Therapy (OT)

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- A holistic allied health profession that helps people do the things they want/need to do -- meaningful activities called “occupations”
- OT enables people to live life fully by promoting health and preventing or living better with injury, illness, or disability (AOTA)

# Occupational Therapy

Often focuses on adapting the environment and/or meaningful activity (occupation) to fit the person



(Adapted from PEO Model, Law M et al. 1996)





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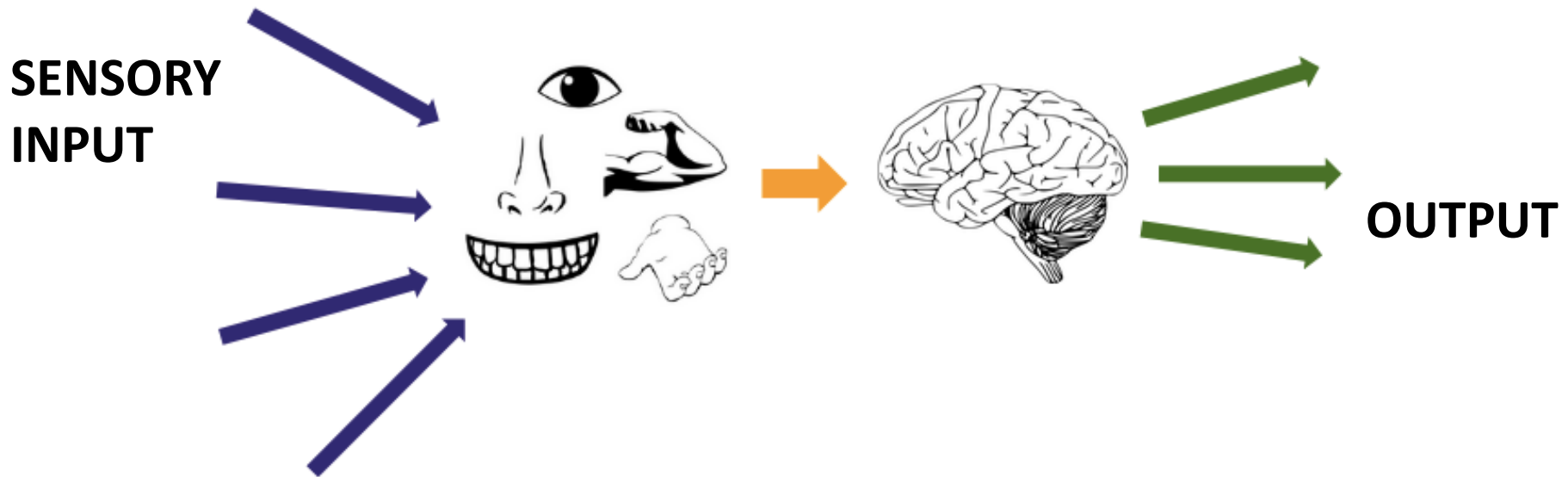
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# Occupational Therapy Expertise in Sensory Processing & Sensory Integration Theory

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Behavior/function is dependent upon the brain's ability to process incoming sensory input from the body and environment



# Video: OT Cultural Arts Consultation

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-IZ1FmNXGs>



# Sensory Friendly Theater

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# Sensory Friendly Theatre

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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)

# Theater Organization & OT Collaboration Journey

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- Theater organization connected with university OT dept seeking experienced OT consultant
- Planning meetings involved theater leadership, OT consultant, parents of children with disabilities to identify goals & priorities, population needs & preferences, determine timeline and feasible program elements
- SF Program Implementation (materials development, marketing, staff/volunteer training, pilot performance)
- Program evaluation conducted via surveys and focus groups
- Grant submitted using program evaluation data
- Ongoing OT consultation for key program components

# Sensory Friendly Theatre Components

Preparatory  
Materials & Tools

Environmental  
Modifications

Trained Staff

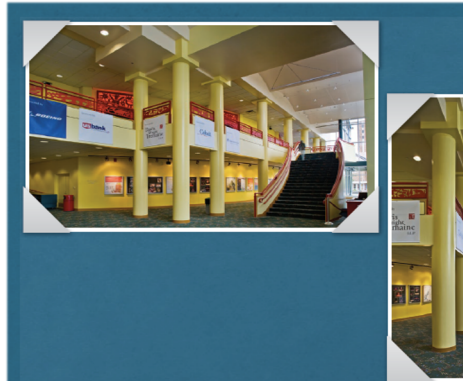


# Sensory Friendly Theater Components

## Preparatory Materials & Tools



- Social story\*
- Play-by-play parent guide for show-specific content\*
- “Meet the Theatre” Event



## Lobby

When I go in the theatre building, I will be standing in the **lobby**. The **lobby** is a very big room. It may be crowded with many people. It may be noisy. If I don't like the crowd, I can find a quiet spot.

## Parental Guide

### Environmental Considerations for Stellaluna:

1. The performance takes place in the Eve Alford Theatre which has open bench-style seating versus individual seats. Benches do have back support.
2. An onstage pianist plays music throughout the show and is part of the show itself.
3. The show is approximately 60 minutes in duration and has one act, with no intermission.

### Show Content Considerations for Stellaluna

1. Parents may want to prepare their children who are familiar with the book, Stellaluna, that the show is similar in some ways to the book (characters with the same names, some lines from the book recited in the show, general storyline followed), but that the show will be different in many ways from the book.
2. Parents may want to prepare their children for the use of puppeteers throughout the show. The characters including Stellaluna, the owl, the birds, are animated by puppeteers that are plainly visible throughout the

### Sensory-rich and emotionally intense moments to consider:

EPISODE & MUSICAL NUMBER	SENSORY CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Prologue: Ladies and Gentlemen...Stellaluna <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prologue</li> <li>• Lonesome Lady</li> </ul>	SOUND VISUAL	-Pianist plays onstage piano (which continues throughout show) -Tap dancer dances onstage  -Sudden light change – stage darkens and bat silhouette appears
1: First Flight w/Mother and Attack of the Owl <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flyin' with my Baby</li> <li>• The Owl</li> </ul>	VISUAL SOUND SUSPENSE EMOTIONAL INTENSITY	-Trees sway in the wind -Sudden whistle sound -Suspenseful music -Stage darkens and glow in the dark eyes appear -Owl appears and chases bats -Owl screeches loudly -Stellaluna separated from mother -Stage suddenly goes dark

# Sensory Friendly Theater Components

## Environmental Modifications



- Smaller crowds
- Chill zone in lobby\*
- Lighting changes\*
- House "zones"
- Robust signage\*
- Relaxed behavioral expectations



# Sensory Friendly Theater Components

Trained Staff\*



- Marketing Team
- Managers
- Front of house & box office staff
- Cast/crew
- Volunteers
- Teaching artists

## MAMMA MIA!

### WHAT IS A SENSORY-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE?

Each relaxed or sensory-friendly performance incorporates special modifications to accommodate audiences with sensory needs:

- Increased lighting in the seating area and house.
- Lower sound levels.
- Lowered seating capacities to allow for more space and movement between patrons
- Additional trained staff on hand to provide patrons with assistance when needed.
- Use of tablets, smart phones, and other electronic devices can be used with headphones during performances.
- Fidget toys welcome.

Sensory-friendly performance is on Saturday, May 18, at 2pm!

The Playhouse in San Anselmo  
27 Kensington Road  
San Anselmo, CA 94960

**TICKETS & INFO:**  
**WWW.23ELEPHANTS.ORG**

SCT'S SENSORY-FRIENDLY  
PERFORMANCE PROGRAM



Dr. Seuss'

The

Cat in  
the Hat

MAY 7<sup>TH</sup>

5:30PM

TICKETS

Adult: \$40 Child: \$33

Sensory Friendly tickets only available through our ticket office

Call 206-441-3322 to book your tickets

Sponsored by:

**Safeco** Insurance<sup>™</sup>

A Liberty Mutual Company

Seattle  
Children's  
Theatre

Sensory  
Friendly  
Theater  
Research

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Seattle  
Children's  
Theatre

Interviews conducted  
with:

-Parents who attended  
with children with  
disabilities

-Theatre managers and  
staff

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# Key Results: Family Perspectives

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The SF performance was a *deeply meaningful family experience*. Parents felt safe, children expressed joy, and impacts extended beyond the performance itself.

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*“It was awesome. And they still talk about it all the time. And we put a poster up in their little play area. Just so they had it...and had it framed...And she definitely attended better because she played it and acted it out after—which she hasn’t done.”*

*-Mother of child with ASD*

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*“I mean, I knew he would probably like it, but he really just loved it. I mean, he was just beside himself with joy. I mean, it was so fun to see that...it was sort of off the charts.”*

*-Mother of child with Cortical Visual Impairment*



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*“And for [daughter], the lights don’t matter, the louder the better. She doesn’t need any changes with that. But for me – this is for **me** to feel safe bringing her.”*

*-Mother of daughter with I/DD*

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Parents of children with disabilities desire *inclusive but safe* sensory friendly performances open to the general public but welcoming for the disability community

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*“I certainly think that anybody who wants to buy a ticket should be able to buy a ticket. But it needs to be made really clear that this is a special performance...Don’t try to sugar coat it...Because the parents that are bringing kids like mine need to know that everybody there is going to be accepting, or we won’t come.”*

*-Mother of daughter with I/DD*

# Key Results: Organization Perspectives

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*Alignment with the theatre's mission* and commitment to inclusion made the SF program possible and sustainable

*“Everyone was just excited to do it. It's a cause that everyone wants to see succeed. And I think that makes a huge difference...So everyone comes into it with a really great attitude, really open hearts, which is beautiful.”*

# Key Results: Organization Perspectives

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*Partnership with an occupational therapy consultant supported high quality and effective program development and implementation*

*“But it is great to have that...professional voice to bounce it off of. Because the last thing we want to do is have a family come and not have a good experience, and then we don’t have any way to help that family...”*

*“I think knowing that we had [the OT consultant] and other professionals in the field helping us facilitate this, it made it very comfortable to embark on this process.”*



# Key Results: Organization Perspectives

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The SF program resulted in *personal and organizational growth*. Staff reported increased confidence with serving families with children with disabilities and implementing access initiatives.

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*“But I think what it has done for us as an institution is when we say, hey, what about fill-in-the-blank of access points that we could be targeting, it no longer seems insurmountable...When we say, what if we added X, it’s like, we could totally do that. Let’s talk about how we could facilitate that, because it seems so easy now, which I think is great.”*

# Key Results: Organization Perspectives

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Challenges related to *funding, staff resources, and marketing* must be addressed to ensure program sustainability

# Research Implications for Theater Organizations

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- SF theatre programs can be **deeply meaningful** for families with children with diverse abilities
- Focus on creating a **safe social environment**
- Explore **partnerships** with OTs, the disability community, and other professionals to support SF programming
- Market SF shows as **inclusive** and open to the general public but set expectations to maintain a **safe and welcoming space for the disability community**
- Creative solutions to funding and staff resource challenges may be needed to maximize program **sustainability**

# Small Group Brainstorming & Problem Solving

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- What access initiatives/programs are you involved in? What has been successful at your organization and what barriers have you experienced?

-How might you apply the information and research findings from this presentation to your own work/organization? Are you developing a new SF performance program? Expanding or modifying existing initiatives?

Use this time to share your ideas with colleagues and problem solve barriers and challenges.

# Closing Thoughts & Ideas

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- OT students are fantastic (and cost-effective) resources – reach out to your local university/OT program for support!
- It's not about changing the performance or being an expert in disability. It's about providing individuals/families with resources and a creating a safe and welcoming space.
- Public SF performances have been quite successful in community youth theatre programs in addition to professional theatre settings
- Consider how to adapt these ideas to virtual performances
- You can do it!!!!

# Resources

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## **Sensory Friendly Guide for Performing Arts Organizations:**

<https://www.kennedy-center.org/globalassets/education/networks-conferences--research/conferences--events/leadership-exchange-in-arts-and-disability/lead-conference-booklet-sensoryguidebook.pdf>

## **Sensory Friendly Nutcracker Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LQHVcGoOlw>

# Thank you!

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<https://www.dominican.edu/directory-people/caroline-umeda>



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