Real world methods for family magicians

Working with special needs children on stage

Lessons from Doug and Heidi Scheer

The boy in the back of the gym has his fingers in his ears, but the microphone isn't too loud: the kids in front row don't seem to mind. Another child flaps her arms like a little bird every time something exciting happens. That's kind of cute, but someone made those same unusual gestures at yesterday's show. Is that an odd coincidence or something else?

Ask any children's or family performer and they'll admit to seeing the same things at their shows. And it's happening more frequently than ever. Some kids in the audience will stare at the floor for 45 minutes seemingly oblivious to your latest miracle or anyone around them. Others rock back and forth endlessly. Some seem to have a bad case of the giggles that lasts all day. Then there are the kids who will sit quietly during a show, but wear the same kind of headphones you might use when mowing the lawn.

So what gives? Who are these kids and what is going on?

Heidi Scheer has a unique perspective on working with kids who seem to be a little out to the ordinary. She is an autism advocate, has a son on the autism spectrum, and is the main assistant to Michigan's leading school performer, Doug Scheer.

"If you are seeing more and more kids and adults in your audience with special needs and behavioral issues, it's not your imagination," says Heidi. "More children will be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) this year than with AIDS, diabetes & cancer combined. Autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the United States."

Children with autism have significant difficulties in social interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests. In more severe cases, children have limited linguistic skills and delayed cognitive development. They can be clumsy and use language in atypical ways.

The Center for Disease Control says the number of kids being diagnosed with autism has reached 1 out of 91. For boys, the numbers are even more staggering: 1 out of 58 and it's thought to go to 1 in 38 in the next few years. Back in 1980 the rates of autism were only 1 out of ten thousand.

So what does this mean to the average magician? It doesn't matter where you perform; banquets, schools, restaurants or private homes, your audience is changing. Children with autism are being mainstreamed into public and private schools. Restaurants and airlines cater more and more to customers with special medical and dietary requests and resorts and hotels are learning more ways to accommodate guests with special needs.

"This creates an incredible opportunity for family magicians," says Doug Scheer, who performs over 600 shows annually in elementary schools and libraries. "Instead of avoiding these kids, I've found myself actively seeking them out to be volunteers during my shows. Since my son has high functioning autism, I've had daily experience in interacting and learning from these children. I know how powerful it can be when you 'reach' these kids. Magic is a tool that has an amazing ability to connect."

Long before Doug's son Gannon was diagnosed, he had an encounter with a child on the spectrum that he'll never forget. Near the end of his show, a boy jumped up and yelled, "Funny show," then sat back down. The teachers and principal and even the students were shocked. They couldn't believe what just happened. As it turned out, the boy was non-verbal and had never spoken more than five words in his entire life, but he just initiated conversation with the magician without any encouragement by his aids.

"I was totally upstaged," says Doug, "but it was great. No one was talking about my show afterwards because they were talking about the boy who spoke to the magician." This one instance prompted Doug to go out of his way and seek out special needs kids to use as assistants in hope that he could connect again.

"The main thing performers need to know about kids with autism is that no two kids are the same so there are no rules that work all the time," says Heidi, "but there are things performers can do to make these kids more comfortable if they are ever unintentionally or intentionally used as volunteers."

One thing people don't even realize about kids on the spectrum is that for them sitting in a noisy audience surrounded by others in close proximity, with lights, music and crowd noises can be an overwhelming experience. The fact that these kids are even in the audience means that many of them have overcome many anxieties, fears and issues that would have sidelined them in the past. Doug compares their achievement to a 650lb man who just lost 200 pounds, "People who don't know any better look at the guy and say he's fat. They don't have any idea how much he has already overcome to get where he is."

Doug and Heidi's son Gannon couldn't sit in a movie theater or even go to church without screaming and running out. "I like to joke that it was the bad singing in church that made him scream because I usually felt the same way," remembers Doug. "Finally, after dietary changes, bio-medical interventions and therapy, the day came when Gannon could sit on a community room floor and watch my show. He wasn't the best behaved-- grandpa was getting dirty looks from the parents around him-- but I couldn't have been more proud. My boy was there watching his mom and dad perform for the first time ever."

Knowing what many of these kids have already overcome is helpful in trying to understand what is going through their heads if they are chosen to help on stage. Standing in front of 400 peers can be frightening for any child, but when a child with autism is invited on stage some can feel completely lost. Imagine floating alone in outer space and you'll have an idea of what being on stage can feel like to kids with certain developmental delays. Certainly, there are some kids with such overwhelming challenges that they would not make good on stage volunteers, but many kids, while seeming to be completely disinterested in what's going on, are completely aware of even tiny details of your show and may even want to help the magician if chosen.

"It's important to make these kids as comfortable as possible," recommends Heidi, "We always keep a stool or small road case just off stage so our volunteer can sit instead of feeling lost by standing alone. But here is a sneaky little trick: we remove one of the rubber feet so the stool is just a little off kilter. The volunteer will notice this and will direct part of his attention to keeping balanced. This isn't distracting at all to the audience, they won't even notice, but it helps direct the volunteer's attention away from

doing something unexpected." In a quick fix, a small book or thick piece of cardboard can be dropped onto the floor and a chair leg can be set on it to create a wobbly chair.

Other things Heidi recommends include offering something unusual to hold if the child seems distracted. Stress balls (the squishy but firm kinds that are sold in office supply stores) work well, so do objects with usual combinations of textures like small bumpy balls sold in toy stores and even some magic gimmicks or pet toys. Carrying one of these items in a close-up bag or performance case is a good idea. The toy can be made to vanish, reappear then handed to the child to hold for the rest of the routine or it can be offered discretely without anyone in the audience even knowing what's going on. A sponge ball might seem like an obvious choice because of its unique qualities, but it can also be easily torn. Something indestructible is best.

Heidi cautions about touching kids on the autism spectrum, "Many kids on the spectrum are extremely sensitive to touch. Even the tags in the back of their shirts can feel like shards of glass rubbing against their skin. Doing the standard hand shaking gags, placing things on their head, or moving them around by their arm or shoulder is out. We've seen kids wince in pain just from a gentle hand on an elbow. Performers need to be aware that if a child quickly pulls away from a touch or guiding hand on the back, the child may not be acting up or being rude, but rather protecting himself from actual pain." A thank you fist bump instead of a handshake as the child is excused is more appropriate in these cases. You can also avoid touching kids and prevent volunteers from wandering by tossing a mouse pad on the floor and asking the kid to stand on it. Doing the old gag: "I need someone taller to help out with this trick, so you better stand on this little pad…now you're perfect" is an easy way to sneak in this stay-put method.

If discussing a show afterwards, performers need to avoid using the word 'autistic.' Some are offended by the word saying it's derogatory; it's a dead end label that suggests no hope. It's more politically correct and safer to say that a person has autism instead. And be careful with your word choice on stage as well. Kids with ASD take what you say very literally. Sayings like, "break a leg," "raining cats and dogs" or "you nailed it" mean exactly what the words are. Carefully choosing your words and avoiding abstract clichés will help avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

If you are planning to put anything on the child or dress her up in any way, ask permission first. Show the child the hat or costume and let her put it on herself. Some kids will comply others may not, so you need to be able to think on your feet. Avoid pressuring the child or making any kind of jokes about being uncooperative. Just move on or try something else. Remember, the audience doesn't know what to expect so changing your routine mid-stream will not even be noticed. The small sacrifice you make with your trick or routine will be made up ten fold when you connect with that child. The child will know it and so will your audience.

In schools, the special needs classrooms are sometimes brought into the auditorium before everyone else because they may need extra time to get settled. This is the time to approach their teachers and ask if there are any children that might make good helpers on stage. Other times, a direct question to the classroom teacher during the show like, "Do you think any kids from your classroom would like to help?" can be made in the course of picking your volunteers. The teachers appreciate your willingness to include their kids and admire your professionalism in handling your selection this way.

If a teacher doesn't think any of her children should go on stage that doesn't mean you need to avoid them. Even the most severely affected kids can participate from their seats by simply offering them items to examine or hold. Giving kids simple tasks while in their seats can make these kids feel included, proud, and very important.

Lisa Ellis has been a teacher of special needs students for more than 30 years and recommends a more cautious way to include these kids in shows, "Sometimes it might be best to include ASD children when multiple volunteers are needed on stage at the same time. The more socially aware kids will model the proper behaviors to follow. This provides a sort of safety net for the performer in case things don't work out as planned. Remember, children can always be excused from the stage and thanked with a round of applause." She says that the opportunity of just trying to help can make a lasting impression and be a good learning experience.

Lisa likes to see performers take chances on stage and suggests that it's even a better lesson when things don't always work out as planned.

"These kids need to learn to adapt and be flexible, more than anything else. They like predictable outcomes and rigid patterns, so going along with unexpected events can be a great learning opportunity. I tell my students that in real life, outside the classroom and in, things happen that we can't always control, but it's never the end of the world." In Lisa's classroom a lot of time is spent focusing on problem solving and properly using coping skills to handle situations. "Good magicians do this all the time. I know things don't always go as planned on stage and our kids can learn from watching a strong performer deal with unexpected issues."

Lisa says that when a performer invites a special needs child to assist it shows acceptance to the other kids in the audience. "We want these kids to be included as much as any other kids, and showing an entire audience that it's okay to interact with them is an important lesson. We need to share these kids and our experiences with them so that we can all learn and grow."

"We've had kids on stage who get so absorbed in the magic that they will remove their headphones on their own so they can better participate," said Doug. "It's moments like those that are remember. Social connections are being made and that little glimmer of hope for the child and his future shines a little brighter."

It's important to proceed with caution, but taking the risk of using special needs children on stage can make you a hero to that child and to your audience. Magicians can create memories that last a lifetime. When you make a child a hero on stage they become the star for the rest of the day. But when you make a child with autism shine, you'll touch your audience on a profound level, but most importantly you can help a child overcome a hurdle that'll make that kid's year.