

A Storytelling Journey for Learners of All Abilities: Easterseals Academy Time Capsule Project

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Over the course of eight weeks, students from across our three campuses participated in an adapted time capsule program—reflecting on their past, celebrating their present, and imagining their future through the power of storytelling.

Each lesson followed a consistent structure to help students build skills and confidence:

- **Mindful Moment:** to help students practice self-regulation strategies.
- **Warm-Up Game:** to activate prior knowledge and spark thinking around a skill of the day. For example, before a lesson on “connecting with yourself,” students explore the concept of self-identity by discussing what identity means and watching a brief video that breaks down its key components.
- **Art Project:** to give students a hands-on way to express their experiences related to the day's lesson.
- **Connections with Others:** to encourage students to share their creations and build connections around what everyone made.

Easterseals Academy first piloted the time capsule program last summer. While the experience was positive, it became clear that the curriculum—initially designed for general education students—could be adapted to better showcase the strengths and creativity of Academy students. By making these adjustments, students with diverse abilities were able to more fully engage and experience the same meaningful outcomes and moments as their neurotypical peers.

Adapting the Curriculum for Every Learner

Together with Once Upon Our Time Capsule, ECR adapted the program to better support the unique learning needs of our students, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive environment. The adaptations included:

- A **pre-program guardian survey** designed to provide valuable context—such as each student's favorite colors, cultural background, and preferred activities—giving teachers insight to guide students through the project and supplement moments when a student might struggle to

communicate those aspects of themselves.

- **Lesson plans** with multiple options and flexible timing for activities and projects.
- **Project materials** with enhanced visual supports to accommodate varying levels of fine motor and communication skills, such as bold colored lines around images to make cutting with scissors easier.
- **Mitigations for sensory barriers**, such as reducing loud sounds, to support students with sensory processing differences.

Through this adapted approach, the project not only supported creative self-expression but also helped students strengthen communication, social, and fine motor skills while building confidence in sharing their own unique stories.

"We're so grateful for the collaboration with Easterseals that enabled us to design a version of our Time Capsule program that's specifically geared toward students with developmental disabilities," said **Stacey Gillett, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Once Upon Our Time Capsule**.

"Easterseals has been an incredible collaborator—thoughtful, creative, and deeply committed to making sure every young person has the chance to feel seen, valued, and connected. Together, we've created an experience that helps students express themselves in accessible ways, while building confidence and strengthening relationships with both peers and teachers. It's been inspiring to see how this collaboration creates new opportunities for connection and growth."

Showcasing Student Voice and Creativity

At the culmination of the program, families, staff, and community leaders gathered for an Open House Celebration to experience the students' projects firsthand. Guests toured Easterseals Academy and [HB Threads](#), our nonprofit social enterprise, and enjoyed refreshments from the student-run store along with a pop-up shop hosted by HB Threads.

We were honored to welcome Illinois State Representatives Yolonda Morris and Kevin Olickal, the Chicago Director for United States Senator Dick Durbin's office, Tran Nguyen, as well as members of

the Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford Board of Directors, who joined us to see the students' creativity on display and learn more about the impact of our programs. Their presence underscored the importance of supporting inclusive education and opportunities for people of all abilities.



Inclusion Is Possible

The Time Capsule project highlights the transformative power of creativity when paired with an inclusive, student-centered approach. By investing in adaptive learning opportunities, we open doors for children with autism and related disabilities to thrive—both today and in the future.

"Inclusive learning doesn't mean simply placing students with disabilities into programs as they already exist," said **Bryan Lindskog, Training and Program Development Coordinator at ECR**. "It

means intentionally designing experiences that accommodate diverse abilities so every student can share in the same meaningful learning and creative opportunities as their peers. The Time Capsule project proves that, with thoughtful adaptation, students of all abilities can fully participate, express themselves, and build the confidence and connections they need to thrive—no child should miss out on that because of developmental differences."