

Creativity Shines: Easterseals' Social Theater Group Empowers Children with Autism and Their Families in Countless Ways

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From start to finish, participants find comfort on the stage while honing new skills, bonding with family, and making new friends.

Moana and her spirited journey. A magical place called Encanto. Puppetry crafted by hand. These are just a few of the themes explored in The Autism Program (TAP) at Easterseals' vibrant and expressive social theater group for young individuals with autism. The eight-week series, now in its third year, is

made possible through a creative partnership between **TAP** and **Gateway Performing Arts**, a community-centric theater organization focused on the dramatic arts.

For children with autism ages 3-5, 6-9, 10-13, and 14-22, the creatively-driven group offers a supportive and imaginative environment to explore the arts firsthand. Integral to the programming are activities to enhance communication skills, build confidence, and, most importantly, have a lot of fun. Whether it's a child's first or third time attending, the group provides a safe and welcoming space for families to connect and for every child to feel supported from the moment they walk through the doors.

Once a participant enters the space, they're instantly deemed an artist, working with the program leaders to get to know one another and their fellow actors. Collaboratively, they choose the themes and stories they'll explore; this could be a well-known tale like Moana and Maui or any variety of theatrical concepts that incorporate a hero, villain, sidekick, scene, or setting.

Since each session is shaped over time by the participants' shared interests, the final showcase is always a surprise. However, one thing is certain: every child's creativity is encouraged to flourish and shine.

"It feels very welcoming, friendly, kind, and caring—and something new to do, which is nice," said Markie McNabb, mother of Elias, nearly 8, who attended the winter session with his 5-year-old brother, Roman.

"I loved that we could also involve Roman," she said, adding how rare it is to find not only opportunities for children on the spectrum but also ones that include siblings. "No one feels left out."

Both boys looked forward to the weekly sessions, especially once they learned who they'd be studying. "[When] they found out it was Moana, that just added to the excitement!" McNabb said.

The group typically meets once a week over two months, beginning the series with an informal introduction and ending with a final creative presentation. This might take the form of an artscape walk-through or a live theater performance complete with costumes, choreography, and songs. But perhaps more important than the final product is the focus on fun. Flexibility and joy take precedence over pressure or perfection. Opportunities like this one are unique—a strong sentiment from the families who have had the chance to take part.

"I do feel like it is hard to kind of find things that are more tailored to children on the spectrum where it does not have that pressure piece," McNabb said, adding: "Because if you say you want to go to dance class or soccer, there's always going to be that expectation that you're going to have to perform

a certain way.”

For McNabb, her husband, Tyler, and their boys, being able to focus more on making connections, having a good time, and also working on social skills just fit better.

Throughout the time the group spends together, the kids also practice emotional regulation with sensory-friendly techniques. Pretending to blow out birthday candles, for example, can be centering and is a valuable tool that extends beyond the program. In addition, a typical session might include warmups, rehearsals, dances and songs, followed by calming exercises and free play.

The social theater group has occupied various locations since it began in 2023. Most recently, this is the gymnasium at the Easterseals Machesney Park Academy campus. Each chosen space is open and welcoming—often equipped with a stage—and designed to invite exploration, creativity, and movement, with plenty of room to roam. Beyond the physical space, it’s also a place where parents and children can connect with their friends and other parents and caregivers.

Eddie Jones, 14, recently completed his third social theater group session, attending with his father, JR. According to Eddie’s mom, Sonia Dalen, the two embraced their time and even learned dance choreography. Dalen described how the masks Eddie crafted were displayed in a final art show, and how his time in the three groups he’s attended has given him newfound confidence.

“He’s a talker,” Dalen said, “but getting up and singing in front of other people is on another level. That’s not something he would have done before.” She describes how Eddie has been singing at home and, most notably, for the first time performed in his school’s spring talent show crooning Elvis’s classic, “Can’t Help Falling in Love.”

“He’s more at ease after going through the theater program. It really helped break him out of his shell,” Dalen said.

She also noted how learning choreography supported Eddie’s memory, and rehearsing routines together with his dad gave them a chance to bond in a new and meaningful way.

McNabb, too, saw how her son, Elias, became more open and social after participating, adding, “Both boys loved it!”

Families that subscribe to TAP’s monthly newsletter can watch for news about upcoming social

theater sessions along with other family-centric, welcoming events.

TAP: Building a Stronger ASD Community

Based in Rockford, TAP is often the first point of contact for local schools, doctors, hospitals, and other professionals for families seeking autism screenings and support. TAP has provided free clinical services to more than 6,500 families and 5,400 children since its inception, offering medical diagnostic assessments that help determine whether a child has autism spectrum disorder. TAP also helps children secure ongoing care through expert guidance, resources, and programming.

At the helm is Lori Davie, TAP's program manager for the past 17 years. Alongside a dedicated team, Davie helps facilitate every social theater session with care. She is supported by Gateway's mentors and instructors, guiding these young artists each step of the way.

"The group's enthusiasm and willingness to step out of their comfort zones is inspiring," Davie said. "Together, they've laughed, learned, and grown, creating not just a theater group, but a vibrant and supportive community."

Even though she has attended every session since the group began, she says each one still feels fresh and magical.

"The hard work and commitment of each member shines through in every story and piece of art," Davie said. "The friendships and memories formed will last long after the final meeting."

Dalen added: "It's beautiful and amazing to watch the kids open up and grow."

With gratitude to funding from **The Autism Program of Illinois**, the **Illinois Department of Human Services**, **The Etnyre Foundation**, and **Pucks for Autism**, TAP continues to offer at least one theater group each year. For many families, it's a beloved experience they look forward to as soon as mention of it hits their inbox.

Want to learn more about The Autism Program at Easterseals or the Social Theater Group? *To inquire about upcoming sessions:* tap.rockford@eastersealschicago.com

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