Last year, in anticipation of Autism Awareness Month in April, a parent approached me about doing a pajama story time specifically designed for children with autism. Even though I wanted to accommodate her request, I was nervous. While I had done story times for a visiting class of children with autism, I had no training or experience working directly with children with special needs, and I had never done a story time for the public.

But this parent was very supportive, offering to handle publicity and sign-ups. She even made arrangements with area high school students to offer babysitting services for siblings who might be left home during the program, and offered suggestions for the programs themselves. The only thing I had to do was plan and present the programs.

After consulting with district teachers of students with special needs and other professionals in the field, I had a better idea of how to structure the programs. I offered two forty-five-minute evening programs on different nights to include stories, songs, rhymes, fingerplays, and a simple craft. The age breakdown was three to five years old and six to eight years old, both with parents in attendance. Two teen volunteers helped with the craft. To encourage feedback from parents, I created a short evaluation form asking if the time was convenient, if they'd like to be notified of future programs, and if they would like to see additional programs offered in the future.

Based on positive comments, I decided to offer similar programs four times a year. These programs would not be limited to children with autism, but be especially adapted for children with special needs.

For my second program, local musician Ann Wild offered to do the program at no charge. She was beginning to offer music programs for children with autism and wanted to get some experience. Together we planned a story time that included Wild’s singing and guitar playing. She brought kid-friendly musical instruments and props such as shaky eggs and scarves for the children to use. As I planned to do this program without a craft, I scheduled it for thirty minutes, although with Wild accompanying it could easily have been forty-five minutes long.

Since then, working solo, I have planned thirty-minute programs with seasonal themes and a simple take-home craft packaged to include all necessary supplies except such basics as glue and scissors. I have incorporated ideas I learned from Wild in addition to feedback received directly from parents attending the sessions. The following are suggestions for planning similar programs.

- Keep the groups small—about ten children with at least one adult each.
- If you are splitting programs into age groups, consider cognitive age as opposed to chronological age; allow parents to decide which program their children will thrive in.
Small Steps, Big Results

- Regular lines of publicity may not reach the people you are trying to target; try to find a gatekeeper, perhaps a parent or a teacher, who can spread the word.

- For legal reasons, be sure your publicity for the general public does not exclude anyone. For example, the title of our program is the generic “Spring Fun Story Time.”

- Try not to turn anyone away, whether or not he or she is a child with special needs. Don't be concerned about closing out the children you are trying to reach; you'll find that most parents of children who do not have special needs will either not sign up or wait to see if there are still openings as the program approaches.

- If your building is accessible, be sure to advertise that.

- Consider taking registrations in case you need to make any accommodations.

- Thirty-minute programs work fine; if you decide to include a craft, tack on an extra fifteen minutes.

- Use rug squares on the floor to signal to children and parents where you want them to sit; a wheelchair also can glide over them easily.

- Big books keep the attention of the children and are easier to see than regular-sized books; when using smaller books, be sure the pictures are large and clear.

- Involve the children as much as possible. Ask questions, even if you think you will not get answers. Props, such as finger puppets or stuffed animals that children can hold during the story, are effective in keeping them engaged.

- Adapt songs and rhymes so that they include big hand or arm gestures, as opposed to small finger manipulations; many children with special needs have a difficult time with fine motor skills.

- Sharing a handout of rhymes, songs, and fingerplays allows parents to join in. Include contact information so caregivers can offer feedback on the program.

- Invest in props such as scarves or shaky eggs; these easily handled items will pull children into the program.

- If you are doing programs for different age groups, there is no need to make drastic changes. Just use a longer book with the same songs and rhymes for older children.

The following is a sample program outline for a spring-themed story time:

Song: “The More We Get Together.” Talk about the theme. Show a puppet of a nest with baby birds and allow each child to handle it.

Flannel: “Five Umbrellas.” Count and guess colors; have each child come up and pick the correct color umbrella.

Big Book: Flower Garden by Eve Bunting.

Finger play: “Green Leaf.”

Action verse:
Stretch up high! Touch the sky!
Stretch down low—touch your toes!
Your knees, your shoulders, your head. [repeat]
Have each child choose one scarf (I keep the scarves and eggs in a basket).

Action verse with scarf: “I See the Wind” (2X)

Action verse with scarf: I’m a Puff of Wind” (2X). Place scarves on the floor and have each child pick two shaky eggs.

Action verse with eggs: “Wind Song” (2X). Place one egg on the floor and pick up a scarf so each child is holding a scarf in one hand and an egg in the other.


Bibliography

Big (oversized) Books


Other Books

Big book with puppets: *Time for Bed* by Mem Fox. Hand a puppet to each child as the animal is introduced. After the story, the children return the puppets to a box.

**Song:** “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.”

**Take-home activity:** Ten marigold seeds and a biodegradable pot in which to plant them.

At the end of the program, allow time for children to handle the puppets.

The above is a basic outline of how I structure my programs; they are not very different from preschool story times. Having a theme helps me choose rhymes and stories, but it’s not necessary. Don’t be distracted by what you might consider unusual behaviors; just keep going and trust the caregiver to deal with anything unexpected. Before the program, you may want to announce to the adults to feel free to leave the room if necessary.

**Feedback**

I have found that parents really like these programs for several reasons. First, it demonstrates to their children that they are welcome to a community center such as the library. It also frees parents from worry over how their child’s behavior will be perceived by others; it is a safe environment where their children will not be judged.

It is vitally important that you are calm, welcoming, and enthusiastic before, during, and after the program. Remind parents that their children may attend any age-appropriate programs that your library offers. If they feel uncomfortable, allow them to speak with the person who is running the program to discuss expectations.

One mother commented:

I thought that you did a phenomenal job of planning and sequencing both quiet activities as well as more interactive ones and that the children really responded very well to your instruction. Everyone was engaged and eager to participate, and you made each child feel that they were contributing to the lesson.

I also thought that the size of the group was optimal because each child had a chance to interact with you as well as with the other children and adults present. Had there been a larger group, I’m not sure that my daughter would have been able to attend and participate as well as she was able to that evening.

Parents have encouraged me to continue offering such programs, even in the face of what appeared to be a lack of interest. For example, this past summer, although children had signed up, on the night of the programs, no one came. A few weeks later, a parent who had come to a previous program was so disappointed when she heard this that she contacted several other parents, asking them if they were still interested in these story times. She got a resounding yes!

If you attempt such programs, remember, sometimes small steps are actually big ones, and you are offering an invaluable service to an often underserved population.

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