



Camp *Yes And*: An Improv Summer Camp for Teens on the Spectrum and Teachers

Final Report to Answers for Autism

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The Center on Education and Lifelong Learning and the Indiana Resource Center for Autism at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community (IIDC) at Indiana University received generous support from Answers for Autism to fund Camp *Yes And* (<http://yesand.indiana.edu>), a two-week improvisational theater summer camp for teens on the autism spectrum and teachers.

What is improv?



Improvisational theater, popularly known in the US as *improv*, is a form of drama in which plot, character, and setting are created during the moment of performance. Many people enjoyed watching Drew Carey and friends make up characters, scenes and songs on “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” Improv is lots of fun, but it also represents a refined system of observing, connecting, and responding that has one major rule: *Yes, and*. Improv is about saying *yes* to our partners *and* adding our own ideas in order to create something new together.

Why is improv important?

In the US, nearly 40% of students with disabilities don’t graduate from high school (DePaoli, et al., 2015). Of those youth on the autism spectrum who do graduate, more than 50% have no participation in post-secondary employment or education (Shattuck, et al., 2012). According to Laugeson, et al. (2012), the development of communication skills is a high priority for teens on the autism spectrum. Shattuck and colleagues (2014) affirm the critical link between these skills and improved post-secondary outcomes.

Drama programs use improv as a tool to develop new works and train actors. However, improvisational techniques increasingly are being used in a variety of settings outside of the theater, including business (Scinto, 2014), educational (Brecht, 2014), and therapeutic (Louden, 2014) contexts. A growing number of arts organizations offer improv classes for teens on the autism spectrum. These organizations advertise a host of benefits for participating teens, including developing social relationships (“Improv for ASD”), flexible thinking (“Shenanigans”), and communication skills (“Special Needs Improv”). Advocacy organizations across the US affirm the notion that teens benefit from these classes in terms of their communicative and social development (“ComedySportz Improv Skills,” 2015; Fox, n.d.; Olenizcak,

2015). Anecdotal evidence from the first offering of *Camp Yes And* supports such claims. For example, a teen participant remarked, “After the camp, I feel like I can listen to other people and cooperate with them better. The camp improved my quick thinking skills, too.” A parent noted, “The great value of the improv camp was challenging the teens to observe their peers' gestures and body language during the skits to develop spontaneous dialogues!” A teacher participant added, “I loved thinking of ways to adapt the games for speech therapy sessions. Most everything we did would help increase a student with ASD's ability to interact and communicate with others.”

Why include teachers?

In the past, efforts to support individuals on the autism spectrum to develop communication skills have focused on the acquisition of discrete skills. However, the field of speech-language pathology is moving toward a systemic model of understanding disability in which “a communication impairment is viewed as existing within the relationships between individuals and others in their environment rather than within the individuals themselves” (Burgess and Turkstra, 2010, p.475). Speech-language intervention, therefore, has been broadened to include the provision of training to communicative partners. Teachers represent a critical group of communicative partners for teens on the autism spectrum.

Odom, Cox, and Brock (2013) demonstrate that autism spectrum disorders are increasing in prevalence more rapidly than any other disability. Legislation, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, holds schools accountable for supporting all students to succeed in the general education environment. However, many teachers don't believe they are able to teach students on the spectrum effectively in general education settings (Cassady, 2011).

Furthermore, Joyce and Showers (2002) found that fewer than 10% of educators implemented new practices in the classroom as a result of attending traditional professional development workshops. Further analysis demonstrated that many workshops provide only new information and examples, which help participants to develop awareness and conceptual understanding of new teaching techniques, but don't support participants to develop and apply these skills in the classroom. Providing opportunities for educators to practice new skills and receive coaching during implementation is essential for educational innovations to transfer from the workshop to the classroom. The structure of *Camp Yes And* provides teachers with this critical support as they learn a powerful new skill set and apply the skills in an authentic context.



What was the camp curriculum?

Camp Yes And was co-directed by Jim Ansaldo, PhD and Lacy Shawn, LCSW. Dr. Ansaldo is a Research Scholar at the Center on Education and Lifelong Learning, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community,

Indiana University Bloomington (<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cell>). He has facilitated school change and teacher professional development for 15 years. He has performed and taught improv comedy for 25 years. Recently, his work has expanded to include a focus on applied improvisation -- using the skills and techniques of improv to support professionals in business, educational, and therapeutic settings.

Lacy Shawn is the Special Needs Program Director at the Hideout Theatre in Austin, Texas (<http://www.hideouttheatre.com/improv-for-kids/building-connections>). In addition to being an improv performer and instructor, she is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and has focused her career on working with at-risk youth and youth on the spectrum. Over the past three years, Ms. Shawn has piloted a successful program at the Hideout that has provided improv classes to teens and pre-teens on the autism spectrum.



Dr. Ansaldo conceptualized the overall structure of Camp Yes And. During the first week of the camp, Ansaldo and Shawn would support teachers to learn improv techniques and their application to supporting youth on the autism spectrum. During the second week, these teachers would work with Ansaldo and Shawn to co-facilitate an improv camp for teens on the autism spectrum. The project, then, was designed to provide both direct service to individuals with autism and a professional development experience for teachers, which would build local capacity to expand and

sustain future work. It was anticipated that camp would provide a safe and supportive environment for teens on the spectrum to develop important skills around communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation—and teachers would develop the skills to spread the work and create more creative, flexible, and supportive learning environments for individuals on the spectrum.

Ms. Shawn drew upon her experience at the Hideout to design the camp curriculum. Each teacher participant received a curriculum binder of over 100 pages that contained information about individuals on the autism spectrum, improv games, and the rationale and instructions for their use. Every attempt was made to communicate respect and care for individuals on the spectrum. For example, consider the following statements from the camp curriculum:

- We fully recognize that no treatment, intervention, or recreational activity is a “one size fits all” model. Every student we have ever taught (adult, child, neurotypical, or with specifically identified needs) brings different strengths and challenges into the classroom. We aim to assess our students, build on their strengths, support their struggles, and help them find success and fun through learning and skill development.
- We recognize that labels, phrasing, and terminology can be a sensitive topic of discussion. Therefore, we aim to approach our students with the utmost respect, and from a “person-first” perspective. Our students are so much more than their cluster of diagnostic traits or diagnostic labels (self or professionally given), and we aim to emphasize and celebrate who they are.

That said, the curriculum offered information about typical challenges faced by individuals on the spectrum, potential interventions, and improv games/exercises that address align with such interventions. For example:

Social Challenges	Social Interventions	Improv Games/Exercises
Difficulty with Eye Contact	Focus on attunement with others	Pass the Clap, Whoosh Bang Pow, Bippity Bippity Bop, Kitty Wants a Corner, Complimentary Statues, Pattern Ball

The curriculum was organized into twelve separate modules that covered specific topics, including improv basics, co-creating scenes, building on offers, portraying characters, justification of “conflicting” ideas, going with the flow, expressing emotion, building story, portraying status, and creating setting. Each module section provided an explanation and rationale, a table of improv games/exercises, instructions for how to play, and teaching notes.

How did it go?

Teen and teacher registration were capped at fifteen each. Teen registration slots filled up almost immediately, and there were two cancellations occurring close to the start of camp, making for a total of thirteen participants of ages 13-18. Initially, ten teachers registered for camp, but several late cancellations occurred, which put the total of number of teachers at six: a high school drama teacher, a third-grade teacher, two speech-language pathologists, and a home school teacher. Three experienced improvisers also participated: one during the entire two weeks, and two for the teen week only.

Camp was held from 1-5 PM on Monday through Friday during each of the two weeks. During Week 1, teachers were introduced to improv using the curriculum modules described above. Those same modules then were repeated as the structure for Week 2, the teen camp.

One week after the end of camp, links to online feedback surveys were sent to teens, family members, and teachers. Overall, the feedback was quite positive. Most teen participants stated that they would highly recommend participating in Camp *Yes And* to their friends. Comments included:

- The activities exercised my imagination. It was really creative and fun.
- I made some friends, and there were many activities I enjoyed ...
- I will use what I learned in social situations at school.
- After the camp, I feel like I can listen to other people and cooperate with them better. The camp improved my quick thinking skills too.



- I hope to at least be a little more social, especially when it comes to having the same interest as the other person.

Most family members agreed that camp supported teens to develop skills for communicating more clearly, participating in social situations, and being more flexible and spontaneous. Comments included:

- [My teen] enjoyed the program. She talked about the exercises and techniques she was learning in the class each day. She LOVED participating in the showcase on Friday. Overall, I believe she felt she could be herself, unjudged, and be her witty self.
- It was a special treat for [my teen] to be part of a "special needs" group without the stigma and engaged in what he perceived to be a really awesome experience.
- I can see that they all formed relationships/friendships over the course of the week. This was very nice. The great value of the improv camp was challenging the teens to observe their peers' gestures and body language during the skits to develop spontaneous dialogues! I was REALLY impressed by some of the participants' ability to do this. Also, some of the campers had a great sense of humor! Wow!
- My son absolutely LOVED camp. From the first day he came home raving about what a wonderful time he had. He said it's normally hard for him to speak up around peers but he felt safe doing so at camp saying that he knew the other campers could relate to him.

Most teachers said that they would highly recommend participating as a professional in *Camp Yes And* to their colleagues. Comments included:

- It was incredible to see our group come together and really "change" over the course of the week. I saw kids stop interrupting and start listening. They made things up on the spot. They went with what someone else came up with. I even heard kids attempt to develop personal relationships with their peers before/after camp.
- I loved thinking of ways to adapt the games for speech therapy sessions. Most everything we did would help increase a student with ASD's ability to interact and communicate with others.
- I plan to use some of the games and activities in speech therapy sessions. I would also like to share some of the ideas with my speech colleagues as well as the general education teachers I work with, especially the [exercise called] "bowl of soup!"
- I will use the information I learned to subtly improve communication skills among my students in all of the different classes I teach.



What lessons were learned?

While the feedback from participants and family members was positive overall, some changes will be made based on their responses. For example, the time commitment for teachers was considerable. In the future, camp will be condensed into a one-week period. Camp staff will work with teachers for a half-

day prior to the start of the camp week, and then during the morning of each camp day. Each afternoon, teachers will work with camp staff to co-facilitate the teen camp. Also, changes will be made to the curriculum binders in order to make it easier to locate game instructions during the camp day. Camp staff will consider ways in which experienced participants might begin to lead activities in successive years. Included in this reflection will be consideration of ways to accommodate more student requests regarding games played during camp.

What are the future plans for camp?

Camp *Yes And* will be held again in Bloomington, Indiana, during summer 2016. Interest also has been expressed in holding a second camp in Indianapolis. Visit the camp website (<http://yesand.indiana.edu>) to sign up for a mailing list and keep updated on registration and sponsorship opportunities.



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