

The Sensory-Friendly Program Initiative

at
Dallas Children's Theater

Five-Year Summary



Your Family Arts Center
**DALLAS
CHILDREN'S
THEATER**



“Our whole family just loves coming to DCT. It feels like home.”
— Natalie Olszewski

Dallas Children’s Theater

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Todd Ranta 2018

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Cover photo credits: Patty Bates-Ballard; Sandra Session-Robertson; John Derryberry

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What would life be like if the buzzing light overhead sounded to you like a roaring lion?

What if the lights going dark in the theater made you feel like you were trapped in a cave? What if, when you saw a flashing light, your body went into convulsions that you couldn't control? What if you were so overwhelmed by these situations that you were afraid of big spaces and crowds?

This is life for many of the 100,000+ children in Dallas on the autism spectrum and with other developmental disabilities, and their siblings and parents. If you were one of these children, most likely your family would prioritize your safety and forego many community events.

Unfortunately, you and your family would miss out on so much, and you would experience the isolation that is so common for families with a child with developmental disabilities.

Drama helps children with autism better understand and respond to social cues, facilitate peer interaction, increase self-awareness and insight, resolve conflicts and solve problems, and foster family cohesion. Yet many children with developmental disabilities like autism have a low tolerance for crowds, loud noises, darkness, flashing lights, and other similar sensory input. Often, because of these challenges, families that include a child with developmental disability don't believe the world of theater is accessible to them.

At Dallas Children's Theater (DCT), we are reversing that belief

by making our theater a safe and comfortable place for children with developmental disabilities.

Since 1984, DCT has been inspiring young people to creative and productive lives through the art of theater. DCT is the largest children's theater in the Southwest, and has been honored by TIME Magazine as one of the top five family theaters in the nation.

Dallas Children's Theater is lauded in the theater world as a place that innovates and takes initiatives to the next level. In response to the growing demand for more inclusive programming, Dallas Children's Theater has taken a bold stand as a safe place for audiences with different sensory needs.

Beginning in 2014, we partnered with children's theaters in Nashville and Orlando, along with North Texas experts in the fields of autism and developmental disabilities, to ensure we developed an inclusive, responsive, and welcoming program.

Over the past five years, Dallas Children's Theater has provided adapted theater experiences to more than 9,000 children and families with autism and others who need a more relaxed, comforting environment.

If you have attended one of these performances, you might have noticed that there were no jarring loud noises, flashing lights, or complete theater blackouts. You might have noticed that a cheerful boy recited out loud in unison with the actors many of the lines of the book on which a play was based. You might have noticed that a

young boy laughed loud and long when one of the characters threw him a ball.

Perhaps you noticed that a young girl stood up and sat down, while another rocked back and forth often during a performance. And you would have noticed that everyone supported and accepted these behaviors without question.

Each year, we meet or exceed our performance goals and objectives for children's comfort during the performance, children interacting with a person they didn't know, and children learning and growing.

Our Blue Pegasus Players drama classes offer a specialized class experience for students with sensory processing differences and those who want to learn from and support them. Because of our amazing staff and the funding that allows us to offer our students one-on-one support when needed, we meet or exceed our class goals and objectives, including increased understanding of basic emotions and interaction with others.

Other arts and children's organizations now come to us for advice on how to make their programs sensory-friendly.

Because families of children with developmental disabilities have so many expenses, the reduced pricing for these programs — made possible by our generous donors — is critical to this program's success.

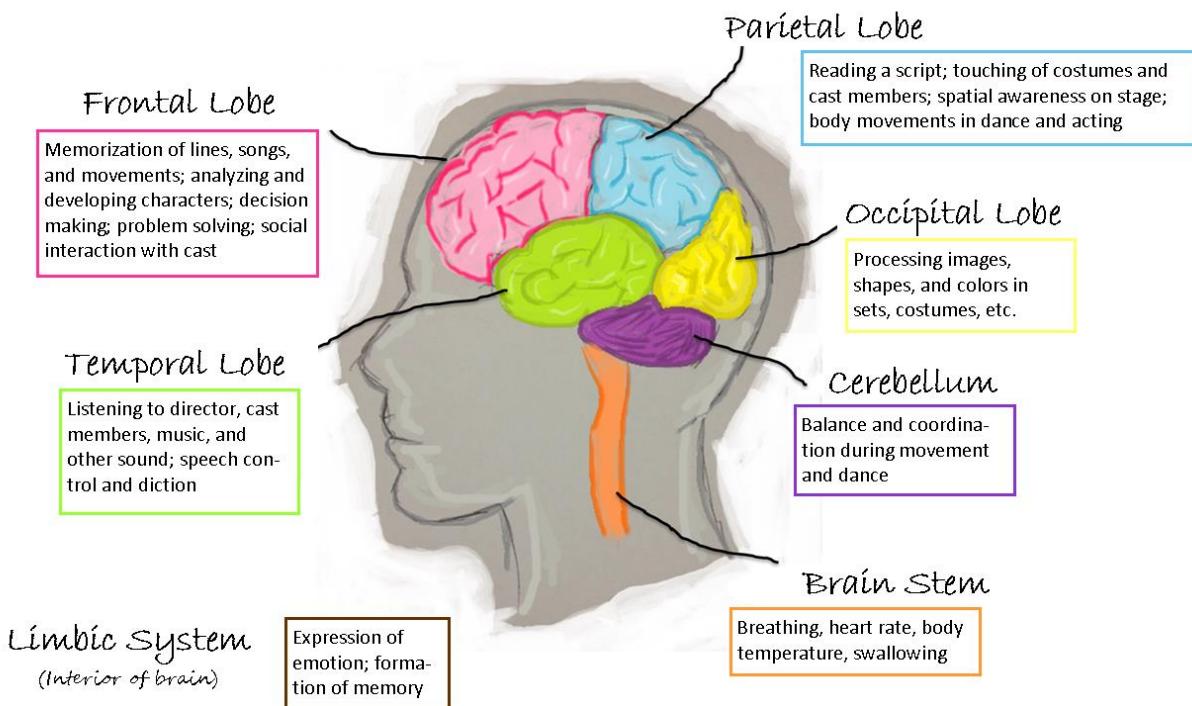
We also are indebted to the Dallas Children's Theater staff and actors who bring their passion to this program every day.



Theater and the Brain

Participating in the arts – particularly in live theater with its movement, emotion, and cooperative learning opportunities – provides children critical brain stimulation.

Recent research has shown that the sensory-rich brain stimulation provided by elements present in theater leads the brain to develop more complex nerve networks that enhance learning and learning potential.



Theater stimulates every area of the brain.

You can read about it in *Smart Moves, Why Learning is Not All in Your Head*, Carla Hannaford, PhD, 2005

Sensory-Friendly Productions at DCT

2014 - 2018



Your Family Arts Center

**DALLAS
CHILDREN'S
THEATER**

EXPERIENCE THE
Magic
OF LIVE THEATER!

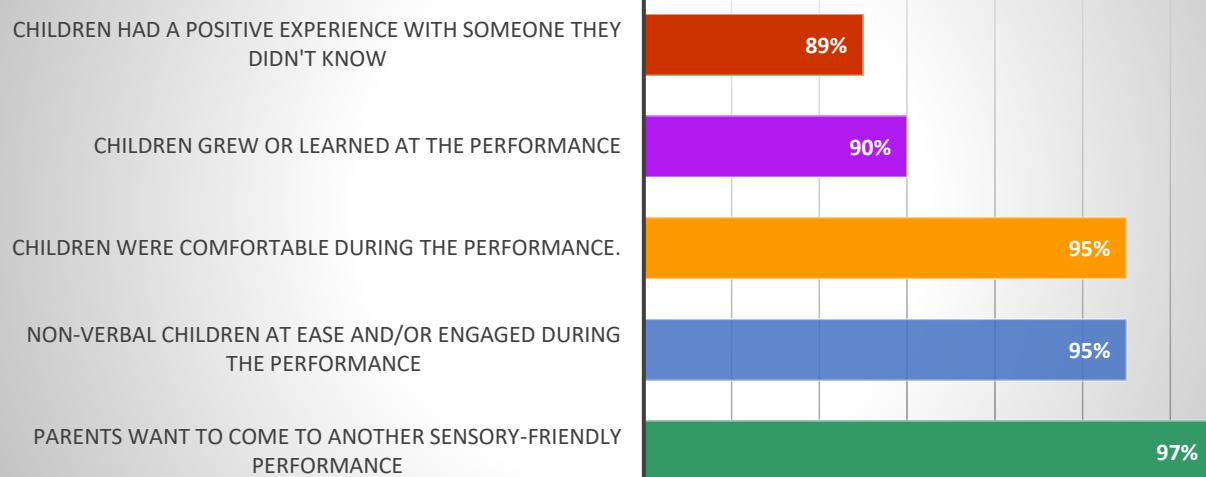
"Each Sensory Friendly play we attend is building our grandson's social skills and broadening his experiences."
— Cheryl Devoto

Results for Sensory-Friendly Performances

General Sensory-Friendly Performance Results

2014–2018 results for families who attended single performances.

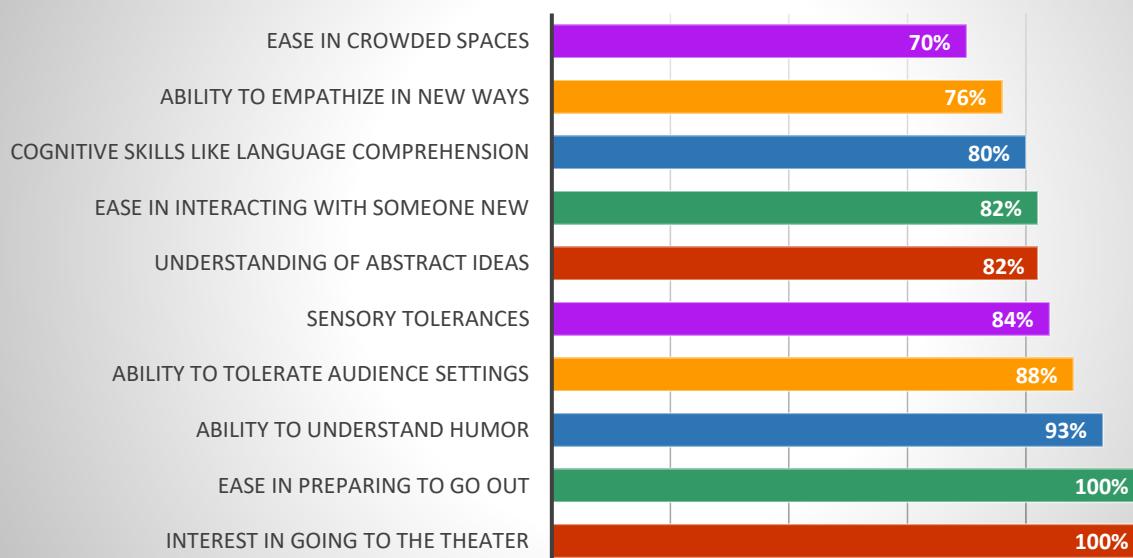
Sensory-Friendly Single Performance Results



Cumulative Growth Results for Sensory-Friendly Performance Frequent Fliers

2016–2018 results for children who attended at least three performances each year.

Cumulative Sensory-Friendly Performance Results



Family Outcomes for Sensory-Friendly Performance Frequent Fliers

2016-2018 results for families who attended at least three performances each year.

Family Outcomes for Sensory-Friendly Performance Frequent Fliers

SENSORY-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES HAVE THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT

100%

SENSORY-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES MEET NEEDS OF CHILDREN WITH DIFFERENT SENSORY NEEDS

100%

SENSORY-FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES MEET NEEDS OF OTHER MEMBERS OF FAMILY

100%

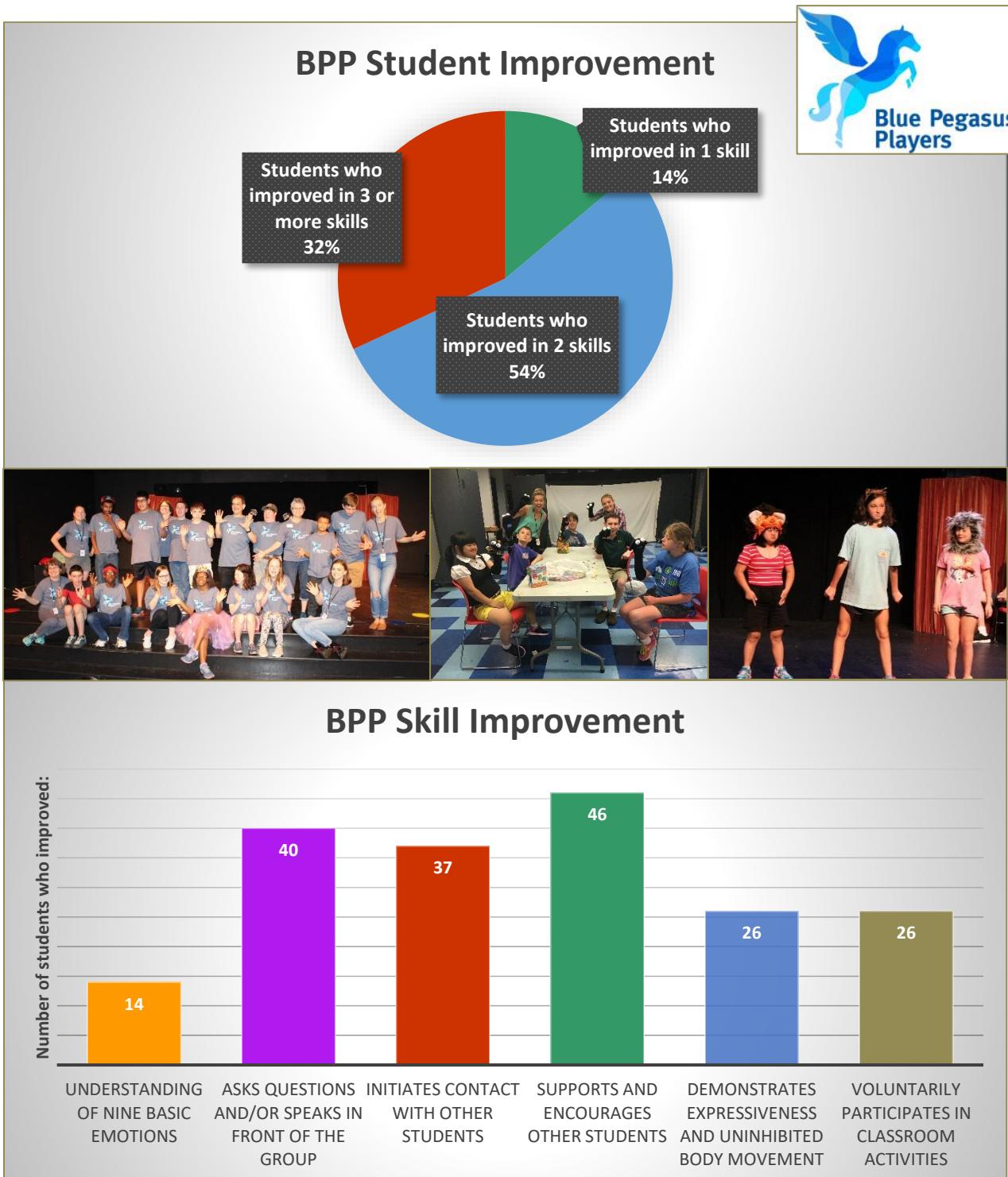
FAMILY FEELS MORE INCLUDED BY THE COMMUNITY

100%



Results for Blue Pegasus Players Drama Classes

2016-2018 results for students who attended one or more drama classes designed especially for students with developmental disabilities. All students improved in at least one skill.



Blue Pegasus Players Community Performance

2018 marked the third year for Blue Pegasus Players, the specialized classes designed to meet the needs of students with developmental disabilities. While most classes end with a brief performance, this year, the students worked toward an evening community performance.

As in most DCT classes, students picked their own characters. DCT staff helped students with vastly varying characters create a script with humor, action, and song. The performance included Spider Man, Willy Wonka, Ice Queen, and Winston Churchill.

All students made amazing strides as they worked toward their performance.

Tej

Particularly notable is Tej, who is on the autism spectrum. When Tej began attending BPP in summer 2016, he did not voluntarily participate and was minimally verbal. His single goal for the class performance was to throw a ball. While he did throw the ball in rehearsal, he didn't throw it at the performance.



Tej and Ms. Gina

In his second BPP class, Tej clapped a pattern during an activity. Staff members strategized ways to build on his love of music and rhythm over two more classes.

When he came for comedy class, Tej participated in skits and told jokes with the help of staff. At the BPP evening community performance, he chose to play Batman and said all of his lines on stage, with some prompting.

Tej's dad says not only has his son developed confidence through BPP, but his new confidence has transferred to other areas of his life, like reading and working.

Aiden

Aiden started attending BPP in summer 2018, and she is the first BPP student who uses a wheelchair and an Augmentative and Alternative Communication device. Aiden's mother attends class with her because she has seizures that can be brought on by fragrances.

Prior to the session starting, the staff discussed ways to include Aiden and adapt the activities to fit her needs, like:

- Using inclusive language (rather than saying "walk to the dot," say "come to the dot")
- Including Aiden in music activities (giving her the words for rhythm activities so they could be pre-programmed in her device, for example)
- Encouraging participation in discussion (we let her mother know days prior to class that we would be asking students to pick their characters for the final performance, so Aiden could be thinking about it and have her ideas pre-programmed in her device, if possible).

Aiden participated and was engaged in the class. She was a supportive classmate (offering encouraging words to her classmates) and a creative storyteller (writing lines for her character). When the staff realized something they were doing wasn't working for her, they checked in with her or her mother to see what was needed, or discussed with other staff members to find a solution.



Aiden and her mom, Kristen McVay, on stage

Aiden has enrolled in more sessions, and the staff continues to adjust (and sometimes readjust) activities and lessons to better include all students.

One day, while at Blue Pegasus Players, Aiden had a horrible seizure that required rescue breaths for her survival. While still seizing, Aiden shook her head when her mom began to take her home.

Aiden wanted to stay to see the play her BPP teacher, Mr. Karl, was about to perform in. She made it through the show and then wanted to take a picture with her teacher. As Mr. Karl said that day, it's "the power of the arts."

As a result of BPP, her mother says Aiden has become more alert and wants to act more. She is even thinking about starting a photography business to take pictures behind the scenes.



Caregiver Quotes

"It's so comforting for me and my children to feel welcomed at a theater: no angry looks from other parents when my child is restless or vocalizes, and not being asked to leave because our presence is a distraction to other audience members . . . It is a great treasure to have the DCT welcome me and my family to these sensory-friendly performances. Inclusive, adaptive, budget-friendly cultural experiences should be a priority for every children's venue—and I'm proud to have our local DCT lead the way." – Julie Ross

"This was life changing for our family to be able to go to this show. We recently moved from Raleigh, North Carolina, and despite having a lot of Broadway-style shows, we were never able to go. Your theater was one of the reasons we chose to move to the Dallas area, and we have already purchased tickets for every future sensory show that was available. THANK YOU!!!!"

- Daniel Matthew

"My son Kory used to get upset just going into an auditorium because some very loud school assemblies had scared him. Now, after attending the sensory-friendly shows at Dallas Children's Theater, he is relaxed when we go into an auditorium. He's even comfortable enough for the family to attend church and some plays that are not sensory-friendly." – Patty Bates-Ballard

"We live 5 minutes away. We've never come to see a show due to the price and the risk of our autistic son behaving poorly. The \$5 ticket and sensory adjustments allowed us to enjoy a theater show. Thank you!! It was memorable."

"I loved the fact that no one judged my ASD son and that there were more children like him. The actors were really patient and understanding when taking pictures after their performance."

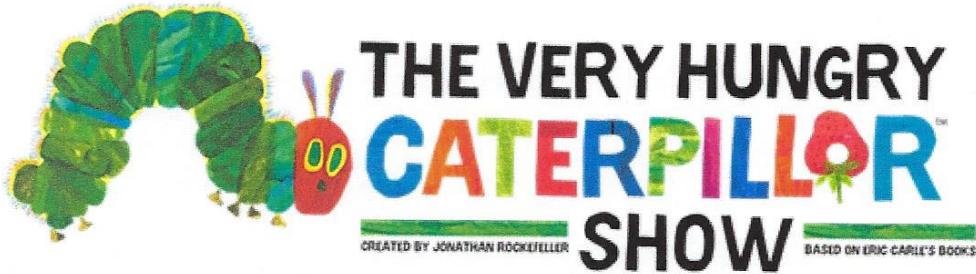
- Deyanira Ibarra

"The characters were so friendly during program signings. Interacting with strangers in a large group is typically overwhelming for my son, but he didn't feel anxious or overwhelmed...it was such a joy to see!" - Sarah Baldwin

"Quinn has started using humor a lot more, specifically trying to make jokes. He has play-acted out a lot of situations with cars and trucks. He performed in his school's musical performance this year and was excellent. Previously, he would watch but not participate in such things."

- Maureen Mann

"He said it made him feel happy and that he never felt he needed to leave. Now this indicates a comfort level in that he knew he could leave if he needed to, and that he was in touch with his emotions about the performance. He LOVED lobby experiences (esp. bubbles) as well." - Carol Bunker



3rd February, 2018

To whom it may concern,

Rockefeller Productions is a company based in New York, and is the worldwide licensor for Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show* which debuted in Australia in 2015. Since its debut in 2015, we have had a successful ongoing tours in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom; with sit-down performances in London's west end and New York.

The Hungry Caterpillar Show is somewhat of a misnomer in a theatrical context. It is a well-known and loved brand that has been around for almost fifty-years, with three generations growing up loving Eric Carle's infamous characters. Our show contains no less than 75 puppets, and every performance (which generally skews younger than most children's shows) is autism-friendly.

When it came to the decision as to who we should partner with to have its United States debut outside of New York there was only one clear option that we desired to pursue – to work with Dallas Children's Theater.

Dallas Children's Theater has been known to us and within the industry for its quality performances, its community outreach programs, and its Autism friendly programming; all values which were and remain important to us in the remount of our production.

Working with their experienced teams (programming, marketing, production) has been seamless, and in a word: 'delightful'. I do not hesitate to pick up the phone to ask for updates or advice, knowing that they have the situation in hand.

Dallas Children's Theater has since become a valued partner of our show in the United States. Through its vision and network of industry contacts, it has enabled our show to be seen throughout the country, and most importantly, has enabled thousands of children to gain access to quality theatre to enrich their lives.

I very much look forward to continuing our involvement with Dallas Children's Theater in the years to come, and highly recommend them as one of the great preeminent children's theaters of this nation.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Rockefeller
Executive Producer – The Hungry Caterpillar Show
CEO - Rockefeller Productions
jonathan@rockefellerproductions.com

Thank You!

We are deeply appreciative of The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and Theatre Communications Group for the grant that allowed us to pilot our journey toward inclusion of all children at our theater in 2014.

A huge thank-you goes to The Crystal Charity Ball for the three-year grant that allowed us to deepen and institutionalize the Sensory-Friendly Initiative.

We also are immensely grateful to our friends at Autism Speaks for supporting the documentation of the pilot year's work and for a second grant for floor cushions and other comforting items.

In addition to our generous donors, we deeply appreciate our two wonderful national partners, Nashville Children's Theatre and Orlando Repertory Theatre. We are also deeply grateful to local partners from Autism Speaks; The Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities University of Texas Southwestern and Children's Health Centers; the Neuropsychology Service of Children's Health Dallas; The University of North Texas, including the Kristin Farmer Autism Center, who coached us, provided detailed suggestions on ways to adapt each performance, assisted in promoting the performances, and helped us identify volunteers to make each performance successful.

With the strength of these supporters behind us this past five years, we look to the future. We are thankful to have had the opportunity to develop a truly meaningful program.

With a firm foundation, and a cadre of new funders, we are excited to continue to serve the many families who could use a welcoming and comfortable outlet for family entertainment that is also beneficial beyond words for their children.

Thanks for being a part of our commitment to being an inclusive resource for all!



The Crystal Charity Ball



AUTISM SPEAKS™
It's time to listen.



Anonymous



Christmas Market 2018



Sharron Hunt

The Aileen and Jack Pratt Foundation

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