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Exposure to the Arts at Young Age Fosters Creativity in Children

By Heather Gibson
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I recently ignored the cardinal rule of parenthood and kept my 2-year-old, Huck, awake during his normal naptime. I knew it was risky, but then, so is suggesting he wear a shirt that isn't his favorite color orange, so I was willing to take my chances.

The reasons for my daring were twofold: First, I had been working almost nonstop for months on the recent UCF Celebrates the Arts festival. We were three days into the festival and I had hardly seen my child in a week. We needed to spend some time together.

Second, I had reserved tickets to "We All Can Dance," a kinderdrama for toddlers and their grownups. The event promised us time to play, dance and make theatre together, all things the two of us love to do. Exposure to theatre is at the top of the activity list for my little guy, and it almost always trumps a nap.

Why? I believe that exposing Huck to the arts at a young age will foster creativity, expose him to a more diverse population, and encourage him to use creative outlets for expressing his emotions. It will also help him learn how to do imaginary and cooperative play.

The kid has one job right now, and that job is to play as hard and as much as he can. The inimitable Fred Rogers said: "When we treat children's play as seriously as it deserves, we are helping them feel the joy that's to be found in the creative spirit. It's the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives." If taking my child to a theatre event will help him be a better "player," that's worth a missed nap.

That said, the logistics of taking a toddler to a theatre can be daunting. How do you get a squirmy, noisy, sticky, short person to be a good audience member? You want to teach him good theatre etiquette, but at the same time, there are limits to what we can expect of a toddler.

There are some fairly obvious things you can do to make your toddler's theatre experience better (scheduling around naptime is the biggie) but here are some tips you might not have considered:

- Ask for a booster seat. Many theatres have boosters available at the guest services counter. Not only will a booster give your child a better vantage point, it can help keep her from being gobbled up by a folding seat.
- Explain the process and rules to your child. When we watch *Daniel's Neighborhood* on TV at home, Huck can talk, jump on the couch, and eat food. When we see *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!* at the theatre next month, there will be a different set of rules. Explaining that to him in advance and pointing out the differences as we walk in to the theatre will help him remember that different rules apply to different places even though the content seems similar.
- Acquaint your toddler with the characters and plot before you attend. Seeing *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* meant a lot more to Huck since we had been reading the story for weeks prior. And it also clued him into the secret he didn't need to be afraid of the scary snow monster Bumble when he saw him in person.
- Seek out shows with reserved seating. In order to keep him engaged, I like to be close to the stage, but in a general admission performance you have to arrive very early to get those seats. My kid just can't sit still that long. When we can't get reserved seats, we arrive early to get a good seat, situate our booster seat, then retreat to the lobby until the show starts and make a last-minute entry.
- Consider the content. *Hamilton* may be at the top of your to-see list, but your toddler will be happier with *Elephant & Piggie's "We Are in a Play!"* Hold off on Broadway for a few years and take the toddler to a short performance with content geared toward children. Many local theaters have "Theatre for Young Audience" productions. Attending a show that is designed specifically for children will help your toddler be more engaged and there will be no chance of her being exposed to profanity, nudity, or other content she might not yet be mature enough to process. Some theatres also offer special sensory performances for children with autism or other aversions to loud sounds and bright lights.

- Attend free or low-price performances. You don't want to drop \$500 on tickets to a Broadway show only to have your toddler fall asleep five minutes into the show. And if he causes a stir, he might be disrupting the experience of another patron who has also invested a considerable sum to see the performance.
- Start short. Spend a few minutes at an outdoor concert or attend a 15-minute show designed specifically for kids. This will help you gauge your child's readiness for a longer-format performance, and if she loses interest, you aren't stuck in a seat for an hour with a howling toddler. Living in Orlando, we are fortunate to be able to visit theme parks that have short, informal concerts and shows. If you don't have this option, keep your eyes open for festivals and fairs, which often have similar opportunities.
- Leave the crackers at home. Most theatres don't permit food consumption in the house. Your best course of action is to make sure that your toddler is well-fed before you enter the theatre, but if you know he's going to demand a snack, don't pull out the ubiquitous crackers. They leave crumbs and worse, they are loud. Instead consider packing fruit chews or dried fruit...and take it out of the crinkly packaging before you arrive at the theatre.
- Know when to leave. Some arguments aren't worth having with your toddler. If he insists on taking off his shoes during the performance, let him. Truly, no one but you will notice. But if your child is crying, afraid, or just having a "moment," it is ok to leave the theatre. You, your child, your fellow patrons, and the performers will all be happier if you make a quick exit than if you try to stick it out. You can always try again another day.
- Don't end the experience at the theatre doors. Your toddler has just been introduced to a new world that will be intriguing and delightful to her growing brain. Have a book with the characters ready in the car for her to read. Ask her questions about what she saw and let her ask you questions. Over the next few weeks, lead some role play with her and sing the songs you heard.

Now that you have a few pointers, Huck and I look forward to seeing you and your little one at the theatre! We'll be easy to spot: sitting near the front with big smiles on our faces, and the smaller one of us will be shoeless and wearing an orange shirt.

