

What's Your Vision? Directing Children's Theatre

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<http://greatstorybook.com/your-vision-directing-children/>

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We all know there is something utterly beautiful about the innocence, honesty and enthusiasm of children. This makes them wonderful to direct. Children are far easier to convince than adults that there are “no small parts, only small actors.”

If you give a child a hope and a chance to shine, he will usually attack even the smallest role with enviable vigor. Children love everything about theater. The very idea of being able to dress up, get up on stage and perform, and grown-ups have to pay attention because it is, after all, high art when it's a play, is mesmerizing to children. They love it. It is the ultimate pretending. But there are challenges to directing children as well.

The first challenge comes from the children themselves. Whether they are all roughly the same age as one another or cover an age range of five or six years, children generally have varied attention spans. Of course, there are some children who will be able to sit still and listen for a longer period of time and others who seem to float away into a world of their own almost immediately. Additionally, like adults, children come with a wide variety of personalities. Inevitably you will find one or two very forward kids in the group.

These kids will shoot up their hands and chime in with their bright ideas at any given opportunity. And often when they haven't been invited to do so. Others are so timid or withdrawn that you can hardly get them to speak aloud a single line of dialogue. The challenge is to plan rehearsal time in such a way as to

keep the greatest majority of children engaged throughout the whole rehearsal process.

Here is what you need to do to keep the kids engaged, not crazy:

1. **Look for an ensemble style play.** This means there will hardly be a discernable lead character, but rather a group of characters share the spotlight more or less equally. This means all the actors need roughly the same amount of attention from the director.
2. **Structure your rehearsal time in rotations.** One group of kids might be working on rehearsing lines and blocking with the director while another group of kids may be working on props with a set designer or assistant director. Depending on how many children are in your show you may plan two or more rotations. Other rotation options include music and singing time, choreography time and even improv games.
3. **Plan rehearsals so that they run roughly the same every time you meet.** Children flourish in an environment where they know what to expect. Open and close rehearsal time the same way every time. Repeat an improv game from last time and introduce a new one. You will be doing yourself a huge favor if you provide structure for the kids.
4. **Avoid calling on only the forward kids for ideas, neither avoid them.** Just make sure to intentionally draw out the quieter kids as well. *Be careful not to allow them to be dominated by those more willing to speak up.*

But even if you dig up the perfect ensemble play, there will be times when the children will be required to simply sit still, be quiet and pay attention for a period of time. And I think that can be a very good thing, if it comes in small doses and is used as a teaching opportunity. What a great way to teach children to stop and listen to one another!

And to take turns. And to appreciate somebody else's talent. This time can be used to teach the kids to encourage and praise each other. It's a good thing to learn to look for something good in another human being when there's nothing in it for you. That is a skill that is sorely needed in the world.

The second challenge with directing children is the parents. Most parents are great to work with. Most are glad, grateful and proud for their children to have a chance to be in a play. They love inviting grandma and grandpa, aunt and uncle and other community members to the play and generally glow with joy and pride as their children perform.

However, there's rarely a time when you don't have at least one parent that is either neglectful, disgruntled or a stark raving stage mom. Listen, I've experienced my fair share of crazy when it comes to parents. I've had to go to the police station because a mother reported a boy in one of my camps for "spitting" at her daughter when he'd actually stuck his tongue out and blown a raspberry while in character, thinking it was something his character might do.

I've been reprimanded by a stage mother and told not to "put your hands on my child" after snatching the child out of harm's way. I've been told by a child that her mother said I needed to get her a different costume because hers was more ragged than the other children (she was playing a ragged street urchin). I've sat for an hour after rehearsal, waiting for a mother to show up to pick up her child.

Just remember, this comes with the territory. Ask anyone who works with kids. Teachers, dance instructors, sports coaches will all tell you parents can be a real pain in the neck. But don't let this be a deterrent if you really love and want to work with kids.

When dealing with difficult parents there are a few things to keep in mind. First, it is okay to set boundaries. You should establish them at the outset of your production then create a contract that both the child and the parent must sign. Make clear the consequences of breaching the contract and then enforce the consequences.

Key things to include in your contract with parents of child actors:

1. **Expectations about attendance.** Generally, 3 unexcused absences equal dismissal.
2. **Expectations about tardiness.** Depending on the length of your rehearsal schedule, perhaps 2 or 3 times tardy equal an absence. Know your show, know how much time you can afford to lose and set your own rules accordingly.
3. **Expectations about responsibilities.** Responsibilities include learning the material and participating to the best of one's ability. They may also include providing one's own costume and participating in making one's own props.
4. **Behavioral guidelines.** These guidelines should include expectations about listening to and following instructions, use of inappropriate language, consequences for negative words and any kind of bullying. Consequences can be things such as talking to the child's parents and possible dismissal from the show if the behavior is severe or continues without a serious attempt on the parent's and child's part to correct it.

Keep track of these things! You will quickly learn how frustrating it is to plan out a rehearsal based on expecting all your actors in attendance and then having to adjust because one or more of them is unexpectedly missing.

Remember, no matter how thoroughly you plan and thoughtfully you mitigate the potential trouble, someone will find a way around it and you will find yourself facing an unexpected situation. When this happens, think about your final goal and whether the steps you are taking will propel your production toward or away from that goal.

These things can be frustrating. Like me, you may have a strong urge to tell off nitpicky or neglectful parents, or throw up your hands and quit the whole thing. But neither of those things would really help accomplish the goal of helping the kids put on the very best show they can. And that, after all, is the goal, to see that these little actors get a chance to shine.

When you lay your head on your pillow at night, before you drift off to sleep, you can say "shove it" in your mind to the nitpicky, nasty, neglectful, unappreciative parents out there and then let them go because the little shiny, happy faces will come floating up to the top and they will be the ones that last.

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