

Unlocking the languages of autistic children in families

July 28 2016



Families play in the pod. Credit: University of Kent

Researchers at the University of Kent are arguing that creativity and intermedial languages can be used as a bridge to communicate with autistic children.

In a joint article, *Material voices: intermediality and [autism](#)* in the journal *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Dr Melissa Trimingham and Professor Nicola Shaughnessy of the University's School of Arts say autism continues to be regarded as a community that is difficult to access due to 'perceived disruptions of interpersonal connectedness'. Researchers engage the children in an all-surrounding drama experience using lights, sound, puppets and masked characters, where children are free to play and respond, drawing out eye contact, speech and shared play.

Their pioneering research using drama with autistic children started with an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project 'Imagining Autism: Drama, Performance and Intermediality as Interventions for Autistic Spectrum Conditions' (2011-2014) working in special schools and has now extended to working with families. The project aims to help the whole family through teaching them new play skills using drama and puppetry, multi-sensory materials and even comedy to help with challenging behaviour. The family programme developed from workshops with teachers and carers in NAS (National Autistic Society) schools and was funded by the University of Kent.

The writers are parents of autistic children themselves and have personal experience of family life with autism. Through detailed observations of two children, they demonstrate how 'intermediality' unlocked some of the many and various languages [autistic children](#) use, facilitating their self-awareness.

They argue for wider use of creative 'material' languages such as puppetry, costumes, projection, microphones, lights and sound in play as a bridge between the lived experience of autism and practices of education and care.

More information: Melissa Trimingham et al, *Material voices:*

intermediality and autism, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2016.1195121](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2016.1195121)

Provided by University of Kent

Citation: Unlocking the languages of autistic children in families (2016, July 28) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-07-languages-autistic-children-families.html>

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