

Supporting Engagement in Circus Arts for Children with Physical Disabilities

Emily Boeschoten, MOTS¹; Will Shaw, MOTS¹; Allison Tsai, MOTS¹, Cassidy Young, MOTS¹
Faculty Advisor: Rane Munaim, MS, OTR/L, CHT¹; Community Partner: Mercury Bergren²
¹University of Washington, Division of Occupational Therapy; ²School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts (SANCA)

Background

- Circus Arts encompasses a range of athletic and artistic disciplines, which allow people to engage in physical activity, artistic expression, and social interaction.
- School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts (SANCA) is one of the nation's largest circus schools. It is a nonprofit dedicated to enriching the community through access to circus classes and performances since 2004.
- SANCA's Every Body's Circus (EBC) Program is adapted for students with disabilities that provides a flexible, individualized approach to instruction that enable youth to develop physical and social skills.

Purpose

The purpose is to expand SANCA's EBC program, which currently serves neurodiverse youth to include those with physical disabilities (PD)/hemiparesis

Process



Needs Assessment

Methods

- Conducted a literature review
- Completed a total of four site visits, including two observations of the current EBC class, one observation of current program training, and one environmental assessment
- Interviewed two pediatric occupational therapists
- Observed current EBC program training
- Reviewed the intake process for three adaptive recreational programs

Identified Needs

- Programming that can be graded up and down for various levels of abilities
- A comprehensive intake process
- Staff training that includes technical skills and psychosocial support
- Environmental assessment

Intake Form Development

Developed a comprehensive intake form to identify the needs of each student

- Includes 5 sections: General, Medical, Mobility & Physical Support, Communication, and Behavioral Information
- Includes space for caregivers to add context on how to best support their children
- Addresses the need for medical clearance for safety and minimize liability
- Conducted an intake form review with 3 parents of children with PD
- Reviewed by a pediatric occupational therapist
- Available in digital format for accessibility

Program Development

- 6-week structured program targeting participation and motor skill development was developed
- Sessions include paired upper- and lower- extremity or balance and hand manipulation activities, with warm-up and cool-down
- 6 adapted circus activities with graded progression
- Low-cost adaptations using new and existing equipment
- Created a staff training video for program implementation and guidelines on working with youth with PD

Example 1: Graded Progression Chart for Trampoline Activity

Progression	Easiest					Hardest
	Laying Down	Sitting	Quadruped	Supported Standing	Standing Independently (slight bend to knees)	Jumping
Environmental supports	- Bolsters for support - Physical support from staff			- Grippy socks - Shoes - Rail - Harness - Physical support from staff	- Grippy socks - Shoes - Rail - Harness	

Example 2: Overview of Week 2 Schedule in the 6-week Program

Week 2	
Warm-up (5 minutes)	Warm-up of limbs and getting heart rates up (arm circles, therabands with arms and legs, core activation). Optional guided free-play of activities already introduced and/or the last activities introduced the week prior.
Tightwire (20 minutes)	Refer to progression/environmental support chart
Trapeze (20 minutes)	Refer to progression/environmental support chart
Cool-down (5 minutes)	Activities that involve regulation, slowing down, deep breathing

Example 3: Low-cost environmental adaptation



Photo Description: a cheese wedge mat (green) and panel mat (blue) were put together to create a ramp onto the aerial mat (black)

Program Recommendations

Safety Considerations

- Continuous staff supervision
- Monitoring fatigue with rest breaks as needed
- Individualized progression; unsupported performance not required

Environmental Support

- Assistive equipment
- Firm surface modification
- Ramps for elevated surfaces access

Conclusion

This project provides SANCA with a scalable, evidence-informed framework to safely include children with physical disabilities in circus arts, supporting participation, skill development, and inclusive community engagement.

Next Steps

- Program implementation
 - Recruitment of participants
- Evaluate program outcomes
- Expand environmental factors that influence participation and accessibility for youth with medically complex PD

QR Code for Program Design, Intake Form, & References

