COLUMBUS, OHIO – Researchers at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center’s Nisonger Center are trying to determine if teaching strategies based on Shakespeare texts can help children with autism become better communicators.

Children with autism often struggle to communicate. Many avoid eye contact, don’t understand the context of conversation and may miss visual cues from others around them.

But by allowing children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to study with Ohio State University student actors who are engaging students in Shakespeare-based activities, the hope is that they will improve their socializing and communicating skills, said Dr. Marc J. Tassé, director of the Nisonger Center and principal investigator on the waitlist control trial studying the unique intervention.

“In this intervention with middle school children with autism, we’re using Shakespeare’s play, The Tempest,” said Tassé, who is also a clinical psychologist. “It’s quite amazing to see how a Shakespeare play can be transformed into a therapeutic intervention that encourages students to express themselves and communicate.”

The research project is a collaborative effort with the Nisonger Center, the Ohio State University Department of Theatre, Columbus City Schools and the Ohio State University/Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) partnership.

The Nisonger Center is the only place in the United States testing this idea, said Tassé. The idea originated about 20 years ago in Great Britain with Kelly Hunter, an actress in the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, who developed the “Hunter Heartbeat Method.” Her signature approach pairs the recitation of Shakespeare’s rhythmic language with physical gesture.
Hunter reached out to Ohio State asking researchers here to develop the study protocol. Now, students in the Department of Theatre are teaming up with researchers at the Nisonger Center to try and figure out exactly what it is about Shakespeare that reaches these children with autism, when many other approaches may not.

“The distinctive methodology I have created uses Shakespeare to release the communicative blocks within children with autism,” says Hunter, who is visiting Columbus now and working with some of the children in the intervention sessions.

“Two major themes underpin the work: the rhythm of the iambic pentameter, which creates the sound of a heartbeat, within which the children feel safe to communicate,” says Hunter. “The second is an exploration of the mind’s eye, allowing children to explore imaginative worlds, which may otherwise be locked away.”

Hunter and Robin Post, faculty in Ohio State’s Department of Theatre and program director of the project, have trained a team of Ohio State graduate and undergraduate theatre students in the implementation of the Hunter Heartbeat Method. They are working closely with producer Lesley Ferris, also with Ohio State’s Department of Theatre.

“She has what we would call a lot of anecdotal evidence, but there hasn’t really been any empirical evidence,” said Tassé, who is working closely with Ohio State Psychology graduate student Margaret Mehling. “We are trying to figure out scientifically what exactly happens with Shakespeare that strikes a chord with these children.”

After a successful pilot program last year involving 14 children, Ohio State is now conducting a more scientific study involving children with autism who are enrolled in Columbus schools. One group will study Shakespeare while another group will not. That way, researchers can better isolate what it is, specifically, that’s helping these kids.

“With the first pilot study, we saw some significant improvement in communication, in social relationships and in pragmatic language skills,” said Tassé. “Things like eye contact, emotion expression, emotion recognition, and expressive communication also improved dramatically.”
The current 42-week study will involve 20 children with autism. By the end of the year, researchers hope to have some preliminary data on their approach, said Tassé.

“We can then compare if the gains that we see in the children who participate in the Shakespeare intervention are greater than the gains other children with autism are achieving through just regular school and just regular intervention,” said Tassé.

This project is funded by an Engagement Funding grant from The Ohio State University Office of Outreach and Engagement to support innovative, creative and scholarly outreach and engagement initiatives that partner the academic/research excellence of The Ohio State University with communities.

The Nisonger Center, a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, is part of The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and was founded in 1966 to provide assistance to people with disabilities, families, service providers and organizations by promoting inclusion of people with disabilities in education, health, employment and community settings.

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