



DISCUSSION GUIDE

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A LETTER FROM DIRECTOR SAMMI CANNOLD

When I was eight years old, my younger brother Noah received an autism diagnosis, and thereafter, no one we knew said the word “autism” around him. As is the case for so many autistic individuals, those close to Noah knew about his diagnosis, but I sensed a certain fear that saying or acknowledging “autism” would further differentiate my brother from his peers. So, while he saw specialist after specialist privately, when we were out in the world, the word “autism” and conversations around it felt off limits. And that wasn’t unique to my brother’s case; there were simply so many misconceptions about autism in the air in the early 2000s.

So, nearly 20 years later, when I heard about a new musical centering seven autistic young adults and their coming-of-age stories, I felt deeply drawn to such a piece of art that—following in the footsteps of the documentary by which it was inspired—might help to open doors on talking about what autism really is: an integral part of what makes my brother and other autistic individuals who they are versus something for them to be ashamed of.

As I began to work on Jacob Yandura and Rebekah Greer Melocik’s **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, I saw an opportunity to unpack and understand real life through storytelling. As a result, I found myself having the conversations we never dared to have 20 years ago, understanding that autism isn’t something to avoid talking about. Rather, this discourse, and centering autistic voices in it, is how we understand it. And while we still have so far to go (for example, it’s still [legal to pay disabled workers below minimum wage](#) in this country), my hope is that using art to shine a spotlight on necessary change can help. I’m deeply grateful to my collaborators—my autistic collaborators most of all—for creating a piece that fosters that conversation. And it is my aim that **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** will help foster this conversation for you and your community, whether you are currently personally connected to autism or not.

Through a partnership with CO/LAB Theater Group and thanks to the guidance of our Autistic Creative Consultant Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt and Director of Community Engagement Becky Leifman alongside our show’s Access Team, we’ve been fortunate to have the opportunity to reexamine our practices both in how we make art and how we make more intentionally inclusive, welcoming, and compassionate workplaces. As Ava often says, “It’s not just being invited to the party; it’s being asked to dance.” And while this exploration was motivated by a desire to make our workplace the best that it could be for our 12 autistic cast members as well as our autistic staff members, it turned into something bigger than that. It turned into a lesson in how we can all benefit from making our spaces more inclusive, open, and compassionate—not just for autistic individuals, but for everyone. I’m excited to continue learning and developing this aspect of our work as we tell this story.

While there are so many individuals who have been part of telling that story over the years, I would be remiss if I didn’t take a moment to acknowledge—singularly—the legendary Hal Prince who was the piece’s original director prior to his passing in July of 2019. His impact on the creation of this show was immense, but moreover, his impact on the American theater was indelible. I never had the privilege of talking to Hal directly about this piece, but I know that this subject matter was deeply important to him and that he saw this work as both a piece of theater and a piece of activism—and that’s what it’s all about for me.

Sammi Cannold, Director
HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO: The Musical
2023



SYNOPSIS

Based on Alexandra Shiva's Peabody Award-winning HBO documentary, **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** is a heart-filled new musical exploring the need to connect and the courage it takes to step out into the world.

At a group counseling center in Columbus, Ohio, seven autistic young adults prepare for a spring formal dance—a rite of passage that breaks open their routines and sets off new and surprising encounters with love, stress, excitement, and independence.

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO is a story about people on the cusp of the next phase of their lives, facing their hopes and fears, ready to make a very big first move...and dance.



MAKING THE MUSICAL



THE CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM

The cast of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** features both autistic and non-autistic actors, Broadway vets, and rising stars. Because the cast includes actors who self-identify as autistic, neurodivergent, and neurotypical, we describe our cast as neurodiverse—that is, including all kinds of brains! (More on these terms in the Glossary.) The autistic characters and understudies are cast authentically—meaning if they are playing an autistic character, they identify as autistic as well.

The cast and creative team is fortunate to have many autistic collaborators, both onstage and behind the scenes. Approximately 35% of our company self-identifies as neurodivergent. Early in the production's creative process, an Autistic Creative Consultant also joined the team to provide feedback on the script and character development. The production's Associate Producer identifies as autistic, as do the Casting Director, Assistant Music Director/Script Consultant, SCDF Directing Fellow, Production Assistant, Script Assistant, Graphic Designer, and many other team members. The production has also collaborated with CO/LAB Theater Group, a nonprofit that offers individuals with developmental disabilities a creative and social outlet through theater arts. CO/LAB helped the team to learn about and curate insights about developmental disabilities through their "Sharing the Stage" workshop, which is led by neurodiverse facilitators and offered regularly to everyone involved in the show. Efforts are underway to make "Sharing The Stage" available to ticket buyers as well.

THE ACCESS TEAM

The Access Team at **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** has one overarching goal: *to provide essential support for and expertise on all aspects of the production.* They work across teams, including producing, production, music, book and lyrics, design, and crew—and aspire to keep access in mind at each step of the production process.

The Access Team serves as a unified force to present proposals about accessibility to the production's management team. In turn, these ideas are integrated into the casts' experience of performing the show, and the audience's experience of seeing it, for example, developing a sensory-friendly advisory list and a Kulture City Social Story for the Belasco Theatre.

Internally, the team reviews and addresses immediate and long-term accessibility concerns, discussing these with the appropriate teams and developing a solution together.

WHO WE ARE:

- » Nicole D'Angelo (they/she), Assistant Music Director/Script Consultant
- » Becky Leifman (she/her), Director of Community Engagement
- » Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt (she/her), Autistic Creative Consultant
- » Liz Weber (they/them), Production Assistant
- » Jeremy Wein (he/him), Associate Producer

Four of our members (Nicole, Ava, Liz, and Jeremy) are autistic with various advocacy backgrounds, and Becky has many years of experience creating neurodiverse spaces and working with neurodiverse/disabled artists.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

ABOUT THE FILM

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO: *The Musical* is based on Alexandra Shiva's Peabody Award-winning documentary film of the same name, about the real experiences of autistic young adults. In the film, set in Columbus, Ohio, a group of young people with an array of developmental disabilities prepares for a rite of passage—a spring formal dance. They spend 12 weeks confronting their fears and practicing their social skills as they prepare for the big event. Working with their trusted psychologist, the Center's founder Dr. Emilio Amigo, they embrace their excitement and deconstruct social anxiety one step at a time, by picking dates, dresses and, ultimately, a King and Queen of the Prom.

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO is a story of the universal human need to grow, connect and belong.

In the documentary, we get to know three young women as they transition into adulthood. The film takes us inside their group therapy sessions, their relationships with their families, and their private thoughts, as they learn to understand and navigate the unspoken social rules that surround the suspenseful and heightened experience of a first date. Through their stories, and a chorus of other young adults confronting similar issues, these moments reveal the hard work, perseverance, and resilience it takes to be a part of contemporary society, along with the extraordinary challenges of social stigmas around disability. Like the musical, the film is entertaining, funny, and thought-provoking, and it challenges us to question and celebrate the path to human connection.



HOW TO WATCH THE FILM

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO first broadcast on HBO in 2015. It is now available for streaming at home on [MAX](#), with a platform subscription, or via [Kino Now](#), as a single rental or purchase. The film can also be watched at home on DVD, which can be ordered via [Kino Lorber](#) or [Amazon](#). You might even be able to find it at your local library!

Educators wishing to show **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** in their classrooms, or to acquire the film for a school, public, or university library, may also purchase the educational rights to the film via [Kino Lorber Educational](#).

max

KINO NOW

KINO LORBER

amazon

howtodanceinohio.com



WHAT IS AUTISM?



**“Autism is a
DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY
that affects how we
EXPERIENCE THE WORLD
around us.”**

According to the article “About Autism,” published by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, “Autism is a developmental disability that affects how we experience the world around us.” It goes on to say, “Every autistic person experiences autism differently, but there are some things that many of us have in common,” such as:

- » **We think differently**
- » **We process our senses, and the world around us, differently**
- » **We move differently**
- » **We communicate differently**
- » **We might need help with aspects of daily living (that non-autistic people might not need help with)**

Autism is often considered a “non-visible disability,” meaning it may not be apparent from looking or talking to a person that they are disabled. (An apparent disability might be muscular dystrophy, in which the individual is a wheelchair user.)

We use the term “autism” to acknowledge the authenticity of people’s experiences and because it is an intrinsic part of their identities. We avoid euphemisms that could imply a desire to not say “disability” and, thus, create a negative stigma (for example, “differently abled” or “special needs”). Furthermore, we recognize that disabled and autistic communities do not exist in a silo. Their intersection with other identity markers—including race, gender, and sexual orientation—are essential to acknowledge and explore.

You might notice that in this guide, and other materials about **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, we do not use the word “disorder.” This word sits uncomfortably with many autistic individuals. (The acronym ASD does indicate “disorder; however. That is what the “D” stands for.) Rather, we understand autism as an identity—one that contributes to being a unique individual in the world.

We have also received feedback that the word “spectrum” can be offensive to some, even though it’s a word commonly used to describe autism. Some feel that the word “spectrum” implies that autism is a range from low to high or a lot to a little—and autism isn’t like that! (More on this in our glossary and resource pages.) The terms high and low functioning are similarly misguided, as they can imply that autism is on a linear scale, with the autistic person’s “functioning” being measured in terms of its proximity to being neurotypical. Rather than relying on these terms, we think of all individuals, including autistic individuals, as having different needs at any given time, on any given day. In other words, autism is a dynamic identity, as opposed to a fixed trait.

That said, we do sometimes reference the word “spectrum” here and in other materials about the musical. This usage reflects our understanding that the term represents the vastness of autism and autistic people and is a term embraced by some in our self-identifying autistic community in the production.

Finally, we note that individuals using this guide may or may not identify with language that we reference here or in other materials related to the musical. That’s okay! We respect every individual’s personal preferences for how they name and describe themselves, both individually and with others.

AUTISM TERMS AND LANGUAGE: A GLOSSARY

The terms below are some of the words that are used in the musical or that are useful and descriptive words to understand when you’re learning about and talking about autism, neurodivergence, and disability.

One of the lessons we’ve learned in making **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** is how much language matters. Words can create shared verbal connections among autistic and non-autistic people. They can assist autistic people as they self-identify and self-describe themselves to others. They can also help non-autistic people understand the preferred terms and language autistic people use. And they can offer a common vocabulary to talk about complex and nuanced topics.

That said, words and language can also be hurtful, divisive, or insensitive. What feels appropriate and useful to one individual may feel offensive or problematic to another. And what’s more, language is ever evolving! Terms used to describe autism 20, 10, or even five years ago can vary widely from terms used today. If these words or terms are completely new to you, that’s okay! Embrace it. (Some of these terms aren’t even in most dictionaries!)

As we consider the language and vocabulary of autism—and of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**—we think it’s okay to continually ask ourselves whether the words or language we’re using feels right to the people we’re speaking with and about. Our team strives to be curious about why a certain term or word may or may not feel right to everyone. And we encourage everyone to use language that feels inclusive and respectful. In that spirit, the below glossary is here to provide a basic primer on terms and concepts identified in the musical. Even as we offer the glossary as a starting place, we also note that the language we use today—and how we use it—is likely to shift.

**“Words can create
A SHARED
VERBAL
CONNECTION
among autistic
and non-autistic
people.”**

ABLEISM

Ableism is the societal, interpersonal, and institutional discrimination against people with cognitive, physical, developmental, visible, or non-visible disabilities. It intersects with and is discussed alongside other negative -isms such as racism, ageism, and sexism. [RespectAbility](#), a disability advocacy nonprofit, defines it as “the belief that people who have disabilities are somehow less human, less valuable, and less capable than others.” Another working definition can be found on [Talila A. Lewis’s blog](#), which states that ableism is “a system of assigning value to people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness.” The definition goes on to highlight the intersections of other fear-based and socially constructed forms of discrimination.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility refers to the extent to which activities, information, environments, architecture, technology, relationships, and other resources are available to, usable by, and meaningful for people seeking to access them. For example, in the built environment, accessibility might mean parking spaces that are close to building entrances, which supports access for children, or physically disabled, and elderly people. In the realm of information, accessibility might be sign language interpretation, Braille signage, or high-contrast document formatting, each of which makes written, spoken, and digital materials as accessible as possible for the widest population. In meetings or at group gatherings, accessibility might mean using and sticking to clear agendas; offering ear plugs in noisy or busy environments; or building in breaks so that folks can have time to process a lot of information.

ACCESS NEEDS

According to the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, “an access need is something a person needs to communicate, learn and take part in an activity.” For example, a wheelchair user may need a ramp or an elevator to access a building, and a Deaf person may need closed-captions or ASL to watch a film. Sometimes a group of people accessing the same activity may have conflicting access needs, for example if one person with low vision needs bright lights to be able to read a document, and another individual needs low light to support light sensitivity.

In these cases, a range of accommodations and options for access can be offered to create the best possible access for the most people.

AUTISM SPECTRUM / AUTISM

The terms autism and autism spectrum are all used to describe a developmental disability that affects how a person learns, thinks, problem-solves, communicates, and interacts in social settings. As the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network notes, “There is no one way to be autistic. Some autistic people can speak, and some autistic people need to communicate in other ways. Some autistic people also have intellectual disabilities, and some autistic people don’t. Some autistic people need a lot of help in their day-to-day lives, and some autistic people only need a little help. All of these people are autistic, because there is no right or wrong way to be autistic. All of us experience autism differently, but we all contribute to the world in meaningful ways.” The “spectrum” part of the term ASD refers to this same idea: that each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges. There is no monolithic presentation of autism, and the ways in which autistic people communicate, think and learn range from person to person.

THE CURB CUT EFFECT

The Curb Cut Effect refers to the fact that when you design environments, materials, and activities for people with disabilities, you make things better for everyone in the process. This is also known as [Universal Design](#). For example, a curb-cut in the sidewalk allows wheelchair users to access the street, but it also makes accessing the street easier, safer, and more convenient for a parent pushing a child in a stroller, an elder using a hand cart to haul groceries, a delivery person carrying boxes, a traveler with luggage, or a teenager on a skateboard. As the racial and economic equity research group PolicyLink puts it, “The Curb-Cut Effect, in its essence, asserts that an investment in one group can cascade out and up and be a substantial investment in the broader well-being of a nation.”

DISABILITY

A disability is any condition that can affect a person’s movement, thinking, learning, communication, seeing, hearing, social relationships, or other aspects of life. Disabled people are often spoken of as belonging to one big group, but disabilities can

vary widely from one to another. Some disabled individuals may have more than one disability, and two people with the same disability may experience that disability—and be experienced by others—in very different ways. Moreover, how we think about disability can depend on the “model” we see it through. There are two main ones: medical and social.

- » In the **medical model of disability**, such as that offered by organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a disability is described in terms of impairment or difference, as in “any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them.” In this model, there’s often a focus on what’s “wrong” with a person that needs fixing or changing.
- » In the **Social Model of disability**—conceived of and embraced by many disabled people—disability is emphasized as limitations of society, whose structures, systems, laws, and rules often exclude or limit disabled people. In this model, the focus is on how societal barriers and limitations can be fixed or changed so that a disabled person’s needs are met.

As noted, disability is also intersectional, crossing boundaries of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. And it’s the only community that anyone can join at any time.

APPARENT AND UNAPPARENT DISABILITY

Apparent disabilities are visually discernible to others while unapparent disabilities are not. Apparent disabilities include those that affect how a person moves or how their body looks. According to the article, “Non-Apparent Disabilities: When Your Disability is Not Visible,” written for the World Institute on Disability, “the majority of disabilities are non-apparent...yet non-apparent disability is a concept unfamiliar to much of the nondisabled population. Consequently, people with non-apparent disabilities face discrimination just as those who are visibly disabled do.” Some common non-apparent disabilities include autism, anxiety, diabetes, dyslexia, epilepsy, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and traumatic brain injury.

IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE / PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

Identify-first language refers to language that mentions the identity of a person first, such as “Black person,” “queer person,” or “disabled person.” Person-first language flips the wording, emphasizing the person part first, such as “people with disabilities” or “person with diabetes.” Generally, autistic people prefer identity-first language (“autistic person,” rather than “person with autism”). The autistic community sees autism as an intrinsic part of their identity: you can’t separate an autistic person from autism. Because of this, identity-first language is what we prefer at **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**. Some people prefer person-first language, however, or use different kinds of language in different settings. When in doubt, ask!!

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality refers to the complex and cumulative ways that different forms of discrimination combine and overlap. It can apply to many circumstances, but it’s a particularly useful term to understand the experiences of marginalized people or groups. For example, an autistic, Latinx, cisgender woman may experience intersecting instances of discrimination based on her disability, ethnic heritage, and gender identification. While the term is a bit academic and technical, it also conveys an important idea: that different forms of identity overlap, and that marginalization, oppression, or discrimination of people with those identities can overlap, too.

NEUROTYPICAL

Neurotypical refers to individuals who have brains that function in a similar way to most of their peers (sometimes called “typically developing” peers). They develop skills, like speaking, organizing, taking care of themselves, or making social connections at about the same time—and in about the same ways—as other people their age. Often, neurotypical people are described in opposition to autistic people, but neurotypical does not only mean an individual is non-autistic. It may also refer to people who don’t have other neurological differences, like dyslexia or ADHD. Because neurotypical people are the majority, and see themselves as similar to many of their peers, they sometimes believe their way of experiencing the world is the only way—or the right way.

NEURODIVERGENT

According to the Cleveland Clinic, neurodivergent “describes people whose brain differences affect how their brain works.” A neurodivergent person may have a medical condition, a learning difference/disability, mental illness, or a developmental disability like autism. Some people have “acquired neurodivergence,” which means their neurodivergence came after an injury or trauma and might change over time. Many neurodivergent people have brain differences that offer strengths neurotypical people don’t have. These can include strengths in memory, mathematical calculations, spatial relationships, focus, attention to detail, and many more. While often used interchangeably with “neurodiverse” in casual conversation, “neurodivergent” refers to an individual brain/person, while “neurodiverse” describes a group of people who may have a range of brain differences.

NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity is the concept that brain differences are not deficits or disorders, but one of many kinds of variations among people. Like the word “diverse,” neurodiverse is a term applied to a group of people, not an individual. It conveys the idea that there are lots of brains out there, and that a group of neurodiverse people will include some people who are neurotypical and some who are neurodivergent. It can also include many kinds of neurodivergence within one group or space. At **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, our cast and creative team is neurodiverse because we include individuals who identify as autistic, neurodivergent, and neurotypical.

ON THE SPECTRUM

Being “on the spectrum” is an expression some use to describe being autistic; the phrase derives from the term “autism spectrum disorder.” The word spectrum is helpful and meaningful to some people, because it can get at the concept that every autistic individual experiences autism differently, like the unique colors in a rainbow, each with its distinct wavelength. (Or like the pie chart concept in [this sketch](#)!). Others find the word offensive, because it implies that autism is on a linear scale, with some people being “more autistic” than others, which is not how autism actually works. As the show says: “if you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.”

SELF-ADVOCACY

Self-advocacy means being able to communicate one’s own needs and act in one’s own best interests. For autistic people, self-advocacy is a skill and a strategy. It can include building the confidence necessary to articulate access needs. It can also describe the use of tools that make learning, communicating, and participating in activities more accessible and meaningful. According to the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), “Self-advocacy means taking control of our own lives. That can mean making choices about how we live our lives, like choosing what we do at home, at school, at work, or in our relationships. It can also mean working as a community to take control over how society views disabled people, how the media talks about us, and policies that affect our lives.”

SENSORY FRIENDLY

A sensory-friendly event, environment, or activity is designed to be less stimulating to the senses. Sensory-friendly spaces are supportive for people with sensory sensitivities and sensory processing differences. When events are sensory friendly, they can be more welcoming, inclusive, accessible, and enjoyable for autistic people. (Some people with autism have sensory sensitivities, but not all do.)

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO has been carefully developed by the production and creative team to consider the sensory experience in a theater. For example, there are no loud, sudden sounds or strobes. We also provide information about the theater experience in advance, and we have sensory tool kits, cool-down spaces, and a sensory advisory guide, all so that audience members know what to expect when they arrive. That said, no show can meet 100 percent of its audience’s sensory needs. Our team is working diligently to incorporate various features, to have one-off sensory-friendly performances with our partners at Theater Development Fund, and to maintain these offerings as needed.

TALKING ABOUT AUTISM AND DISABILITY

For many non-autistic people, talking about autism and disability feels unfamiliar. It may even feel uncomfortable or taboo! Neurotypical people may feel they don't understand autism, and they may be fearful about broaching it in a way that could show ignorance. They may also feel cautious about inadvertently hurting or offending an autistic person by saying the wrong thing or using the wrong language. These feelings sometimes mean non-autistic people don't talk (or proactively think) about autism at all.

During the making of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, we collaborated with CO/LAB Theater Group to learn about developmental disabilities through their Sharing the Stage workshop, which is led by neurodiverse facilitators. The workshop helps individuals and organizations build teams that are inclusive, collaborative, and welcoming to all people, including autistic and neurotypical people. In the workshop, the team at **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** took away several strategies that each of us can try out individually—and that groups and institutions can adopt—as we strive to learn about, talk about, and improve our understanding and practices around autism and disability.

Try some of these out for yourself!

TALKING ABOUT AUTISM AND DISABILITY

The concept of “presuming competence” comes from decades-old research about making education and classrooms more inclusive. The idea is that when we’re encountering neurodivergent or disabled people, we can begin by believing and accepting that the person we’re meeting is competent. In other words, unless or until we learn otherwise, we trust that the person is able to think, learn, understand, make choices, and contribute to professional, political, social, and economic life.

Many autistic people find that non-autistic people come with preconceived ideas about what autism is or isn't. If you're a non-autistic or neurotypical person who's talking about autism, presuming competence means you start from a place of understanding autism as a brain difference—neurodivergence—as opposed to a limitation or weakness. You avoid reductive, inaccurate, and outdated ways of thinking about autism, like “low-functioning” or “high-functioning, which may cause you to make assumptions about a person's ability to think, learn, and understand. You accept that an autistic person may not communicate, socially interact, or respond to sensory information the same way that you do and further understand that this does not make them less capable to communicate, socially interact, or respond to sensory information. You see how these differences do not mean that autistic people can't understand you or don't have something to contribute.

In addition, sometimes presuming competence means readjusting your assumptions, or not assuming anything at all! It means that we neither assume that everyone with

**“The concept of
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autism is the same, nor do we assume that neurological differences are problems. We don't assume that being disabled means needing help, or that disability has the same impact on everyone. We understand that how a person looks, moves, talks, or experiences the world may not reflect the fullness of their abilities or contributions. Really...we don't assume anything at all and we check our biases! Our focus, instead, is on the individual autistic or disabled person's experience, as that person experiences and communicates it.

USE COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVELY

When working with and/or interacting with autistic and/or individuals with developmental disabilities, it is important to use direct and clear communication. Here are some ways to do that:

Be aware of processing time

Be patient when waiting for answers, verbal or physical. As a general rule of thumb, giving a 7-10 second wait time after questions is appropriate to process and form a response. If a new question is asked during that time, it resets the clock.

*Sometimes, autistic people may not give the typical conversation verbal/non-verbal cues that they heard or understood the question. As said above, presume competence and be patient!

Provide options for communication

Utilizing different lines of inquiry could be effective and helpful for folks who need various kinds of communications. Consider offering options (a or b), or accepting verbal or non-verbal (physical, objects, written, texted, etc) answers.

Give direct and clear instructions

Give explicit prompts and only one at a time. Avoid a long list of instructions at once, especially when they are not related to one another. If you need to give multiple instructions, an accompanying visual cue (like a written agenda) and numbers associated with instructions is helpful.

Speak like yourself

Intonation, volume, and tone should be the same when speaking to people with disabilities. Non-disabled adults often view developmentally disabled adults as children. Some might use a "kid voice" when speaking to someone with a disability, assuming they don't understand speech or need to be spoken to like a child. This is unnecessary, and frankly, rude.

BE CURIOUS AND OPEN

The idea of being curious and open means we approach conversations about disability and neurodivergence with an authentic desire to understand and connect with others. Coming to a conversation about autism with an open heart and mind, especially if you're neurotypical, can look a lot of different ways. A few conversation practices include:

- » **prioritizing an autistic individual's self-advocacy over any non-autistic person's assumptions**
- » **being genuinely interested in an individual autistic person's experience**
- » **using the language the autistic person prefers**
- » **letting the autistic person decide whether they want to talk about autism—or not**
- » **listening more (and talking less)**
- » **focusing on an individual's specific, stated needs rather than on general labels**
- » **taking responsibility if we make a mistake in how we interact or communicate**

When non-autistic people approach conversations about autism and disability with curiosity, they should also bring a spirit of inquisitiveness and interest to the dialogue. Bringing curiosity to a conversation about autism or disability means coming with a willingness to be surprised and to learn. We take the possibility of making a mistake—really the inevitability of making mistakes—and make that prospect less scary and less high-stakes by assuming from the get go that we don't know everything. We understand that if we're curious, we will emerge from the conversation with more information than we started with. We consider the possibility that the conversation may not even go how we expect: it might be funny or playful instead of serious, or intriguing rather than intimidating.

In the field of anti-racist learning, this curiosity-based approach to conversation is sometimes called “failing fast” or “failing forward.” It's the idea that we can come to new conversations with the expectation that we'll get some things wrong, and the willingness to “get it wrong until we get it right.” When speaking about autism, the “failing forward” practice can decenter a non-autistic person's discomfort and recenter a common goal of understanding, connecting with others, and learning.



THEMES

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO focuses on the intersecting stories of seven autistic young adults, using their coming-of-age experiences as a window into connection, courage, identity, family, and love. If you're facilitating a conversation about the musical in a classroom, a small group, or among your family and friends, you're likely to talk about autism, disability, and neurodivergence. You may also want to explore some of the themes on the following pages.



COMING OF AGE

HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO dramatizes a familiar tradition for many young Americans: the formal dance. For many, the high school “prom,” “formal,” or “homecoming” dance is hosted by a school or community group and is a coming-of-age ritual that marks a transition from childhood to adulthood. Across the country, teenagers and young adults attending formal dances do the same activities: pick out fancy outfits; choose or accept dates for the dance; pin boutonnieres to their lapels; dance with their partners; socialize, snack and sip drinks; and experience the emotional ups and downs of planning for, shopping for, attending, and decompressing from a big, noisy, social event.

Fun Fact: In the show, Marideth, who loves facts, points out that formal dances have historical roots in preparing young women for marriage, and this history is steeped in outdated and exclusionary roles regarding marriage, gender, and race.

Almost everyone—across the full range of neurodiversity—experiences these dances as a rite of passage. A lot of people find these dances awkward, overwhelming, or stressful. The event itself can be a big deal—so much planning and anticipation! But beyond the dance, participating in a community—and culturally supported activity is also a milestone, in which young people begin to make decisions about how they'll present themselves, how they'll communicate, how they'll travel, and who they'll spend time with—independent of their parents or other elders.

In **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, we also see the musical's protagonists do other coming-of-age activities. Caroline takes public transportation alone and begins her first year of college. Mel aspires to a promotion at work. Drew applies to college. Tommy tries for his driver's license. Jessica navigates the bureaucracy of government-subsidized transport. Marideth makes new friends. Moments of growth into adult life like these can be challenging and overwhelming for lots of people—not only autistic people. But they can also be energizing, thrilling, comforting, and freeing.

Some questions for reflection:

- » As you reflect on the storyline and protagonists in the musical, were you reminded of your own rite of passage?
- » If you had to write a play about your coming of age, what moment(s) would you choose to highlight?
- » What emotions came up for you?
- » What would be your theme song?
- » What parts of the story did you see in your own experience—or the experiences of those close to you?

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

In **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, we see how hard it can be to talk about disability, growing up, seeking independence, and asking for support, among other challenging topics. Sometimes these conversations can be especially difficult when we have them with the people we love and care about the most—because our feelings about these people are so important, and we don’t want to offend or hurt them.

Throughout the musical, we see and hear lots of different kinds of fraught and tense conversations. Some are short comments made in passing, and some are long and purposeful discussions. Some relate specifically to an autistic person’s experience, like Jessica’s remark to Terry that living with her mother is “no longer cute,” or Mel’s conversation with their employer about how to show good work etiquette. Some are conversations almost everyone grapples with at some point in their lives. For example, Drew confronts Dr. Amigo about his phone call to the University of Michigan admissions department, as he has already told Dr. Amigo that he doesn’t wish to attend that school. And when Dr. Amigo meets with reporters, he shares some personal and complicated history: that he became a doctor in part to fulfill a dream of his dad, who was forced to give up his role as a doctor when he emigrated to Ohio from Cuba.

Some questions for reflection:

- » What difficult conversations have you had to have in your family or with peers, employers, or teachers?
- » What made them difficult?
- » What tools did you use to make them easier?
- » Did you notice any useful tactics for getting through difficult or awkward conversations being used in the production (think: using humor, approaching the conversation with empathy, deploying curiosity)?

PARENTING

The storyline we see unfold in **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** centers around the experiences of young autistic people. But we also encounter a lot of parents—and a lot of parent-child interactions, and relationship-building.

Some of the characters are the parents of autistic young adults, and we see them supporting their kids through the passage to adulthood. The relationship between Dr. Amigo and his neurotypical daughter Ashley is highlighted in certain scenes. We see these two characters juggle the stress of Ashley’s injury, her professional collaboration with Dr. Amigo at the Center, and an evolving relationship between father and adult daughter. In fact, while Dr. Amigo is a therapist specializing in autism and his daughter is non-autistic, we see that their challenges and joys parallel many of the experiences of the autistic characters and their parents.

Some questions for reflection:


- » What aspects of the parent-child relationship do you think are universal, regardless of autism or disability?
- » What parts are different when a child is autistic?
- » How does being autistic shape or change the way a young adult individuates—or separates—from his/her/their parents as they grow older?
- » What are the common tensions that all parents experience as their kids prepare for adult life?




HOW TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC PEOPLE IF YOU'RE NOT AUTISTIC

One question that neurotypical people often ask is how they can support autistic people, even when they don't have the lived experience of being autistic, or any expertise in autism, neurodivergence, or disability. The good news is: there are a lot of ways!

Here are a few ideas for supporting autistic people after you've watched **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**:


 **Share the information you've learned** or know about autism or about the show. Even if they're not in a place where they can see the show in person, friends and family can:

- » Poke around the production's [website](#)
- » Watch clips on our [YouTube channel](#)
- » Peruse [resources](#) we love
- » Listen to [songs from the musical](#)
- » Watch the [More To Talk About](#) series

 **Avoid making or repeating generalizations** about autistic people. When you meet someone who's autistic, be open and curious about their:

- » Particular experiences
- » Access needs
- » Interests, likes and dislikes

Basically, invite yourself to learn the same things about an autistic person you would be curious to learn about any other person you meet!

 **Remember** that a person's self-advocacy—how they communicate their own needs and desires—holds more weight than any assumption you may have about autism or autistic people. Self-advocacy for autistic people can look or sound like:

- » Disclosing they have autism
- » Asking for support
- » Describing challenges
- » Not asking for support
- » Describing strengths
- » Participating in decision making
- » Sharing likes and dislikes
- » Participating in conversations


You can read more about self-advocacy in this Autistic Self Advocacy Network [article](#); there are additional resources on that site, too.



 **Empower yourself** to respectfully correct others when they:


- » Repeat misconceptions about autism
- » Use poor language or outdated terms
- » Perpetuate misinformation about autism

When you do correct others, always refer to an autistic and/or disabled scholar, expert or source for further learning and context.

 **Explore resources created by autistic people.** These are abundant and diverse! Sources of information about autism and neurodivergence that are created by autistic and neurodivergent people include articles, podcasts, blogs, social media, how-to guides, books, illustrations, and cartoons. A few fun and interesting places to start your journey—all created by autistic or neurodivergent people—are:

- » [@Autism_Sketches](#) (instagram account)
- » [@neurodivergent_lou](#) (instagram account)
- » [StimPunks](#) (blog)
- » [1800 Seconds on Autism](#) (podcast)
- » [Understanding the Spectrum](#) (comic strip)
- » [Clearing Up Some Misconceptions About Neurodiversity](#) (article)

You'll find that in many resources created by autistic people, audiences are offered multiple ways to take in the information. For example, a written piece might include an “ear listening” option (for those who prefer to listen rather than read). An oral piece might include a transcript (for those who want to read rather than, or alongside, listening). A dense document might be accompanied by a “plain language” option (for those who find plain language more useful). These options are all examples of accessibility—which everyone benefits from.

 **Model the three strategies** we explain in the section “Talking About Autism and Disability.” By adopting these, you'll create an environment in which others are supported in doing the same. As a reminder, those practices are:

- » Presume competence
- » Use communication effectively
- » Be curious and open








CONVERSATION STARTERS



After experiencing **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, you may want to lead or facilitate a conversation in your family, with a local support group, for your classroom, or in a group of friends.

The prompts below are divided into categories based on who might be participating in your conversation. That said, if you read the full list of prompts, you may find prompts you like from any category. For example, there are some questions written with classrooms in mind that might be useful in a family setting, or there might be questions intended for general audiences that also work for teachers. Above all, note that these prompts are just that: starting points for discussion. All are aimed at assisting and encouraging audiences as they process the musical and share their thoughts and feelings with others. After reading the below, you may wish to generate your own prompts, too.

5 DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES

-  Did you come to the experience of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** with any assumptions or expectations about autism? If so, what were they? Did your experience of the musical shift any of those assumptions or expectations? In what ways?
-  At the beginning of the performance, we hear that “if you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve met one autistic person.” What do you think this means? How did the musical illustrate this way of understanding autism?
-  Which of the musical’s characters was most compelling to you? Why? Did you see yourself or someone you know or love in that character?
-  What elements of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** were different from other musicals or productions you’ve seen about autism or disability? Was the live experience different from other live productions you’ve attended? In what ways?
-  The cast and creative team of the musical is neurodiverse. How do you think having a neurodiverse team behind a production shapes its creation?

5 DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR SCHOOL GROUPS AND CLASSROOMS



In **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**, the autistic characters participate in group sessions at Dr. Amigo's center, in which they talk, share about themselves, set goals, and practice navigating social situations. Which of these activities are awkward, uncomfortable, or difficult for you? Which are easy or enjoyable? Did you relate to any of the characters as they worked at these activities? (Think about being hesitant to dance in front of others or loving to talk about dragons!)



School or formal dances are a common tradition in a lot of middle schools and high schools. Have you ever been to one? What was it like? If you have attended a dance before, did you feel like you were prepared for what would happen? If you've never attended, do you feel you know what to expect? How would knowing what might happen help you navigate the experience? How comfortable would you feel with being surprised?



Lots of the scenes in **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** illustrate moments when parents and children adjust to the child's growing independence. Dr. Amigo sings, "We shelter our children because we care, but how long can childhood last?" Did any of the musical's parent-child moments resonate with you? Which ones? Do (or did) you ever wish you had more independence from your parents? Do (or did) you ever wish you had less?



Throughout **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** we see characters negotiate the ups and downs of friendship. When have you had hard moments with your friends? Did you talk to someone about those moments? How did they get resolved?



Think about later in the production, when the newspaper article about Dr. Amigo and the dance comes out. The article says Dr. Amigo is being "poetic" when he calls the young people in his group "terminally human." It also calls him "generous," and refers to the autistic protagonists as "brave," "differently abled," and having "special needs." Do you think the newspaper reporter understood Dr. Amigo's message or the work he does with autistic people? What did the reporter get wrong? What did Dr. Amigo get wrong? Why is Remy upset by the article? Why do you think Remy says "the whole conversation needs a huge overhaul?"

Note: The above questions are aimed at students in grades 5-12 and are written in a straightforward style that's intended to be accessible across many grade levels and ages. In the spirit of "presuming competence," the questions are written for neurodiverse audiences who we think will have varied thoughts and opinions about the musical!

That said, depending on the students in your discussion, educators and facilitators may wish to adjust—or pick and choose—the questions to better adapt to the particular ages and interests represented in your group. If you're facilitating this conversation with students, we encourage you to first discuss the "How To Talk About Autism and Disability" section of this guide.



5 DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR CLASSROOMS WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN



How do the characters in **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** describe autism? What are some of the words they use to convey their experiences? What are some of the feelings they share? If you're autistic and want to share, do any of these words feel meaningful to you? Do any reflect your own experiences or feelings? Do any not reflect your experiences or feelings? Why or why not?

- » **One-Word Answers:** What is one word to describe autism that you heard shared in the musical? What is one word you'd use to describe autism?
- » **Physicalize:**
 - » If you are autistic, show me how you feel about that in your body. Are you proud? Happy? Scared? (You can be all these things! Show a few!)
 - » If you are not autistic, show me what support looks like in your body. Are you giving something? Listening? Sharing? All of the above?



When the original concept for the Amigo dance fails, and Drew suggests starting over with a new dance, he identifies some ideas that would make the experience more supportive for the attendees. What are some of these ideas? Why does he think they'll be helpful? (Think: using a familiar space, using a familiar DJ, catering favorite foods, using smart lights, putting an autistic person in charge.)

- » **One-Word Answers:** What is one thing you saw at the center when they were setting up a dance? (a disco ball, a red carpet, nice clothes, etc.)
- » **Physicalize:** Strike a pose showing me how upset you might look if no one comes to a party you planned. Strike a pose setting up a dance. Do a group pose at the dance (you can be a person at the dance or an object!)
- » **Options:**
 - » Do you think starting over is hard or easy?
 - » Do you think Dr. Amigo feels like a hero or like a coward?
 - » Do you think the attendees will like the first or second dance better?




Building off of Drew's leadership, think about what kinds of changes would make your school or classroom more supportive for autistic people. What if an autistic person redesigned your classroom overnight, like Drew redesigns the dance? What would be different? What would stay the same? If you're autistic and want to share, what would you want to see in your classroom?

- » **Physicalize:**
 - » As a group, create a tableau (a frozen scene) for a "Second-Chance Dance" with your bodies! You can be an item, a person, or a place at the party. One person stands up and says "I am a (example: Disco Ball!)" and holds a pose like a disco ball. Another person gets up and says "I am a (example: dancer!)" Play until 5-6 people are engaged and then have them move their post around. Folks who are non-speaking can just pose!
- » **Options:**
 - » If you were creating a second-chance dance, would the lights be flashing or calm?
 - » Pick one thing to change from the Encore nightclub to make it more supportive to autistic people: sound, crowd, or people.



Note: Most classrooms in the United States include autistic children. And classrooms often include children who are both neurotypical and neurodivergent. In consideration of that reality, the below questions are aimed at students who are learning in neurodiverse classrooms and school environments.


In the spirit of "bringing curiosity," these questions are intended to inspire neurodiverse audiences across many ages to de-center the neurotypical experience, and to focus on the experiences of autistic children and young people. If you're facilitating this conversation, we encourage you to first discuss the "How To Talk About Autism and Disability" section of this guide.

 Toward the end of the musical, Marideth's dad talks about his own experience of going to a party, singing, "Yes, it was uncomfortable, but also it was worth it..." Think about this sentence. Can you identify some examples of doing something uncomfortable...that was also worth it? It can be difficult to have two conflicting feelings about a single experience. What's an example of that happening in your life?

» **One word answers. Finish the sentence:**

- » A place that makes me feel uncomfortable is ...
- » A place that makes me feel comfortable is ...
- » I was once scared to But then I tried it and felt

» **Physicalize:** Strike a pose showing how it feels to be uncomfortable. Strike a pose showing how it feels to be comfortable. If you want to discuss this, talk about the difference in your body. What part moved / changed?

 **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** has two features that make it unique: 1) it was created by people who are autistic and non-autistic and 2) everyone who plays an autistic character in the musical is autistic in real life. Thinking about these two features prompts two related questions. 1) Do you think having a neurodiverse cast and crew—or team, or staff, or classroom—is important? Why? And 2) Do you think non-autistic people can play autistic characters in movies, plays, or musicals or write a book from an autistic character's perspective? Why or why not?


» **One-word / phrase:** What movie or TV show have you seen with disabled and/or autistic representation? What book have you read with disabled and/or autistic representation?


» **Physicalize:** Strike a pose with your classmates that shows what it can look like when neurodivergent people work together. (Think about gestures like putting all hands in a circle, as in a sports team huddle, or an all-are-welcome gesture, with hands outstretched.)


» **Options:**



- » If there were to be a book/movie/play/musical about your life, would you want to star in it?
- » Would you prefer to have someone else play you?

5 DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT SOMEONE WITH AUTISM






 Parts of **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** centers on the roles and experiences of parents of autistic children and young adults. If you're a parent of an autistic child, which of these portrayals was most resonant for you? Which diverged from your experience?

 Some of the non-autistic characters in the musical express an evolution in their thinking about autism over time. Has this happened for you? If you're a parent, sibling, or family member of an autistic child, were there expectations or assumptions you had about autism—or about the particular person you love—when you first learned they had autism? Have these shifted over time? What experiences, education, or resources affected your thinking? Has watching **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** made you think differently?

 Many people who support an autistic person, friend, or family member have concerns about that person's journey toward independence and adulthood. If the loved one is already independent, or already an adult, the fears might center around how the autistic person currently navigates routine life situations, like problem-solving with colleagues, navigating bureaucracy, filling out forms at the bank or doctor's office, or attending noisy, public events, all of which can be challenging for autistic people. Do you have these fears? What are they? How do you manage them?

-  Every autistic person is different, so the experience of parenting an autistic child, supporting an autistic spouse, being a friend to an autistic person, or working with an autistic colleague is not monolithic. Where do you go to find resources for loving, supporting, or parenting the autistic person or people in your life? How do you talk with the autistic person you care about when you're striving to be a good parent, friend, spouse, or colleague? What sources of information or guidance have been most helpful to you? How do you actively listen and honor their self-advocacy?
-  Our identities are intersectional, which means that lots of us care about autistic people who are also experiencing other forms of difference or marginalization. How did the musical reflect on intersectionality? How have other identities (outside of autism or neurodivergence) impacted your own autistic children, friends, or colleagues?

5 DISCUSSION PROMPTS FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE TO DISCUSS AMONG THEMSELVES

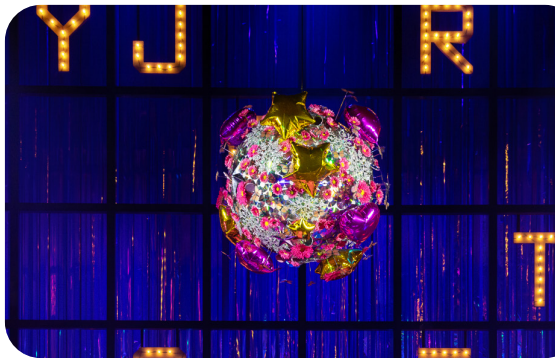
-  Is **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** the first musical, production, or creative piece you've seen about autism? If not, what other kinds of stories have you experienced? What was different about this production?
-  Representation is the act of speaking for or acting on behalf of someone, or the portrayal of someone in a certain way. When it comes to autism, the dramatic representation of autistic people in books, movies, and plays has long been...problematic. In entertainment in particular, there's a long history of non-autistic people portraying stereotypical autistic or neurodivergent people, of production and creative teams centering neurotypical experiences, and of pervasive ableism. How do you feel representation was handled in **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO**? Have you seen autism represented this way before? What would you add to the range of experiences, representations, and perspectives included in the musical currently?
-  **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** began as a documentary, which followed the lives of real autistic young adults who actually lived in Ohio and attended the real Dr. Amigo's center. Since its release in 2015, lots has changed in the world's understanding of autism and neurodiversity—and lots has stayed the same. Thinking back to 2015, what have you seen as an evolution in your own experience of autism? How have others around you evolved? How have popular media portrayals of autism shifted? Do you think these shifts are positive? Negative? Mixed?
-  **Writing Prompt:** Think about how you felt as a member of the audience, and write down some of these feelings. Were you excited? Validated? Overwhelmed? Nostalgic? Something else? Were your access needs met? What was different about the theatrical experience in this production as compared to others you've attended? Did you feel the impact of the production's Access Team? What would you improve or do differently?
-  In the musical, the formal dance serves as a plot device around which the characters orbit...but it's also a metaphor for negotiating life. Like a formal dance, life is a dance of its own: offering all of us opportunities to experience anticipation, dread, excitement, social anxiety, emotional connection, isolation, awkwardness, and relief—to name just a few! What aspects of the literal dance felt familiar to you? Have you had a similar experience? Did you identify with any of the feelings of the autistic protagonists as the dance approached? What about the metaphor of life as a dance; did it feel apt? When Jessica dances with Tommy and Marideth with Drew in the last scene, did you connect to the sense of victory they felt?

RESOURCES WE LOVE

Below is a short list of resources the cast and creative team at **HOW TO DANCE IN OHIO** has found useful and informative. Resources are grouped by topic and format.

How to Talk About Disability and Autism

- » [Identity-First Language](#): Autistic Self-Advocacy Network
- » [“How to talk about disability sensitively and avoid ableist tropes”](#): NPR
- » [Disability Language Style Guide](#): National Center on Disability and Journalism
- » [“Don’t be scared to talk about disability”](#): NPR



Organizations and Resources We Love

- » [RespectAbility](#)
- » [Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network \(AWN\)](#)
- » [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#)
- » [Katherine May’s Autism Resource Page](#)
- » [GIVE: Your Guide to Teaching Artistry in Inclusive Settings](#)
- » [CO/LAB Theater Group’s “Sharing the Stage” Workshop](#)
- » [Crip Camp](#)

Additional Relevant Resources

- » [Stella Young’s TED Talk on Inspiration Porn](#)
- » [State of the Arts: Inclusion Report](#)
- » [Talila A. Lewis’s Working Definition of Ableism](#)
- » [Demystifying Disability](#), by Emily Ladau
- » [Careers in the Arts Toolkit: National Endowment on the Arts and Art Beyond Sight](#)



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WWW.HOWTODANCEINOHIOMUSICAL.COM



P3THREEPRODUCTIONS

This guide was developed and written by Caitlin Boyle,
in collaboration with Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, Becky Leifman, Level Forward, and P3 Productions.

Photography by Curtis Brown.

The guide was designed by Orange Static.