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Kristy Seymour and Patricia Wise

Circus Training for Autistic Children: Difference, Creativity, and Community

Circus training can benefit children diagnosed on the autistic spectrum and their families. In 2010, as Head Trainer at Flipside Circus in Brisbane, Author 1 (Kristy Seymour) developed a method for using circus as a therapeutic tool for children with autism. In this article, she and Patricia Wise work between experiential and theoretical positions to explore how circus can open up a new world to such children, enabling them to take risks physically and emotionally, and to stretch the capacities of their bodies in an environment that enriches their social development. Seymour and Wise deploy the idea of 'chaosmosis' from Deleuze and Guattari, Pope, and others to argue that, counter-intuitively, children with autism benefit from the environment of creative chaos that attends circus. Through Agamben's work on being and singularity they discuss how circus values difference and inclusivity, building community in ways also captured by Probyn's notion of 'outside belonging'. Kristy Seymour has worked for over sixteen years in contemporary circus as an aerialist, trainer, artistic director, creative producer, and choreographer. She has significant profile in the youth circus sector, and is completing doctoral research on contemporary circus in Australia at Griffith University. Patricia Wise is an Associate Professor in the School of Humanities, Languages, and Social Science at Griffith University. She has published numerous articles and chapters on the links between education, mental health well being, and identity. Her current research focuses on fashioning conceptual frameworks for studying intersections between people, spaces, and culture in 'new' city regions.

Key terms: identity, risk, embodiment, Deleuze, chaosmosis, Agamben.

BASED in research related to Author 1's seventeen years' experience as a circus artist and twelve years as a youth circus practitioner working with children and young people, we explore in this article how circus training can enhance physical and social development for children diagnosed on the 'autistic spectrum'.¹

Using the tools of circus training to 'unlock the body' can also open up new social and emotional worlds to such children. Not only do they develop strength, coordination, and physical awareness, they also gain confidence, opportunities for creative expression, and a sense of 'fitting in' somewhere. Many 'special needs' children have spent much time in their young lives involved in physiotherapy, speech therapy, osteopathic therapy, and behavioural therapy. The mental and physical strain that this puts on both child and family can be significant. Further, when children apparently reach plateaux in

their development it can be an indication of their having come to the limits of their capacity to benefit from therapies, but they may simply be bored or frustrated.

By recreating a *culture of circus* for children on the autistic spectrum – a culture that is shaped and supported by circus trainers, participants, and their families – we provide them with an environment that is stimulating while also being safe, challenging, and inclusive. It is possible to use circus training to develop the same motor skills and muscle memory outcomes that are most often targeted in occupational therapy and physiotherapy, with the important difference that there is another especially creative and playful layer that is more likely to enable children to enjoy the therapeutic process.

Hanging upside down on a trapeze not only creates a physical experience that helps to strengthen children's bodies, but also offers imaginary engagements and actual

challenges that can help them to develop confidence in many different respects – physical, emotional, creative, expressive, and relational.

The spectacle and frenetic physicality of the circus may appear to be an assault on the senses: festoon lights, ringmasters with megaphones, acrobats flying past, noise, and rapid movements all produce a state of chaotic energy that would seem to be the exact opposite of what a child with autism ‘needs’. However, Author 1’s experience suggests that when autistic children are immersed as participants in the creative chaos of circus they begin to draw upon their senses, which they usually repress in order to shield themselves from a world that is difficult for them to navigate. It seems that the apparent chaos of circus gives them an opportunity to express themselves and their feelings more freely than they usually do.

Physically they are challenging themselves, developing body awareness and fitness. Mentally they are achieving feats that at first they regard as impossible, gaining confidence in themselves and learning to trust their bodies to hold them up and so learning to balance themselves safely. Beyond these obvious benefits experienced by each child to a different degree lie the emotional and creative rewards that arise from being part of a group participating in the circus.

A Community of Outsiders

Children with autism, almost by definition, are unaccustomed to *feeling* part of a group, experiencing a sense of connection and interaction with others as enjoyable, stimulating, and exciting. Circus, also by definition, is a group activity. Whether it is a troupe of professional acrobats learning to trust each other with their creative ideas and bodily safety, or a group of amateurs learning tricks for fitness and fun, circus sets up a creative space that is chaotic *and* inclusive, relying at once on individual talent and group cohesion.

In her time as a youth/social circus practitioner, Author 1 has experienced first-hand how trust and group dynamics play

vital roles in helping the circus community to develop and grow. The core of the work in a youth circus is with children undertaking training on a regular basis in much the same way as other children undertake dance or music classes, or participate regularly in a sport. It is, of course, often the case that circus proves to be personally valuable to many of these children as much as it provides them with skills and performance experience. However, circus can also have a remarkable impact on the wider community.

We use the term ‘social circus’ when referring to the style of circus training Author 1 uses in working with autistic children and their families. The structure and style of a social circus workshop vary greatly in comparison to a recreational circus workshop. There are different focus points, different needs for the participants, and different outcomes from the training.

Cirque du Soleil’s community development department, Cirque du Monde, coined the term ‘social circus’ about fifteen years ago to refer to a style of circus used to promote social change and/or community development. Social circus undertakes a great deal of community outreach. The aim is to engage the participants more positively with themselves, with their own lives, and with other people through engaging with circus training. This often has an added effect not only of extending the circus community but of building new communities.

In her previous work, Author 1 has experienced examples of circus being used to bridge social gaps and build group dynamic in various communities. Since 2006, she has employed social circus to work with street youth, indigenous youth, and refugee children. In all of the groups she has worked with as a social circus practitioner to date, the impact on the overall trust and connection of the group has been remarkable. It is clear that circus can transform not only the individual who participates in the workshop but also those closest to them.

Trust develops among the children as they become part of the circus community through their learning and sharing of skills. As an assistant trainer observed:

Over time, an increase in trust and sharing of common goals was clearly evident among the children, as they learned that if they acted responsibly themselves, their acrobatic partners would have more confidence in them, see that they were both focused on achieving the same things, and act responsibly in return. Physically, the children would become more daring with each session, as they learned to trust not only the other children and their trainers, but also themselves and their own capabilities – it was always very moving when a student who initially trembled with fear and apprehension at being mere centimetres off the ground, gained enough confidence over time to scale the trapeze with ease and stand on top of a human pyramid with a wide grin of satisfaction on their faces.²

This change begins with individuals learning to trust themselves, to trust their bodies, which then flows on to the group. The children reach a point where they are all working together, building trust in each other. In the challenge of creating a human pyramid or holding each other on a trapeze, a level of trust develops in the group that brings everyone together on an emotional and physical level. There is no room for anyone to be made to feel as though s/he is not part of the group or does not fit in.

It is not only the trust required in these moments that creates a strong group dynamic. In his PhD thesis *Why Circus Works*, circus practitioner Reg Bolton emphasizes ‘the significant moment when an “outsider” becomes an “insider” in circus’.³ The group dynamic is further reinforced by the energy that is shared afterwards, of having achieved something together that may have seemed impossible at the start. It is in such moments of achievement and enjoyment of achievement that the group energy shifts and a sense of ‘family’ develops in the group.

In 2011, Author 1 worked with a group of autistic children aged three to five and their mothers, running a weekly circus workshop that aimed to help the children to develop their motor skills, focus, and concentration. After a few weeks it became noticeable that there were unintentional levels starting to form in the workshops. The children were slowly becoming more and more bonded to

each other, much like siblings. They began to cheer each other on in difficult tricks, to support each other emotionally as well as physically in their training. Simultaneously, the mothers who accompanied their children to the workshops each week started to form bonds with each other and with other children in the programme.

For these women, the workshops provided an opportunity to share their stories as mothers of autistic kids, to listen to each other. This was a chance to support each other when their children struggled with a task and to congratulate each other when their children had breakthrough moments. In their time at the circus they found a common ground, a way to belong without feeling a need to explain anything about their family. In fact, the very things that can so readily isolate them from ‘normal’ society – the idiosyncrasies and challenging behaviours of their children – were precisely what brought them together at the circus. In effect, the mothers became a new community: a community of ‘outsiders’ who became ‘insiders’ in an environment that allowed them to enjoy and celebrate together their children’s differences.

Difference, Creativity, and Community

Rob Pope explains Deleuze and Guattari’s *heterogenesis* as ‘a multidirectional and multi-dimensional activity of creation’.⁴ This suggests an interesting parallel to the creative process of the circus and the diverse and inclusive community that develops as a result of the chaotic creativity of practice. For Deleuze and Guattari, the concept ‘involves kinds of intricately interdependent but strictly unpredictable “becoming” (“being still to come”)’.⁵ Pope explains how heterogenesis highlights the multiple ‘intersecting planes’ in which creation may occur, citing these features from Deleuze and Guattari:

(i) *Philosophy*, in so far as it is primarily involved in the creation of *concepts* (abstract systems of virtual worlds); (ii) *art* (including literature), in so far as it is primarily involved in the creation of *affects* (sensory embodiments of possible worlds); and (iii) *science*, in so far as it is primarily involved

in the creation of *percepts* (sensory embodiments of functional worlds).⁶

Pope, again citing Deleuze and Guattari, observes that 'what we actually encounter is an overlapping of domains: "three modes of thought intersect and intertwine" such that "a rich tissue of correspondences can be established between the planes"'.⁷ Author 1 has experienced all three 'domains' as a circus performer and as a circus trainer. These domains offer one means of understanding why and how circus is particularly valuable for children with autism in that we can notice how the children need concepts, affects, and percepts to come together in ways that make sense to them in order for them to make sense of themselves in the world.

Although similar in movement and technique, the practice philosophy of circus differs significantly from gymnastics, athletics, and even ballet. These latter strive for perfection/excellence in individual performance, producing elite athletes or dancers, even when there is a troupe involved. Circus is an inclusive, non-competitive, pluralistic and quirky, multi-sided art form in which any individual can become part of the group, no matter their size, shape, or age, as long as they have or develop skills that contribute to the creative potentials of the whole. The mode of their participation simply depends on the skills they choose to develop. As the circus trainer Davy Sampford observes, children in circus training gradually

become more expressive, and then slowly they start to gel with the group and the other kids training with them. There are not many kids who stay on the outside of the group for long. It becomes somewhere for them to fit in because circus is not just one discipline. For example, if you are not doing so well on trapeze, you can try juggling or unicycle.⁸

Because of how the practice philosophy contributes to the 'energy' that circus generates, the art form tends to attract people who may not feel a sense of identity with the 'creative worlds' produced by more mainstream performance arts. Such people are more

attracted to the openness of the 'virtual' or 'possible worlds' created in and by contemporary circus.

Circus adopts performance processes, narrative devices, and conceptual frames in which all kinds of people can sit comfortably, without compromising their sense of themselves. Their idiosyncrasies, quirks, and eccentricities seem to be welcomed by the art form and its practices. For children with autism this is a rare experience, to be able simply to fit in without having to alter their behaviour or physicality first. For their families this brings a sense of relief. They can leave their apologies, explanations, and defensiveness about their children's difference at the door. They can rest in the knowledge that for the time that they are in the circus space, they belong, regardless.

Sensory Embodiments of Possibilities

The physicality of circus as an art form captures the 'sensory embodiment of possible worlds' of which Deleuze and Guattari write. We have already observed the extent to which trust and sharing are crucial for circus tricks to take place. As the skills become more involved and more advanced, the level of trust and group dynamic also advances. Not only are circus students connected by their trust in each other, but also by their touch: catching each other mid-air; gripping one another's hands and feet; balancing on more than one person at a time.

For children with autism, this highly sensory experience of embodiment is often a crucial contribution to their physical therapy. To be able to 'locate' their bodies in the space; to feel their hands grip the ropes on a trapeze; coordinating their left from right when they are upside down – all of these embodied practices can activate the brain in specific ways that aid their development. The bonus is the confidence and joy that the children express, and the joy that their parents and siblings can experience from seeing them enjoying the sensory embodiment characteristic of the circus. It is clearly a very welcome change from their day-to-day existence, which frequently sees them 'trapped' in their

bodies to varying extents.

Physiotherapist Kaye Dixon has seen the 'embodiment of functional worlds' in the children she works with in her programme *The Juggling Brain*. Dixon began to notice that, through the connection to a skill or art such as juggling, the child became an 'expert' juggler. It was a way in which children could connect themselves to their physical development through learning a special skill that not every child excels in. In training, their proprioception, vestibular systems, and overall brain function through the act of learning how to juggle, not only do children improve in their sensory development, they also *become* 'a juggler' – something that makes them stand out in a positive way, a skill about which they are encouraged to become obsessive:

I had a lot of eight-, nine-, ten-year-old boys, who would be doing poorly at school, bored at school, not reading and writing well: they were depressed about their own abilities. So I started saying to them, 'You're coming here, but what you're coming here for . . . is to learn how to juggle! And very few people in your class are able to juggle. And you're going to be one of the best at juggling.' Now, for a child who had not succeeded in anything, they usually were not good at sport, they were not academic . . . this was the first tempting thing for them.⁹

In using juggling, Dixon provides a goal for the children to reach that helps them motivate themselves to continue to improve. Once you have mastered one ball, then there are two, then three, then comes throwing it under your leg, spinning around and catching etc. There is no end to what can be achieved and within this constant improvement and connection to their sensory embodiment, to the world of juggling, the children grow in physical development, and at the same time in confidence and their connection to themselves. Becoming a juggler allows them to make sense of where they 'fit in' *in their own terms*.

'Fitting in' Not 'Blending in'

Giorgio Agamben's work in philosophy can also help to shed light on how, as

'individuals' – indeed, as eccentric and even disorderly subjects, we can 'fit in' without 'blending in'; how we can be part of a group effort of productive creativity without being compelled to 'make ourselves over' into a version of what the group expects a person to be in order to participate in the group. Agamben begins *The Coming Community* thus: 'The coming being is whatever being.'¹⁰ In explaining his use of 'whatever', Agamben turns to the Latin version, *quodlibet*, noting how this word is used by the Scholastics: '*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum* – whatever entity is one, true, good, or perfect'. He continues:

The common translation of this term as 'whatever' in the sense of 'it does not matter which, indifferently' is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: *Quodlibet ens* is not 'being, it does not matter which', but rather 'being such that it always matters'. The Latin always already contains, that is a reference to will (*libet*). Whatever being has an original relation to desire.¹¹

We understand this as referring to being which is not 'whatever' in an apathetic way, like a shrug of the shoulders, but being that is whatever it chooses or needs to be in the most important way to itself.

Further, it seems to us that Agamben invites us to understand that if being always matters, then all beings always matter, and they matter for the reasons that they matter to themselves, each, singularly. We see this in circus bodies: in their exuberant displays of individuality, using that term in the sense of enjoying their difference from every other body.¹² It is not at all considered 'normal' to juggle knives, swallow swords or flames, swing, and fly high in the air or stand on one foot on top of ten other people and two chairs. But, as Agamben stresses, 'whatever being' is a question of will, of desire: it is a need to *do* what bodies are not supposed to be able to do, and a will to *express* that need, that each performing body seeks and finds in the circus.

The practice philosophy of social circus builds on this aspect of all circus, actively encouraging each person to draw on his or

her specific desires, will to expression, and personal parameters – how far they can imagine themselves going in using their own bodies. In terms of children on the autistic spectrum, the latter includes, of course, variations in sensory preoccupations, physical limits, and self-perceived boundaries in relation to both. People begin from their own embodied self-perception to discover how they might contribute to the social circus community. For autistic children, however, we simply need to remain aware that their beginning points are more highly individualized than most people's.

'Being Such that it Always Matters'

Ethics and safety aside, there are no specific rules or codes that people must tick off in order to become part of the community, other than being completely themselves and using their bodies to tell important stories. Acknowledgement of 'being such that it always matters' is, in fact, central to social circus. Indeed, all aspects of circus in one way or another embrace a notion of each performer as an individual with special skills: circus works for audiences partly because performers build on that in order to convey the embrace of difference to the audience members: 'This act is extraordinary, but if I can do extraordinary things, maybe you can too.'

In *The Coming Community* Agamben also develops the notion of *singularity* as an idea of being that does not require identity or belonging.¹³ This is especially helpful in thinking more specifically about how social circus workshops provide what seems, quite quickly, to feel like 'safe space' for autistic children. It needs to be remembered that these children often feel unsafe, even in their own space. The practice in social circus of welcoming and celebrating difference, and the emphasis on the fact that difference fuels creativity and creativity fuels good circus, means that each child can gradually come to feel not only comfortable in their difference, but to enjoy that difference, at least while in the workshops. More than this, though, each

child can begin to allow him/herself to be such as s/he is. Children might even start to feel that they are lovable to themselves. Agamben thus provides an important insight into *how* social circus practice might be achieving the benefits that we can see it is achieving for children with autism.

The belonging encouraged by circus is based in recognition of difference, in embracing a position that is, as Elspeth Probyn puts it, in effect 'outside belonging'.¹⁴ Remembering Agamben, we need to note that belonging as a question of normalized categories, sets, and classes is the kind of belonging that children with autism or children with learning difficulties are anyway put 'outside' of by those who are taken to be 'normal' and take themselves to be the 'inside'. What we aspire to in social circus is, in these terms, to bring everyone we work with inside their own outside belonging – to come to terms with what is actually special about themselves, so that they can, in turn, join a circus community largely constituted of other people who have been or are, in one way or another, also 'outside belonging'.

In becoming comfortable in the circus community, children with autism come to be participants in a community of other outsiders, and to understand that they are in a space and a community where their belonging, *such as it is*, can belong.

Creative Chaos

Circus is an ongoing state of controlled chaos in which several acts – each also utilizing controlled chaos – usually take place simultaneously, in training and performance: bodies teeter along tight-wires; knives are juggled with gusto; balancing people and objects in precarious arrangements is a regular pastime; and swinging and flying through the air is a defining activity of the genre. Throw children – literally and figuratively – into the mix and the chaos is sure to escalate, while the control must continue to operate.

Circus schools all over the world encourage children to take risks with their bodies and minds.¹⁵ It takes a great deal of courage

and focus to get up on to a trapeze and thrust yourself into the air, trusting to the fact that your body and mind will remember what your trainer has taught you to do. When flying trapeze is considered in terms of its constituent parts, the performance is not simply a matter of swing, let go, catch, land in the safety net. Momentum, timing, trust, athleticism, and a consciously embodied awareness of distance and gravity all work together in a complicated balance in order to make a somersault to the catcher look apparently effortless.

For an aerialist, momentum, body, and thought work together as s/he flies, in what needs to be recognized as embodied cognition – that is, understanding-action that does not acknowledge any mind–body split. Juggling, while less dangerous, holds even more imminent chaos than flying trapeze: patterns and numbers and momentum and timing and, once again, gravity all connect the body to the art, making jugglers look as though they could ‘do it in their sleep’. However in their many juggling training sessions, balls will have been dropped, fumbled, and thrown in wrong directions hundreds of times before the controlled chaos of a seven-ball juggling act comes together fluidly.

Without chaos, circus would not hold the magic and mystery that is the very quality that draws children (and adults) to it. Reg Bolton observes that ‘much of the value and appeal of circus is that it is relatively unexplored and unexplained’.¹⁶ Circus sets up a space that allows apparently chaotic actions/events to take place in disorganized and seemingly effortless ways that are actually highly organized and skilful. The same space also enables all kinds of misfits, odd-bodies, and kooky types not only to ‘fit in’ together, but to be at the heart of the show, central to the action – clowns, contortionists, fire breathers, and so on. For children, the combination of controlled chaos, idiosyncratic people, and difference makes circus a very appealing setting.

This is particularly the case for children with autism whose behaviour is often monitored closely in the classroom, the playground, indeed in most aspects of their lives.

They have frequently become hypersensitive to the ‘need’ to monitor their own behaviour, especially in public, quickly learning that their own bodies and actions are ‘not to be trusted’ among ‘normal’ people. In strong contrast, as participants in a circus workshop they are encouraged to let quirky behaviours and excesses of energy ‘out’ while learning how to control and harness them in positive ways towards creative ends.

Mind–Body in Circus Training

Within the chaos of circus, the self-control, focus, and determination to execute a trick perfectly is what makes a performer achieve mind–body synthesis and draw on deep levels of concentration. An acrobat can be training in a space with twenty other circus performers, all swinging, flying, dangling, flipping, and juggling energetically in close proximity; however the acrobat’s mind–body will be connected only to the new trick currently being perfected. The ability to focus amid the busy disorder that surrounds them intimately connects acrobats to the creative chaos of the circus space as a whole. Once a performer reaches a professional level, the same trick needs to be done to music, under lights – perhaps strobe – on a stage that might be slightly tilted, with the surrounding activity of other acrobatic performances – and then there is the audience, itself consisting of hundreds of potential distractions. But, somehow, it all clicks together and works.

Circus *needs* both to suggest and utilize a chaotic process in order to deliver the expected experience, or – when professionally conceived – the required product. Underneath the creative chaos is a structure. It is a matter of looking more acutely in order to see it. As an art form circus is not, of course, out of control, despite the persistence of the cliché ‘the place is like a three-ring circus’ that is used to suggest unproductive chaos overseen by unprofessional people. In an actual circus, there is an astutely devised and carefully managed overall plan: a structure, a formula. It so happens that the plan – the order involved in any successful circus show

– does not take the form that most people recognize as ‘orderly’.

Pope takes the idea of *chaosmos* – a running together of chaos and cosmos to suggest a composed chaos – from Deleuze and Guattari who, in turn, take it from James Joyce.¹⁷ For Pope,

It neatly captures the paradox of many visions of creation and versions of creativity, both ancient and modern: the ways of which kinds of order (cosmos) emerge from kinds of apparent disorder (chaos).¹⁸

If you were to walk into a circus rehearsal or training session you might think that the place was out of control: nothing would be ready in time, no one is focusing, and no one is in charge. But the chaos of rehearsal *is* ordered in all sorts of ways.

For example, you cannot throw your body into a back flip without understanding the technique and timing required to execute it, and without considering who and what is around you. Much less would you throw a trick to the trapeze catcher randomly, expecting him or her to catch you safely. Further, each trick is being practised as a constituent of an act that is or will itself be part of a show that is built out of the skills that each performer has, and the components of the potential show that each person or group is rehearsing.

There is a plan in advance for the show, but that plan has usually been devised out of the work done in training and rehearsal. When the order of the performance is decided, including the narrative arc that often emerges around the tricks, there may be further changes if new or more challenging tricks are perfected. Once the performance begins, however, every element is synchronized with every other, every performer is aware of every other, each trick complements every other trick as part of the show as a whole.

The ‘magic of circus’ is precisely how it encompasses an ordered chaos to such an extent that the audience is held throughout in awe of how the performers ‘bring it off’ without being gravely injured. To observe

closely when committed circus performers are training together is to become aware of brains firing with creativity; bodies flaring with skill, strength, and enthusiasm; and an extraordinary group energy, a buzz throughout the space that links performers’ bodies in what it is they are about to create or perform. This is *chaosmos* as it occurs in circus during the creative process that underpins the devising of the performance, and during the performance itself.

It could be said that many children with autism live in an almost perpetual state of controlled chaos (that from time to time can tip out of control). They tend to be chaotic beings in the sense that they ‘bounce’ through their days, often swinging from being very active and highly strung to being quiet and completely reclusive. So, working against these feelings of personal disorder, they will frequently find ways to order themselves, such as only eating green food today, only walking in straight lines this morning, ‘windmilling’ in the backyard or playground for the next two hours, or refusing to walk on carpets this week.

Embracing Singularity

Suppose we place these children in a circus class that is, in effect, a parallel controlled state of chaos? They find themselves in a situation in which, for example, in preparation for walking on the tight-wire they are encouraged only to walk on the one rope stretched out on the floor, over and over. Training exercises like this obviously allow children with autism to utilize their techniques of control in ways that also help them to focus their bodies on balancing, on connecting left and right brain, and concentrating on a task devised by someone else.

Training for a circus trick in such a way invites them to make positive uses of embodied needs, actions, habits and expressions that in other situations appear odd or compulsive. Thus, in a circus class they are encouraged to spend extensive periods *embracing* their desire for repetitive actions and movements, which in turn enhances a comfortable sense of embodiment. To a con-

siderable extent they are able to experience how it feels to 'be themselves' in a productive context, learning how to undertake a creative practice in which they are not constrained by their awareness – and/or their family's awareness – of what is socially 'outside' of 'normal' behaviours. The creative energy that circus culture produces, along with the physical risk it promises, provide a unique environment for many special needs children to grow and embrace their particular ways of being in the world: their singularity; their difference.

Bolton argues that setting up a creative space that is inclusive, challenging, and bubbling with aspiration, enables children of all types to find an imaginative place in which they can feel they 'fit', or 'belong': 'The circus can provide an escape from the world, or a colourful universe of possibilities. Both are *imagination*, as well as clearly manifesting . . . *risk and defiance*.'¹⁹

Autistic children participating in circus training have the opportunity to step into a world where risk and defiance of the 'norm' are encouraged; where imagination and aspiration are expected to be operating at full force – almost 'out of control'; and where idiosyncratic, repetitive bodily expressions may well be recognized as providing a basis for new skills and new ideas. To enter this world, even just for an hour a day, can bring a beneficial change of pace and an experience of affective engagement for autistic children and their families.

The circus is recognized by those who participate in it as a world of possibilities, where minds are open and bodies are pushed beyond their limits to achieve feats and goals that are deemed not only dangerous, but barely possible. Through circus arts, a person's body is changed and so is his or her perception of what a body can do. Circus has a history steeped in the idea of being different and unorthodox. It encourages the bending and breaking of rules and expectations about physical abilities, in order to create a dynamic space that changes the way we see and experience the human form, and thus reorganize our ideas of what bodies are capable of doing.

For many children with autism, circus provides a particularly valuable opportunity to explore the play between allowing themselves to be exposed to a sense of chaos in which they draw on their senses and making a creative virtue of the kind of order that they are used to imposing, or trying to impose, on their day-to-day world. Circus values their eccentricities, individual preferences, talents and modes of expression, while at the same time encouraging them to rely on and interact with other children and trainers in order to execute a trick or acrobatic sequence, or to make an audience laugh.

Since Jules Leotard, some three hundred years ago, took a bar of wood, added some ropes to it, and used it to catapult his body through the air, circus has pushed the limits of what bodies can and cannot do physically, what they should or should not do culturally. 'Risk and defiance' are central to how participation in circus can enhance the creative, emotional, and physical well-being of children with autism, encouraging them to break out of the labels, boxes, and constraints that they are all too aware of in their daily lives, and experience a kind of confidence that is not made available to them in many other circumstances, if any.

Notes and References

1. We use the term 'autistic spectrum' as this is the most commonly used medical term; however this, and the term 'special needs', are both labels that are capable of locking children into categories or 'boxes', which we try to avoid when working with children and circus.
2. Jessica Radvan, interview with Author 1, March 2012.
3. Reg Bolton, 'Why Circus Works', unpublished PhD dissertation, Murdoch University, 2004.
4. Rob Pope, *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 5. *Heterogenesis*, a compound word (from the Greek for 'varied' and 'birth'), is another way of describing and exploring what Deleuze and Guattari also refer to as *chaosmos*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Deleuze and Guattari, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4–5.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5
8. Davy Sampford, Flipside circus trainer, interview with Author 1, April 2012.
9. Kaye Dixson, physiotherapist, interview with Author 1, April 2012.
10. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.
11. *Ibid.*

12. We use 'individuality' to refer to the children's expression of their different identities, not in its popular usage, tied to post-Enlightenment modernity's reliance on an ideology of individualism to guarantee conformity with the social contract, its terms including that bodies should only behave in the ways that it is *agreed* that bodies should behave, and will be ordered, disciplined in one way or another, by oneself or others, to do that. See Foucault's detailed explorations in *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

13. Agamben, *The Coming Community*.

14. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

15. While circus training, like current theory, avoids dualistic separation between body and mind, it is nevertheless necessary to use both terms in order to discuss the kind of synchrony to which circus training aspires.

16. Bolton, *Why Circus Works*, p. 1.

17. Pope also notes that the word is used by Umberto Eco in, for example, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* [1989].

18. Pope, *Creativity*, p. 5.

19. Bolton, *Why Circus Works*, p. 89 (emphasis in original).