

THE BRAIN'S PLAYGROUND:

Using Improv Games To Teach Social and Emotional Learning

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Maja Watkins and TiaMarie Harrison are the co-authors of *The Brain's Playground: Using Improv Games to Teach Social and Emotional Learning*. While Maja Watkins was taking early education college courses, she was also taking improv classes at The Second City, Los Angeles and saw a strong connection between the two. This realization was the kickoff point for [Zip Zap Zop Enrichment](#), an organization whose mission is to support learning through improv. Building Zip Zap Zop Enrichment continues to be an everyday journey. It started as an after-school class that was eventually implemented into the school's curriculum, and soon after Maja was asked to bring the program into the home environment. Maja now also goes into schools, therapy centers, and organizations introducing "the improviser's mindset." Maja saw improv as the missing link for children with autism at first, but this concept grew to include

all children and all ages. Maja believes the specialized approach that Zip Zap Zop Enrichment provides is one of the most

effective methods to bridge the divide between individuals with and without special needs. Zip Zap Zop Enrichment has transformed improv games into experiences that connect people of all abilities in inclusive settings. The philosophy behind Zip Zap Zop Enrichment is that all people can learn together and help one another. The program curriculum helps others practice essential social skills such as empathy, tolerance, perspective-taking, self-advocacy, eye contact, mindfulness, and many other important qualities can be implemented in many ways within therapy centers, homes, and schools. Often others feel they are not knowledgeable enough or do not know how to include people with special needs, but Zip Zap Zop Enrichment changes that. Zip Zap Zop Enrichment programs are specifically designed to enhance social and emotional growth for anyone. Zip Zap Zop programs no longer have to separate participants into skill groups, but instead offers everyone the tools to communicate in a fun and natural way using improvisation.

Maja joined forces with TiaMarie Harrison. Tia teaches college courses, is a parent educator, and an education and behavior specialist consultant. Tia has worked with many families and schools assisting children, parents and teachers in helping children reach their fullest potential. As a college educator, Tia provides knowledge to and shares experiences with adult learners. In the college courses that she teaches, she emphasizes treating each child as an individual by working with the child from where they are at and not from where you think they should be. This helps the educator or parent build rapport and establish a connection with children. Tia focuses on taking a collaborative approach and making adaptations for everyone to be successful along the way. While working with two children, as their Education Consultant and Behavior Specialist, Tia participated in Zip Zap Zop Enrichment Improv Classes that took place in her client's home, she saw a great opportunity to work on social skills in a non-intrusive way. She also found that she connected with one of the boys in a way that made their relationship stronger. "He is silly and loves to make others laugh. By playing these improv games I noticed we had a structured way to be silly together that we both enjoyed." As she continued to participate in these classes, she asked if Maja wanted to share Zip Zap Zop with students in her college course "Introduction to Children with Special Needs" at Santa Monica College. Maja agreed and shared the program with an early childhood education class. One of the adult learners said: "It sounds like an Indoor Playground." For Tia, this is what Zip Zap Zop does: it creates a playground for your mind. After Maja left the class, many of the students asked how they could become certified to teach this way. Maja and Tia brainstormed ideas and decided to have Maja attend as a guest speaker in another one of Tia's college courses "Strategies for working with Challenging Behaviors." Maja attended several class sessions to teach adult learners how to implement improv to teach social skills. This led Tia and Maja to conduct [research](#).

MEET THE AUTHORS



Maja is the Founder of Zip Zap Zop Enrichment. Maja works with children and young adults with autism and other neuro-diverse and neuro-typical minds. Maja studied Child Development and she is also a graduate of The Second City where she studied improv and sketch comedy. Maja believes in inclusive settings when strengthening social skills. Maja believes opportunities, like those found in improv, allows children and young adults to reach their highest potential in a natural, fun, and creative way. Visit www.zipzapzopenrichment.org to contact Maja Watkins on consulting, professional development, and the Zip Zap Zop Enrichment program.



TiaMarie Harrison has been working in the field of Education for the last 20 years. She began her career working directly with various children diagnosed with and without disabilities. After earning her Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and Special Education, she found a passion for working with parents and supporting ALL children. Her experience as Adjunct Faculty teaching college courses only reinforced, not only do parents and children need support to succeed, educators need support too. Visit www.withinsupport.com to contact TiaMarie Harrison for support for families and schools through in-home and school consultations and direct services. As well as Professional Growth hours (Early Childhood Education/Child Development) and Professional Consultations and Presentations.