

Improv Games & Social Skills for Parents and Teachers by Tiamarie Harrison and Maja Watkins



Improv games and exercises provide opportunities to socialize in a safe place where you can take risks and make mistakes. Improv games with children allow parents and teachers to practice being in the moment while working on important social skills in a natural, fun, and creative way! Using improv games along with the improvisers mindset makes it so children can explore their unique points of view while still reaching social goals that strengthen peer relationships along with their relationships with adults. All children have social and emotional competencies they are learning to understand, these competencies include relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, stress management, and responsible decision-making. These competencies can all be found in Social and Emotional Learning. Improv games allow children, and adults, to go with the flow when practicing these social skills. Improv games can be used as a tool for parents and teachers to practice social skills in a non-judgmental way. These games can be played in the car, in the classroom, at home, and anytime parents and teachers would like to incorporate social and emotional learning, which is proven to be an incredibly vital component to social and emotional development. Maja Watkins (Founder of Zip Zap Zop Enrichment) and TiaMarie (College

Professor and Parent Educator) both believe in the value of improv at home and the classroom.

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. Maja's work with all children, including children with autism, focused on appropriate social behavior in school and at home. The improv games being taught at The Second City were the perfect experiences to apply with the children she was working with in order to generalize and understand the complex social skills being taught to her students and clients. This realization was the kickoff point for Zip Zap Zop Enrichment, an organization whose mission is to support learning social skills through improv while bridging the divide between children with and without special needs. Zip Zap Zop Enrichment runs as a non-profit organization in Los Angeles, Ca. and goes into schools, homes, and therapy centers implementing improv games to enhance communication, empathy, eye-contact, and other social tools.



Maja soon joined forces with

TiaMarie Harrison. Tia is a College Professor, Parent Educator, and a Behavior Specialist. Tia is the teacher and Behavior Specialist for two boys who are homeschooled. Tia works with the boys in the home setting. Tia chose to bring in Zip Zap Zop Enrichment and Maja to work with her clients and she participated in the 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. Tia also found that she connected with one of the boys through improv 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." Tia found that these improv games helped her see the boys' social strengths as well as areas they could improve in a clear and organic way. Tia realized these games became an essential component of her client's development.

Maja Watkins and TiaMarie Harrison decided to produce a research project diving deeper into the social and emotional learning that was being strengthened with improvisation. Below you will find examples of games and stories from the research project conducted by Maja Watkins and TiaMarie Harrison. Maja and Tia incorporated the five core competencies found in Social and Emotional

Learning: social-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-awareness. All the names in the research project stories have been changed to protect the privacy of all students involved in the research project. The research project was conducted in a home-setting involving parents, homeschool families, and children in the community ranging from ages 4-11 between July 2017-July 2018. Each game and story shared is categorized within three of the five social and emotional learning competencies. Each game and story explained were explored during the research project. The research project has been made into a book titled: *The Brain's Playground: Using Improv Games To Teach Social and Emotional Learning* and includes 40+ improv games, theorists explaining the need for improv with children, and how to use improv to reach social goals.

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Improv Game #1: Emotion Car

Social and Emotional Competency: Self-Awareness—*To recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they affect behavior.*

Often there are situations where students emotions affect another student. When someone is laughing about something, this can lead others to laugh. When someone is sad another person can take on that same emotion and become sad, too. When someone is mad, sometimes we notice our mood has turned to mad as well. As quickly as our emotions become the same as others, it is important to be aware that we are able to control our emotions and can choose to stay in the moment or move on.

For example, in the Research Project, Michael saw David crying and Michael asked what was wrong. David stated he didn't want to talk about it. Michael then joined class while David started to pace and expressed signs of frustration. David was very affected by Michael's emotion and could not join the class for a period of time. At the end of class, the game *Emotion Car* was played to help David move on with his day. In *Emotion Car* one student, "the driver", has no emotion while another student, "the passenger" enters the imaginary "car" with a strong emotion. "The driver" embodies the new emotion and empathizes with the "the passenger." Eventually "the driver," thinks of a reason to leave the car which allows "the passenger" to become "the driver" which allows "the passenger" to no longer feel this strong emotion and instead express no emotion as "the driver" allowing a new passenger to join the car with a new emotion. This game allowed David to explore Self-Awareness and led to a positive discussion on controlling our emotions.



Improv Game #2: Honest Truth

Social and Emotional Learning Competency: Responsible Decision-Making—

To make constructive choices using ethical responsibility. Students, during the research project, were playing the improv game *Honest Truth*. In this game, students are asked to give three facts about themselves, two truths and one lie. However, Emily without us knowing gave 3 truths. The other students began trying to figure out which fact was a lie and Emily explained none of them was a lie. Maja asked Emily why didn't she tell us a lie and she responded: "because it doesn't feel good." That led to a discussion about telling the honest truth and how we feel. Then Ava gave her three facts and one was a lie. Afterward, Maja asked what did it feel like to tell a lie and she responded: "it felt weird, just a little bit." We all agreed and the next student took their turn. This later turned into a discussion about telling the truth which falls in line with Responsible Decision-Making.

Improv Game #3: Mumbo Jumbo

Social and Emotional Learning Competency: Social Awareness—To take the perspective of others and empathize.

Brian was participating in the improv game *Mumbo Jumbo* where students make other students laugh. The students try to stay composed while others make them laugh in order to practice controlling their emotions. Brian wanted to make Teddy laugh and tried multiple tactics. Teddy did not laugh and Brian started to observe what other students chose to do to make Teddy laugh. Brian took another turn and altered his tactic to what he believed Teddy would find funny instead of what he found to be funny. The tactic worked and Teddy laughed and Brian started to understand Teddy's sense of humor and perspective. This was an example of a student practicing perspective-taking and having respect for others which falls within Social Awareness.

Zip Zap Zop Enrichment's improv games and activities were created from Maja Watkins experiences working in Early Education and studying at The Second City, Los Angeles. These games and activities were strongly tied with Social and Emotional Learning once TiaMarie Harrison witnessed the extreme benefits for her homeschool clients. These improv games helped the children and the adults practice "going with the flow" while strengthening social skills. These games can easily be used in the home environment with parents as well as teachers in

schools to practice social and emotional learning while laughing and having so much fun!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



TIAMARIE HARRISON has been working in the field of Education for the last 20 years. She began her career working directly with a variety of 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 an Adjunct Faculty at Santa Monica College only reinforced that, not only parents and children need support to succeed, educators need support too.



MAJA WATKINS has worked with children on many levels. Having a brother on the autism spectrum has given Maja an understanding of how powerful communication is for ALL people. Maja's education includes a B.A. in Child Development and she is also a graduate of The Second City where she studied improv and sketch comedy. Maja has worked for years as a teacher and behaviorist where she practiced an emergent curriculum. Maja's focus is on inclusive classrooms where the curriculum is designed to allow children and young adults to reach their highest potential in whichever way they feel most comfortable. (www.zipzapzopenrichment.org).