

# *This Little Heart of Mine, I'm Gonna' Let it Shine . . .*

*Teaching Clowning to Children and Young Adults with Developmental Challenges.*

*from Ariana Isaccson and Christina Lewis*

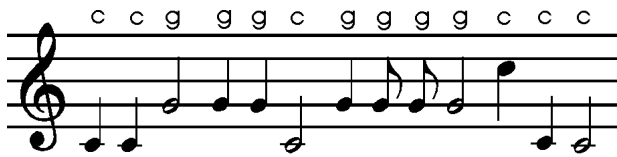
## *A Lesson Plan from Arina Isaccson of the Clown School of San Francisco*

**Arina Isaccson, M.A.** is the Founder of the San Francisco Clown School and has performed all over the world as a clown and puppeteer since 1975. Her teaching is legendary in clowndom and the world. She has taught many years at Clown Camp in La Cross, WI and is the “clown mother” of many, many clowns, including Shobi Dobi, Aileen Moffitt and Christina Lewis. She has been working with developmentally disabled children since 1967. Charlie Lubin “Uncle Baby” has been her student and friend for over 17 years.



*Charlie and Arina*

The most important thing about teaching children and particularly teaching children with developmental differences is that the structure must be very clear, so that they know what is going on at all times. When they come into the studio, you have the room already set up. I put carpet square ruminants in a circle, so that each one has a definite space that is their own. They can come and go from that space.



Names go Up! Names go down! This is the way . My names sounds!

You bring them in, sit them on the squares and do some sort of activity that welcomes them. I usually do a name game of some kind. A very simple one is this. You do it with hand movement so right away you engage their voices and you engage their bodies. I tell them to say their name in the silliest way they can. Everyone sings together “Names go up!” (Arms go up) “Names go down!” (Arms go down) “Tell us how, your name sounds.” (Everyone sings together and then points to that person and repeats that name in the same silly way.). You repeat this around the circle.

Then you get them standing on the carpet square and you do a physical warmup. Start at the head and all the way down the body. You can teach them the “chicken neck” [a clown look and see gesture: the neck and head

move forward and back without moving the body] “Look at someone, see them, and pull back, reacting to that person.” Do it around the circle. You can continue: eyes up, eyes down, shake out your face etc. Then I will call out different emotions. “I am going to call out a word and I want you to say the word with your face, without moving your body or using your voice (happy, angry, afraid, etc.) “Now we are going to do it with the whole body.” And then I clap my hands for them to *freeze* and hold that position 1,2,3.” You teach them right away about takes, freezes and holding.

If you’re with a child or young adult that is at a very “low” level then you have to put the word in a sentence. “Now the first word we are going to do is *happy*. I felt so *happy* when I went to the circus. Ready 1, 2, 3, *happy*! Show how you felt when you went to the circus.” If there are children that don’t deal with abstractions, and remember feelings are abstractions, you put it into a phrase they can relate to. “*Afraid* -- Oh, I was so *afraid* when I got to the street corner and there was no street light and I didn’t know when to cross. O.K.! Ready! 1,2,3, *Afraid*.” I clown and make the gestures with them.

When you teach kids with differences, you want to break things down into their smallest parts. If you have an activity, you think to yourself “What is the first thing that I have to do in order to do this? For example, with adults you can say, “Everyone walk around the room and when I call out a word, you’re going to move to that word -- *Moonlight*.” And everyone does an abstract movement of that word. With kids with developmental differences, you start out “Everyone when I say 3 you are going to point to the moon. 1,2,3, point, and freeze. Where is it? Up in the sky! OK, everyone point to the moon. What happens when the moon is very big. It puts light on you and how does that make you feel when the light goes on you. It makes you feel like you want to float.”

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Anyone that has trouble holding on to a lot of things at one time, you break it down into its small parts. This works also with older people in nursing homes. It's called developmental teaching.

Then I do something with walking around the room. "Stop, Look at someone. See them. How does it make you feel when you see them? Let yourself be afraid. You don't know them. Walk again. For each emotion you give an example. "It's your best friend, you're so *happy* to see them. Go and give them a big hug." At the end of an exercise everyone claps and everyone goes back to their carpet square. It is very important that you give a clear transition and closure -- that they get a chance to breathe after they do each activity. Clear endings will later help you when teaching about beginning, middle, and ending for skits. By having clear endings, you also segment the work and they can recall it easier.

Freezing or stopping all movement is not always so clear, so I use balloons to teach this -- bright colorful balloons. I'll do the classic clown misname on the colors. Pulling out a red balloon and saying this is a green one. I have them practice keeping the balloon up in the air. Depending on how able they are. If they are just at the level of keeping it up in the air, I don't go into -- do it with your elbow, do it with your wrist. If I have a mixed group, I will throw something in for everyone. "Now as long as you hear the music, I want you to keep the balloon up in the air. When the music stops, I want you to stop no matter where you are. If you caught it fine, if it falls to the ground, let it fall, but don't move. Now when the music starts, get your balloon and keep it up in the air. OK Go! Now keep your eye on the balloon the whole time." It starts to teach them eye contact and focus. They can do this exercise forever and ever and ever!

I'll have them do things like lead with body parts. I will set up the room with a carpet square in diagonal corners. "OK Line up behind one of the 2 squares. When I put on the music, I want you to walk to the square on the opposite side of the room and lead with your belly button." They know exactly where to go because of the carpet squares. "OK, the next 2 lead with your chest."

At the end of the class, I get them on their carpet square and I thank them very much and I ask them what they like best about the class. What was the hardest thing? What was the funniest thing? I always end with a song. I'll have them stand up. I use something they have all heard. Like "This little light of mine, I'm gona' let it shine. This little light of mine I 'm gona' let it shine . . . Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine." If they are really into it, they can do miming with the words. "OK everyone take a bow. Let's give ourselves a round of applause. (Clap around in a circle) "Everyone give yourself a hand" (everyone puts their hand in the center) "Give yourself a foot, Give yourself a bootie. And thank you very much."

There is no judgment, as judgment is an abstract ability. People with Developmental differences don't have that ability to judge themselves or other people. They are pure and that shines in

their smiles. What is, is! There is no self conscious fear of performing, only some shyness. Everything is totally in the present moment. And do they ever shine, they shine and they shine!

-- Arina Isaccson



### *Christina Lewis "Dotty Moppet"*



**Christina Lewis** holds a B.A. in Comparative Religion, and an M.A. in Drama Therapy (her Masters thesis was done on the Therapeutic Value of the Clown.). Chistina is a graduate of the Ringling Clown College and has taught at Clown Camp. She has studied theater with Stibor Turba in Czechoslovakia and studied and performed in Italy, but started clowning in Nicaragua when she traveled there with a Women's Circus.

Christina is Assistant Director of The Clown School of San Francisco with Arina Isaccson, where she teaches workshops in clown character development and improvisation. She has been teaching and coaching Developmentally Disabled Students for the past 9 years. She is active as a community clown and performs with an improvisational troupe "Playback Theater" in San Francisco. Christina brings her vast experience of theater to the clown community and her enthusiasm draws the bright light of clowning from all of us.

## *Let It Shine . . . Let it Shine . . . . . Let it Shine*

## ***A Clown Program in the San Francisco School District***

In 1988 while I was working for the San Francisco School District, I started teaching clowning to developmentally disabled young adults, 18 to 22. The federal government has mandated that if you are developmentally disabled you must receive 4 extra years of community-based education and training. I created a one day a week opportunity for us to come together to clown as part of this program. We have four teachers and para professionals and about 15 students with other volunteers and clowns coming in on a regular basis to "play."

The developmentally disabled do things simply and slowly and very in the moment, as most don't have a capacity to plan. When I first started working with the school district, I kept feeling this about them. "These guys are fabulous, they are so funny. They come up with things that we would never dream of doing and it is all so theatrical!" What's happening in the moment is where it's at for them, which is so much the basic core of clowning!

One of the things that I think is so valuable about my class is that it is an opportunity for these special students to truly be themselves, and to receive praise and recognition for who they are. For example, if they have some really strange habit that as teachers we are supposed to teach them to conceal so they don't stand out, in drama they get to celebrate difference. They get such joy out of it and everyone laughs with them and they feel great and they love it.

### ***There is so much gaiety and joy. It's beautiful.***

In my classes we do clowning exercises together and as performance exercises -- so they get to see each other "on stage." We are able to practice this in a supportive setting. There is such a warmth in the class -- everyone loves everyone else. There is so much gaiety and joy. It's beautiful.

One skill we practice is identifying emotions and building an emotional vocabulary. For example, how does happy look? To most people "happy" is a certain feeling in your body. If you move your body, you can access that two ways. The method acting thinks the feeling and then creates the body movement. Or you can create the body and it will bring the happy feelings. That is a lot of what we do. I create the happy body and they imitate me, but they interpret it in their own way. This is extremely therapeutic. Sometimes we churn up their emotions, but that is a positive thing because they can identify it. Then they can actually say I'm mad or happy etc. It can mean a lot less isolation.

With the emotional vocabulary, they learn to exaggerate their feelings in their own unique way. Not all of them, but many learn to create large clown gestures and have their stock gestural expressions. Some of them can get a clown walk, but for most that is too abstract. Some of my students can get to the level of Charlie, but many cannot, certainly not at first, so I don't stress their walk. I do stress looking, reacting, and

creating big gestures and working through the emotional vocabulary.

Sometimes they will lock into what they love to do. One of the girls really liked her sad gesture, so she would do it all the time even when it wasn't what she was supposed to be doing. It was so hysterical. The process is the performance. They are so open about it.

Often they will string together different skit pieces. Maybe they will be in the middle of one piece, and drop a piece of a different piece into it; or in the middle of a piece, they will start to make another piece. What is so beautiful about these young people is that their process is so on the surface. You see that process. You know in clowning how the transitions are so fabulous to watch? Well, they are always like that. You can watch them thinking, "Oh Wait that's wrong," and they will go back and start again. But it's funny. It works theatrically! And most important, they love doing it. They are communicating and expressing themselves.

At the end of the year we have a show. The parents and friends come, it is at night and everyone pays a few dollars and the kids dress up and put on makeup and they are so excited. They really rise to the occasion. They remember when they are supposed to come on, and they help each other out. They sit back stage and they are quiet. There is no stage fright -- that is an abstract concept. They actually enjoy making people laugh.

### ***They are able to laugh and see the beauty of their kid just because they are the way they are.***

For their skits, I teach them a very simple structure and they interpret it in their own way. We don't challenge their interpretation in any way. That is the beauty of it. That is their creative touch (we are learning to be non judgmental too).

I will teach them very simple bits like the hat drop or the bench piece, and they do it in their own unique way. They sequence things differently and they are so funny. Everyone laughs and claps, the parents take videos and photos. They are able to laugh and see the beauty of their kid just because they are the way they are. Praise means a lot to these young people. Being honored on stage is a big thing to them.

They are not very good at eye contact -- making a connection -- like looking at the audience to show their feelings. This is a big thing and something most students have trouble with disabled or not! It is something we work a lot at. It helps them in their day to day life also.

One of our standard pieces is where someone is sad because they lost their heart and someone else comes in with a heart (stuffed heart pillow) and taps them on the shoulder and gives them the heart. And they get to be happy. It's a way they work out their support for each other. You can do it also with a flower. Someone comes out and they are sad, someone else comes out with a flower behind their back, gets the attention

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of the first person and gives them the flower and they are happy and friends.

We had this student who had no verbal skills. She would make sounds, but no verbal skills. She was locked in at about a one year level in a lot of ways. It took her a while to understand the stage idea, but once she got it she was really into it. She really stole the show one year. She loved to peek-a-boo from behind the stage flats. She had this great laugh. She was behind stage laughing, the audience knew it. She would just stick the flower out and she'd laugh and laugh. The audience was so with her. Then still behind stage, she'd go to the other side of the stage stick the flower out from behind the flat and laugh and then she would finally come out laughing and would whack the other person on the stage with the flower and everyone would laugh and laugh and laugh. She just made it up. That is how she interpreted the piece. She loved it, the audience loved her and she loved the audience. It was great!

One of our student's mother died of cancer. One day he brought into our session an altar he had put together of his mother -- pictures, teddy bear, religious articles, etc. I said "We have to do a drama piece about your altar. So I took out this bag of hearts (many size, colored and textured stuffed Hearts) and I gave him a heart. "Why don't you come out and do an honoring to your mother? He came out with all of this movement, and as he was doing this I had this idea. I gave a heart to each of the students, and asked them to support John. They all spontaneously put the hearts down in a big pile in front of the altar. Then they joined hands and John lead them through a ritual. They did this all by themselves. He had them all hold hands and pass a squeeze. It was such a beautiful bonding for them.

*Working with the developmentally disabled is the same as working with the dying or sick. It comes from the heart. You need to drop your judgment, let go of your mind, just be with them wherever they are.*

The key to being able to work with developmentally disabled young people and children is you have to slow down and be very patient. You have to learn their language. There will be those who have verbal skills and there is not a lot of distance you have to cover in order to connect with them. And then there are students who are more complicated. Maybe they are nonverbal and have a lot of behaviors that are in the way. You have to decipher their language (physical and verbal). It's all about language. What is this person's language? What are they trying to communicate with you? What is their reality? A lot of negative behavior of the more severely disabled are due to frustration of not being able to communicate or be understood.

You need to get to their level and communicate at that level. You have to see what excites them and how to connect non-

verbally. I try a lot of repetition. Repeating the sounds and movements that they make - this is a very strong way to connect. You are mimicking them, you are communicating.

There is this one student who doesn't have a lot of verbal skills, but he has a fabulous movement repertoire. He is like a dancer with a repertoire of movement. That is how he can express himself.

Clowning is a good connector for them, because clowns work on a spontaneous abstract level. We take abstract concepts, but what we do is concretize them. Say I have this idea about my obsession with cleanliness, which is all about control in life. How to you exemplify or characterize that? I use a broom. Its about me sweeping and I can't get the floor clean. That's how I process. With these young people that's the level at which they function right off the bat -- they will just pick up the broom and express frustration!

In one "performance" this young man, had four different chairs of different sizes. All he did was come out, look at one chair and sit in it, decide it wasn't the right chair and get up and sit in the next chair. He kept doing that. He did it for so long and he did it so fast. It was so funny, and everyone was laughing so hard. How many times have you run around with your busy schedules in the heat of mad perfectionism trying to get everything just right! He was parodying human nature - the true clown at work. Maybe he wasn't aware of parodying -- that is an abstract concept, but he did it so naturally. And it was his expression of frustration. Of course, the audience is especially generous and forgiving, but that in itself is part of the whole picture - that these kids can do that to an audience --make them sit there and laugh at themselves.

Working with the developmentally disabled is the same as working with the dying or sick. It comes from the heart. You need to drop your judgment, let go of your mind, just be with them wherever they are. They will give you back so much more then you ever expected -- you get acceptance and love and the complete lack of judgment. There is a young man who volunteers to our class from the AIDS hospice. You can see and feel what he gets from them.

A prevalent philosophy in the special education field is to teach that basically these young people have to fit in. There is this whole thing of natural proportions - one disabled kid and 20 non disabled kid. This is all well and good; however, I feel very strongly that there is something very powerful about the community that they create with one another. I feel that the connection, the love, the support and friendships that they provide for one another is extremely valuable to them and cannot be denied. I think that partly by having this troupe it allows that sense of community to grow with all its love and affection, as well as the artistic value that it holds. We want to be able to bring this out into the community as an educational tool, as well as a pleasant experience for them.

– Christina Lewis

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