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LET'S TALK ABOUT INCLUSIVE CIRCUS PRACTICE

Functional Juggling NETWORK

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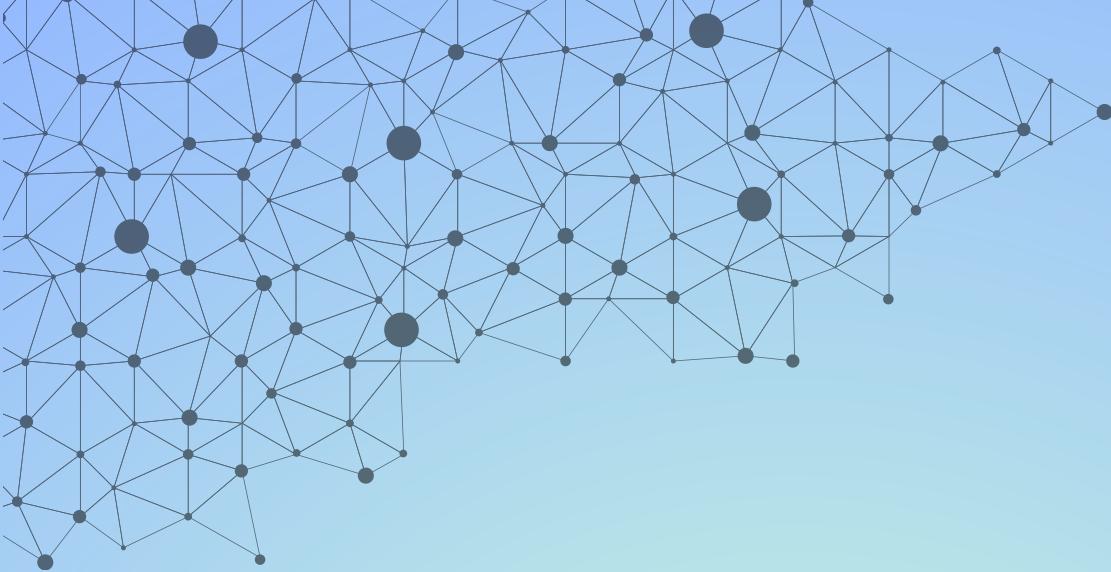
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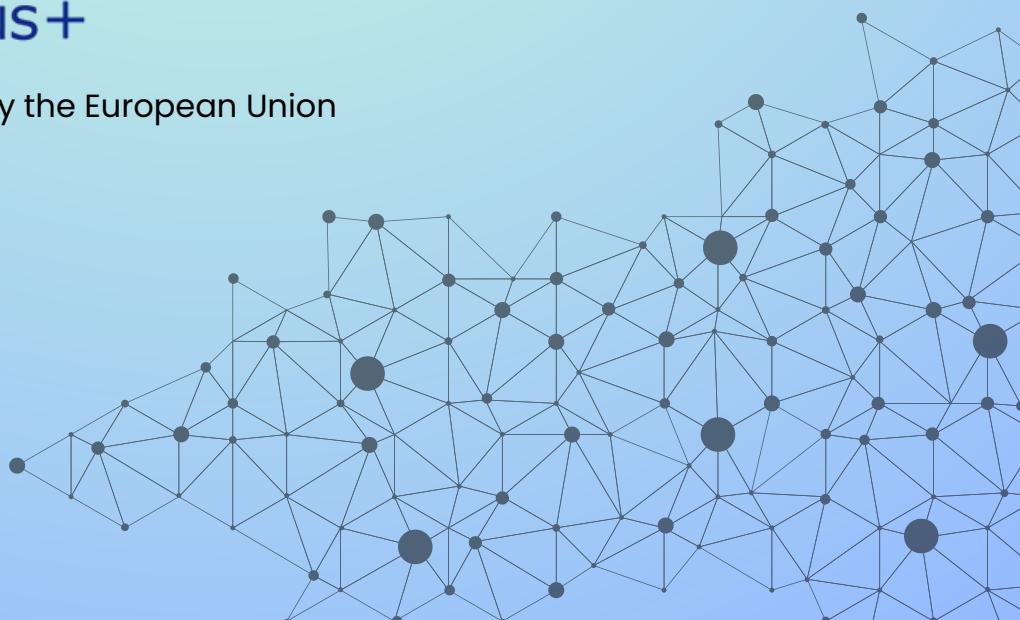
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PROLOG

The world of circus pedagogy is in the midst of a quiet but powerful shift. For a long time, circus in education was seen as something mostly for kids—playful, physical, and rooted in learning a specific set of technical tricks.



But across the globe, a growing wave of practitioners is pushing beyond that narrow frame. They're showing that circus can be something much more: a tool for inclusion, for connection, and for deep personal and social transformation.

This publication offers a window into that evolving landscape. It brings together case studies from educators and facilitators across Europe who are reimagining what circus can look like—and who it can be for. Through their stories, we see how movement, play, and presence are being used to open new doors for learning, healing, and community building.



My own journey into this evolving landscape began back in 2014, when I first encountered the principles of social circus—especially the idea that learning could be shaped around the person, not the program. That insight lit a spark. But the real shift came a few years later, in 2017, when I was introduced to Craig Quat's Functional Juggling method. That encounter changed the way I thought about circus entirely.

Soon after, I became part of a growing European network dedicated to exploring these ideas. What started as a small circle quickly grew into a dynamic exchange of methods, philosophies, and practices—stretching far beyond its original borders to include voices from all over the world. What united us wasn't a single technique, but a shared belief in inclusion, adaptability, and the power of movement to reach people in ways words often can't.

At the centre of this evolution is a shift in the questions we ask. Instead of "How do I teach this person a skill?", we now ask: "What kind of experience is this person seeking? What capacities do we want to nurture? And how can I, as a facilitator, create the conditions for that growth to happen?"

It's a subtle but profound change—from teaching tricks to creating meaningful experiences. From performance to presence. From outcomes to exploration. The juggling ball becomes less of a goal and more of a tool—a bridge between bodies, between ideas, between ways of being.

Soon after, I became part of a growing European network dedicated to exploring these ideas. What started as a small circle quickly grew into a dynamic exchange of methods, philosophies, and practices—stretching far beyond its original borders to include voices from all over the world. What united us wasn't a single technique, but a shared belief in inclusion, adaptability, and the power of movement to reach people in ways words often can't.

None of this happens in isolation. This work is nurtured by a vibrant international community—one that feels more like an open-source movement than a formal institution. It's a space of exchange, generosity, and trust. We share tools. We remix ideas. We learn from each other's failures as much as from our successes. Slowly, we're building a shared language—a kind of movement vocabulary—that allows these practices to travel, transform, and take root in wildly different local contexts.

The case studies that follow are more than workshop summaries. They're reflections of this cultural shift. They offer windows into how these methods come alive—in kindergartens, in care homes, in refugee shelters, in classrooms, in gymnasiums. And they remind us, again and again, what becomes possible when we shift the question away from performance and toward presence. From “can they juggle?” to “how can we meet them where they are?”

This book is a collection of those moments. And maybe, if we're lucky, an invitation to create more of them.

Written by Marc Bielert, NICA e.V.

Supporting Wrist Fracture Rehabilitation with Functional Juggling Tools

Inspirál Circus Center - Budapest, Hungary
Written by Gallyas Veronika

Introduction

This case study explores the use of **Functional Juggling** to support the rehabilitation process of a **70-year-old woman** recovering from a **wrist fracture**. The work was carried out over a **three-month period** in Budapest, Hungary, as a collaboration between the patient and a juggling educator trained in adaptive circus arts. The aim was to use juggling-inspired tasks to increase mobility, reduce frustration, and create enjoyable, repetitive motion-based exercises that complemented physiotherapy goals.



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BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

Wrist fractures, particularly of the **carpal bones**, are common in older adults due to falls. Recovery is often slow—**regaining fine motor control** can take **six months or more**. As a juggling educator with almost **30 years of experience** and formal circus training, I was intrigued by the challenge of adapting circus tools to support this kind of rehabilitation.

I began by reviewing the physiotherapist's diagnosis and recommended exercises. My goal was to “dress” these tasks in **playful and engaging formats**—what I call “putting them in juggling clothes.” At the same time, I wanted to **introduce original movement sequences** drawn from my years of experience teaching Functional Juggling.

METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

The work started while the client was **still wearing a cast**, using soft objects to encourage **gentle finger movements**. Later, we progressed to more complex tools and dynamic activities. I brought a **wide range of props** to each 1:1 session, selecting tools that could **stimulate wrist motion** without overloading it.

Key tools included:

- **Soft balls:** rotating two balls in the palm stimulated **finger mobility**, both during and after the cast phase.
- **Poi:** used for **multi-directional wrist movement** and micro-corrections in later stages of recovery.
- **Juggle Board:** allowed for **open-state sequences** and adaptations like **rolling with palms facing upward** to stimulate wrist rotation.
- **Floating stick:** ideal in the early phase due to limited mobility; it offered a **sense of success** and **gentle stimulation**.

All tools were left with the client between sessions to **encourage daily practice**.

Supporting Wrist Fracture Rehabilitation with Functional Juggling Tools

*Inspirál Circus Center - Budapest, Hungary
Written by Gallyas Veronika*

CREATIVE STRATEGIES

Inspired by **social circus methodologies**, I introduced a **mini-performance element**. Together we choreographed a piece titled “**Flea Circus**”, set to music, where two fingers portrayed elephants balancing on a ball. This playful framing **increased repetition**, sparked imagination, and made the practice more **emotionally rewarding**.

The sessions were hosted at the client’s home, though we recognized the value of the **Inspirál Circus Center’s group setting**, where community presence and varied stimuli can be highly motivating.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Several factors contributed to the success of this process:

- The **therapeutic power of conversation**: being able to share frustrations and triumphs proved emotionally supportive.
- Bilateral engagement: we worked with **both hands**, even though only one was injured. This created opportunities for comparison and **cross-lateral activation**.
- **Video documentation** of sessions boosted motivation by visibly tracking progress.
- The juggling tasks helped **identify and undo compensatory movement patterns**, such as initiating wrist motions from the shoulder instead of the forearm.
- The **poi tool** initially caused frustration—its difficulty and occasional contact with the body challenged the client. We adapted by switching to a poi with **finger loops** for better control.

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CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

One major challenge was my **limited anatomical knowledge**—while I could design effective movement sequences, I lacked a full understanding of the **complex musculoskeletal architecture** of the wrist. This at times made me feel uncertain.

For the client, the biggest challenge was **not performing the tasks well**. Yet the sense of joy and purpose she felt through **ball manipulation**—where success was tangible—offered a powerful **emotional counterbalance**.

An important element of our process was exploring the **personal significance of injury**. We discussed how the fracture might symbolically reflect **boundaries, pace, or life redirection**. This brought **meaningful depth** to our work beyond physical recovery.

CONCLUSION

This collaboration demonstrates how **Functional Juggling** can effectively support rehabilitation in a **flexible, adaptive, and emotionally resonant** way. It's not a substitute for clinical care, but a **vital complement**—inviting joy, story, and play into the healing process. The client now continues her progress **independently** with her own poi and soft balls, having discovered new motivation and creative tools for self-care.

The Juggle Board in Kindergarten

Almáskert Kindergarten - District III, Budapest, Hungary
Written by Zsuzsa Székely, Somatic Education Specialist

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, at **Almáskert Kindergarten** in Budapest's 3rd district, we hosted a short workshop where special education teachers, development specialists, and interested kindergarten educators could learn the basics of **Juggle Board**. I participated in that training as a special education teacher, and those few days turned out to be energizing and deeply motivating. Soon after, the kindergarten leadership purchased a Juggle Board for each of the institution's three branches. This is how my journey began—working with the Juggle Board in a kindergarten that includes children with a **wide range of needs and special educational profiles**.

HOW IT STARTED

I began by integrating the Juggle Board into **individual or small-group movement development sessions**, conducted in a separate room during the morning hours. These sessions were offered to children whose personalized education plans (as prescribed by the expert committee) included movement development or therapy—sometimes as a **complementary therapeutic tool**.

EARLY EXPERIENCES AND FUNCTIONAL USE

I first used the Juggle Board with **children with physical disabilities**, specifically to support **functional improvement**. For one girl, both upper limbs were affected due to central nervous system impairment, making **shoulder and hand flexion movements extremely difficult**. The Juggle Board proved to be an exciting new tool for her.

Even though the required movements demanded the same amount of **concentration and effort** as with other therapeutic tools, the fact that the balls **rolled within fixed channels** and could be initiated with **small movements** made success feel **more attainable**. This led to a stronger sense of accomplishment.

In this case, I didn't prioritize teaching the board's base pattern. Instead, I focused on her **individual developmental goals**, such as:

The Juggle Board in Kindergarten

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- Strengthening and stretching the hand muscles
- Improving posture
- Preventing compensatory movements

I often let her take the lead in the activity. I noticed that this **sense of control** made her more enthusiastic and persistent with the exercises.

ADAPTING FOR LOWER LIMB ENGAGEMENT

In another case, I worked with a child who had significant **leg length discrepancy**. We used the Juggle Board with the **feet**. Our goal was to **activate the shorter leg**, which had limited movement due to an orthosis and was underused in daily life. After we found the right position, the child played using **only the affected leg**.

This wasn't easy—it required intense effort and led to quick fatigue—but it was accompanied by **lots of laughter and small victories**.

BODY AWARENESS AND INTEGRATION

We also played with the Juggle Board **using feet only** with a child who had underdeveloped **body awareness and body image**. This child barely acknowledged the existence of his legs and had difficulty moving them independently. He instinctively tried to **reintroduce his hands** during play, even though the activity focused on the legs.

Helping him develop a sense of his full body—its parts, movements, and position in space—was essential for his overall development. Behind his challenges was a rare genetic disorder that resulted in a **highly uneven cognitive profile**: excellent verbal skills but weak focus and sensory integration.

Eventually, we expanded the play to include **cognitive challenges** using hand-based table play. For example:

- Creating and remembering **color sequences**
- Assigning animal identities to the balls, who had to “come out of their caves” when called—even if they had changed places

These activities proved effective when combined with other tools, contributing clearly to the child's **development and maturation**.

The Juggle Board in Kindergarten

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POSTURE AND GROUP WORK

We also use the Juggle Board in **group movement development classes**, particularly for **postural improvement and strengthening back muscles**. In these cases, children play lying on their stomachs.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND OBSERVATION

Beyond motor and cognitive development, I began to notice the Juggle Board's potential for enhancing **social interaction**. We introduced it to children who were experiencing **connection difficulties**—those who struggled with mutual attention and cooperation.

During play, I would observe:

- Whether children looked up from the board to their partner
- Whether they requested the ball in any way
- Whether they acknowledged the presence of the other player

For more structured cooperation, we played in **triads**, with two children on one side of the board. The game involved **simple rules** that required **collaborative problem-solving**, such as:

- One child could only roll blue balls, the other only green
- Balls could arrive on any track
- They had to help each other navigate space and timing without blocking one another

These dynamics were **highly informative**, both as a facilitator and as an observer.

The Juggle Board in Kindergarten

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A CASE OF CONTROL AND REGULATION

With one child—frequently in conflict with both peers and adults—we used the Juggle Board to observe and gently challenge **control-related behaviors**. This child had a **strong need to maintain control** over daily routines and play.

During board play, he initially attempted to take over the session subtly, then increasingly overtly—even when playing with another child under structured rules, he could take control in a matter of minutes. When playing with me, he would often withdraw quickly if the activity wasn't fully on his terms.

This presented an opportunity: through **micro-adjustments in facilitation**, we began to build moments where he could stay in the game without compromising his sense of autonomy—creating a **balance between structure and choice**.

ONGOING USE AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

We now use the Juggle Board throughout the academic year to assess and strengthen:

- Motor skills
- Cognitive processes
- Social abilities

In every case, I have observed clear signs of growth and development in the participating children.

For me, the ongoing evolution of my Juggle Board work is supported and inspired by participation in professional workshops, where I can share experiences, learn new approaches, and renew my creative toolkit. Whenever I feel stuck or too anchored in familiar patterns, these workshops offer fresh perspectives and new energy—helping me return to the classroom refreshed and re-inspired.

More Than Movement: Stefania's Long-Term Journey with Functional Juggling

Written by Sara Papadato
Disabled Day Centre - Trezzo sull'Adda, Italy

Introduction

texto SELF descripcion organizacion. miembros lo que sea que quieran mencionar sobre la orga.

TARGET GROUP

This work focuses on a woman named Stefania, a person with disabilities with high support needs who attends a Disabled Day Center in the North of Italy. Stefania lives with severe mental retardation, spastic left hemiparesis, and a generalized anxiety disorder. She navigates her environment in a wheelchair and is accompanied by an operator. Her diagnosis often masks her warmth and potential—but underneath is a woman full of energy, joy, and determination.

BEGINNING SITUATION

I hold a degree in **Physical Education and Sport Sciences** and have worked in the field of disability for many years. Since 2011, I have specialized in circus pedagogy, and in 2018 I became a certified **Functional Juggling** facilitator through training with Craig Quat.

I first met Stefania in 2016 through a **Motor Activities Training Program** (MATP), developed in collaboration with **Special Olympics**. The activity takes place at the "Don A. Mezzanotti" Disabled Day Care Center in Trezzo sull'Adda, near Milan (Northern Italy), managed by the Azienda Speciale Consortile Offertasociale with Cooperativa Sociale Solaris as the contracting entity.

In 2018, we transitioned from MATP to the **Functional Juggling project**, supported by a collaborative and open team of educators and therapists. Stefania initially participated with her right hand tied to her wheelchair (due to self-injurious behavior and object-mouthing). She now wears a protective glove and has gained far more freedom and control.



Professional Service



SELF



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ITALY

More Than Movement: Stefania's Long-Term Journey with Functional Juggling

Written by Sara Papadato
Disabled Day Centre - Trezzo sull'Adda, Italy

GOALS

Initially, the shared goal was simple but essential:

- **To participate in the activity without enacting dysfunctional behavior**

Over time, with input from the physiotherapist and staff, the goals evolved to include:

- **Stimulating movement in the left upper limb**
- **Encouraging interaction with peers through juggling activities**

SETTING AND TOOLS

Sessions take place in a **multi-use room**, typically used as an office, but reserved weekly for juggling sessions. Materials are **assembled and disassembled each time**.

Sessions last **20 to 30 minutes**, depending on Stefania's physical condition. Work is **always one-on-one**.

Props used include:

- Juggle Board (horizontal and inclined)
- Abacus
- Flashcups
- Flowersticks
- Juggling rings

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PROCESS

Since 2018, Stefania has participated in **weekly sessions from October to May**. The initial focus was on **building a relationship**, understanding her interests, and finding pathways to engagement.

During the early years, an educator familiar with Stefania accompanied each session. As the relationship developed, I began working with her independently.

Each session follows a structure:

1. **Greeting and welcome** on the ground floor
2. **Activation phase** – often with the Juggle Board
3. **Core work** – combining color association and limb engagement using the board, abacus, and flashcups
4. **Left upper limb activation** using horizontal movement tools
5. **Final phase** – a game of Stefania's choice and a summary of the session

Stefania is **highly engaged** and, over time, has learned to **accept and enjoy new challenges**, while still showing preferences. A key strategy is to maintain her attention on **movement-based tasks**, not on self-regulatory or avoidance behaviors, and to **frame activities as games or mini-competitions** to increase motivation.

We discovered she could **identify and match colors**, using props like the abacus and Juggle Board. These moments allowed us to incorporate **cognitive engagement alongside motor play**.

Collaboration with the **educator team** has been essential for aligning goals, and the **physiotherapist's support** has guided the left arm activation strategies.

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OUTCOMES

Evaluation is based on **continuous observation**. The changes—though subtle—have been profound:

- At the start, Stefania would often attempt to put her right hand in her mouth as soon as it was untied. Today, this behavior appears **only once or twice per session**, and she easily redirects herself back to the activity.
- Her **right hand is no longer tied**, and she wears only the protective glove.
- She now **intentionally reaches out** with her left arm up to **four consecutive times** to interact with props like the Juggle Board or flashcups.
- She has played with **peers, family members, and even young children**, always accompanied by an educator, showing **openness and cooperation**.

Perhaps most beautifully, Stefania has become the “**expert**” of the Functional Juggling activity within the center—frequently **demonstrating** what she has learned to others with pride.

There is still space for growth—particularly in developing **more measurable tracking systems**. Ideally, we would integrate **video documentation or sensory tracking tools**, so that real-time facilitation could be paired with deeper reflection and data analysis afterward.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Working long-term with a person with complex disabilities requires **patience, perseverance, and consistency**. At first, I felt stuck—unsure if anything was really changing. But over time, and especially through the lens of Stefania’s dedicated educators, I began to see it: **the tiny shifts that were, in fact, huge steps**.

What we do with Functional Juggling is not just about movement—it’s about **trust, attention, presence**, and creating the conditions for each person to **show us who they are and what they’re capable of**.

It may not always look like progress—but when we learn to look differently, we see just how far someone has come.

Rebuilding Grasp – Functional Juggling and Hand Rehabilitation

Written by Lapo Botteri

Delivered by Circo Tascabile at the C.T.E. center in Cinque Vie, Florence

TARGET

This project focused on **adults with severe motor disabilities**, particularly individuals with **impaired hand gripping ability**. The participants—six residents of the C.T.E. center in Cinque Vie, Florence—were all **wheelchair users**, each presenting **complex physical challenges** but maintaining **medium-to-high cognitive functioning**. The initiative was developed in close collaboration with the facility's physiotherapists, with the goal of **supporting rehabilitation efforts through playful, curiosity-driven activities** that promote **neuro-motor adaptation**.

BEGINNING SITUATION

My name is **Lapo Botteri**, and I hold a degree in Physical Education with additional certification as a sports teacher. I first encountered **Functional Juggling** in 2016 through a workshop with **Craig Quat**. The experience **shifted my professional trajectory**. Within weeks, I approached a local therapy center and began integrating the methodology into my practice. I've remained with the same organization ever since, now working **13 hours per week** and developing **long-term, individualized programs**.

The C.T.E. center serves individuals with **complex mobility limitations**, many of whom face additional challenges such as **spasticity, limited range of motion, or coordination impairments**. While physiotherapists focus on biomechanical rehabilitation, my role—through Functional Juggling—has been to engage neuromotor programming at the intersection of **play, precision, and movement intelligence**.

GOALS

Each participant had a **personalized set of goals**, defined in collaboration with the center's staff. The primary objective was to **support upper limb rehabilitation through sensory-motor exploration**. Secondary aims included:

- **Enhancing grip strength and manual dexterity**
- **Encouraging ambidextrous coordination**
- **Improving attention span and cognitive-emotional engagement**

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SETTING AND TOOLS

Working Space

Sessions were held in the center's **small gym**, a quiet, adaptable space well suited for sensory-focused activities. Each participant engaged in a **15-minute one-on-one session**, once per week, from October to May.

Working Tools

Materials were selected according to each participant's abilities and goals. These included:

- **Juggle Board**
- **Finger puppets**
- **Flashcups**
- **Juggling rings**
- **Rain sticks**
- **Household objects** (cutlery, brushes, bottles)
- **Stress balls**
- **Animal squeakers**
- **Sensory props tailored** to specific grip types

PROCESS

The program unfolded weekly across **eight months**. Each session followed a structured flow, with content **adapted to each individual's physical and emotional needs**.

Preparatory Phase

We began with verbal check-ins and tactile activation. Questions like "How are you today?" were paired with gentle hand and arm massages to increase body awareness and reduce tension.

Analytical Phase

We explored fine motor skills and targeted movement patterns such as finger isolation, wrist rotation, and bilateral integration. The goal was to refine precision and self-awareness in movement.

Global Phase

Refined elements were combined into integrated tasks, such as controlling ball movement on the Juggle Board or exchanging juggling rings rhythmically. These tasks emphasized functional flow, coordination, and movement confidence.

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ORGANIZATION PROCESS

Two interdisciplinary teams provided essential input throughout the program:

Educators

They offered background on each user's daily behavior, emotional profile, and learning preferences, helping to adjust session pacing and tone.

Physiotherapists

They ensured technical safety, advising on posture, muscular limitations, and safe movement ranges. Their guidance allowed for creative exploration within a safe biomechanical frame.

While we encountered no major obstacles, we did observe unexpectedly high levels of engagement and improvement, surpassing initial expectations.

OUTPUT

Though no formal metrics were used, feedback was collected from across the team:

Physiotherapists

Reported **no measurable biomechanical changes**, but recognized that the work **complemented their sessions meaningfully**.

Educators

Observed **notable improvements in attention, behavioral regulation, and hand coordination**. Participants began **using both hands more naturally** and showed progress in handling tools like **pens, cups, and utensils**.

Music Therapist

Saw **enhanced control and intention** while participants used musical instruments, particularly when **striking mallets on xylophones**.

Speech Therapist

Noted **improved focus** and greater ease in operating **manual communication devices**.



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Delivered by Circo Tascabile at the C.T.E. center in Cinque Vie, Florence

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Two central questions emerged:

First: Why did the **physiotherapists observe less change** than other team members? Their clinical lens is crucial, yet it may **overlook the subtle functional gains** made through embodied play.

Second: How can we better document this type of change? In future projects, we hope to implement **baseline assessments and post-session comparisons**, using tools like **video analysis or motion sensors**, to more clearly track outcomes.

Functional Juggling may not yield instant results. But it **creates space for small miracles**—like holding a spoon, gripping a pencil, or striking a mallet with **renewed purpose and joy**.

Colours and Patterns to Unlock Friendly Interactions

Eva Parlani

Educational member of the Monokyklo team

Introduction

The **Monokyklo team**, along with other interested individuals, attended the "Functional Juggling" seminar led by Craig Quat in Thessaloniki.

Following the seminar, our trainers volunteered at various Disability Daycare Centers (DDCs) across the city. Their goal was to apply the practical tools of Functional Juggling with individuals of all ages and with diverse disabilities, working one-on-one with each participant.

STRUCTURE AND SETTING

Each session began with a **brief introduction of the games** to both trainers and participants, followed by **free exploration**. Participants were encouraged to **take initiative**, allowing us to observe which **patterns, colours, or movements naturally attracted their interest**. Facilitators provided **gentle, non-intrusive support**, focusing on encouragement and autonomy.

Sessions took place indoors in **designated recreational areas** of each DDC. Materials were displayed on tables and included:

- The **Juggle Board**
- **Hula hoops, spinning plates, scarves, and juggling balls**

The program ran for several months, with **near-daily visits to five different centers**, creating an opportunity for **longitudinal observation and diverse participant engagement**.

SESSION FLOW AND GAME DESIGN

Each 90-minute session followed a consistent structure:

- Opening **circle game** where everyone shared names and personal updates
- A **main session** with rotating activity stations or small-group games
- A **10–20 minute break** depending on group energy
- Closing **group reflection**, sharing highlights and feedback

The activities rotated through **Functional Juggling games** and other circus-based experiences. Some sessions used a **clock-style layout**, allowing participants to move independently between activities. The structured yet playful design allowed for **adaptation to individual interests and needs**.



Professional Service



MONOKYKLO



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GRECIA

Colours and Patterns to Unlock Friendly Interactions

Eva Parlani

Educational member of the Monokyklo team

OBSERVATIONS AND OUTCOMES

The central focus—**facilitating social openness and peer interaction**—was clearly met. We observed:

- **Stronger interpersonal connections**, especially among previously withdrawn individuals
- A noticeable difference in **game preferences** based on age and type of disability
- Two participants with hyperactivity displayed **impulsivity**, though it remained **non-disruptive**
- Participants were **drawn to bright colours and structured patterns**, and although creating new sequences was challenging, most persisted and **succeeded with guidance**

Familiar educators played a crucial role. When participants were supported by someone they trusted, **focus, engagement, and joy all increased**. Tools that incorporated **colour and number coding** proved especially effective.

Across all five DDCs, participants showed:

- **Greater behavioral regulation**
- **More consistent participation**
- **Increased openness to trying new things**
- **Heightened social engagement** with both peers and trainers

CONCLUSION

This initiative demonstrated how Functional Juggling can be a **powerful tool for inclusion and connection**. With **more frequent and structured sessions**, we believe it would be possible to achieve even **greater progress in motor skills, cognitive engagement, and social behavior**.

The consistent involvement of **DDC staff was a key success factor**. Their presence helped build a **secure and familiar atmosphere** in which participants felt safe to explore, take risks, and form new relationships. The program not only enriched the daily experience of the participants but also **empowered caregivers and educators** to engage with inclusive pedagogy in a practical, joyful way.

Feeling Safe: A Key for Autism

Eva Parlani

Educational member of the Monokyklo team

THE BEGINNING

The **Monokyklo team** introduced methods of *Functional Juggling* in Thessaloniki, with the primary goal of making **circus arts accessible to people with disabilities**. The team was composed of trainers with backgrounds in circus arts and specific training in Functional Juggling, gained through participation in international seminars and facilitator courses.

The project, titled "**A Rolling Ball**", was designed as an **integrated intervention** at various **Disability Daycare Centers (DDCs)** in Thessaloniki. It aimed to offer a **creative, inclusive space for expression** through the language of juggling and movement.

As a facilitator with experience in circus workshops and having attended trainings in **Thessaloniki, Budapest, and Milan**, I entered the project with a **deep desire to make circus arts accessible to all**—free of exclusion or discrimination. My focus as team leader was on **strengthening group dynamics** and creating a **safe, supportive environment** in which participants could explore an unfamiliar activity with **confidence and comfort**.

A key component of the project was that we **visited participants in their own environments**, bringing all necessary materials with us. This approach, which allowed individuals to remain in **familiar and protected spaces**, proved essential in facilitating their **early engagement and comfort** with the activities. It became clear that **respect for each participant's rhythm and individuality**, along with **active collaboration with on-site educators**, contributed significantly to the project's success.

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THE CASE OF NIKOLAS

Among the many stories that emerged, **Nikolas** stood out. Nikolas, around ten years old, is **on the autism spectrum**. He experiences **limited speech and expressive abilities** and typically **moves through space only with the support** of a special education teacher. He was particularly sensitive to **loud sounds** and **sudden movements**, which made him cautious and hesitant during our initial sessions.

During our **first two visits**, Nikolas remained at a distance. He **did not approach the props**, and although we addressed him with openness and care, he **did not respond to verbal interaction**. His **physical and emotional distance** remained steady.

But something shifted during the **third session**. For the first time, **Nikolas picked up the juggling balls**, made **eye contact**, and **accepted our presence**. From that moment forward, a connection began to form. He started **welcoming us with trust**, helping to set up the space, **trying new combinations**, and **returning to the props independently**.

I believe we were able to offer Nikolas a **non-threatening environment**—a space where he could **experiment, create, try, and even fail** without fear of judgment. It was a **safe space for self-expression** and discovery, where his process could unfold at **his own pace**.

From that point on, Nikolas **never missed a session**. He **remembered the combinations** we practiced, **tried new ones with enthusiasm**, and increasingly showed **independence** in his exploration. Over time, he **reduced reliance on his support teacher**, and in a powerful moment of connection, began to **share personal information** with us—an act that signified deep trust.

Through this process, we witnessed a clear **increase in Nikolas's self-confidence, communication skills, and social openness**. His journey is just one example of the **transformative power of Functional Juggling**, both for **psycho-emotional growth and physical activation**.

Feeling Safe: A Key for Autism

Eva Parlani

Educational member of the Monokyklo team

Facilitator & trainer in circus arts

PERSONAL REFLECTION

This experience has been **deeply transformative** for me—not just professionally, but personally. I was able to **apply a method I believe in**, and at the same time, witness how **circus can serve as a tool for inclusion, empowerment, and communication**.

Being in daily contact with participants—their **unique responses**, their **small or big victories**—reminded me of the **power in simplicity**: the simplicity of **movement, of play, of being present**.

This process **strengthened me as a trainer**, as a facilitator, and as a human being. It reaffirmed my belief that **art can be a bridge**—a tool for **access, for connection, and for solidarity**.



Hidden Therapy Through Play: Functional Juggling with Children with Autism and Their Caregivers

written by Paulina Chodnicka, Odskocznia Studio, Warsaw, Poland

Introduction

Based on the work of Miłosz Goślicki, circus educator and circus artist in the Podbeskidzie region of Poland,

TARGET GROUP AND PARTICIPANTS

This program was designed for a small group of children with autism and their caregivers. Two groups participated in total—each composed of four children and their respective caregivers—creating a one-to-one dynamic that fostered trust, connection, and shared learning.

INITIAL CONTEXT

Miłosz Goślicki is a **professional circus artist and workshop leader** with years of experience in movement-based education. However, when it came to **Functional Juggling (FJ)**, he was just beginning his journey—having recently completed a training with Craig Quat.

Circus pedagogy remains relatively unfamiliar in the Podbeskidzie region of Poland. Hoping to change that, Miłosz reached out to the **President of the National Autism Society, Bielsko-Biała branch**, and organized an open session for local therapists. The response was immediate and heartfelt—one participant remarked, “It was the first time in a long while that I genuinely had fun.”

PROJECT GOALS

The primary aims of the workshops were:

- To offer **rehabilitative experiences** through movement and coordination
- To create **joyful, meaningful interactions** between children and their caregivers
- To integrate Functional Juggling into local therapeutic practice through demonstration and collaboration



Odskocznia Studio, Warsaw, Poland



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SETTING AND TOOLS

Workshops took place **indoors**, with two **Juggle Boards** set up on tables and open space around them for movement exploration.

Props included:

- Juggle Boards
- Rings, juggling balls, juggling bags
- Balloons
- Hula hoops
- Spinning plates
- Flower sticks

The space was arranged to offer flexibility—participants could move freely or stay close to their caregiver as needed. This allowed each child to find their own rhythm and level of engagement.

WORKSHOP PROCESS

The program ran for **six months**, with **biweekly 1-hour sessions**. In retrospect, one hour proved a bit long—especially for children who arrived tired after a full day of school and therapy. Based on this, Miłosz now recommends **shorter 40-minute sessions** for children on the autism spectrum, to avoid overstimulation and maintain focus.

In the **first four months**, sessions followed exercises learned in training with Craig Quat (e.g., the **5-Step Juggling Method**) and Jael Rodríguez (Hula Hoop Integral). Activities involved juggling boards, rings, and collaborative tasks. After this foundation was built, Miłosz began to introduce **customized games and variations**, including balloons and themed play tailored to the group's needs.

A key element was the **active participation of caregivers**. Every session was designed as a **shared experience**—not only to support the children but to strengthen bonds between children and parents through play and co-regulation.

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ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Each group of **8 participants (4 children from 7 to 14 years old + 4 caregivers)** was supported by Miłosz as the sole facilitator. While there were no additional assistants, the involvement of parents created a rich, co-supported atmosphere.

A surprising and beautiful outcome was the **level of integration** that unfolded. Parents engaged with each other, with staff, and most importantly—with their children in new and joyful ways.

Even beyond the sessions, parents formed a **WhatsApp group**, stayed in touch, and began attending community events together. Though modest in size, this network continues to thrive. The sense of **community-building**—so central to contemporary circus culture—took root organically and powerfully here.

UNEXPECTED OBSERVATIONS

While the sessions were initially planned for every two weeks, occasional **longer pauses between meetings** actually proved helpful. They gave families space to process and return with renewed energy.

Miłosz also received inquiries from an **inclusive kindergarten** and a **local library** seeking similar workshops. Perhaps most surprisingly, this process gave him the confidence to begin working with **children under 7**—something he hadn't considered before discovering Functional Juggling.

RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS

Parents shared enthusiastic feedback—reporting **noticeable improvements in coordination**, especially increased use of the **non-dominant hand** in daily tasks. They also spoke of a **softened resistance** to physical engagement and a growing enjoyment in movement-based play.

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A conversation with the **President of the Autism Society** offered further insight. She emphasized that many children today are overburdened. Their days are full: school, therapy, appointments, rushed meals. The word “therapy” alone can feel heavy. What she valued most about Functional Juggling was that it felt like “**hidden therapy**.” The children didn’t realize they were working—they were just “throwing things with the juggling guy.” And yet, **real developmental outcomes** were being achieved.

These included:

- **Sensory integration**
- **Social skills development**
- **Physical coordination**
- **Expressive movement and creative play**

Miłosz also believes the method touches on elements of **art therapy**—especially when sessions include rhythm, drawing, or music. When participants start to internalize the patterns, **expression becomes intuitive**.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Strong points:

- Extremely high adaptability across ages and needs
- Genuine caregiver-child bonding
- Community engagement and continued connection
- Joyful, meaningful participation without pressure

Weak points or learnings:

- Session length should be adapted to avoid fatigue
- Scheduling and pacing are critical for long-term participation

FINAL REFLECTION

After a full year of applying the method, one truth stands out clearly: **Functional Juggling is genuinely inclusive**. Its flexibility allows for deep personalization—whether someone is highly active, non-verbal, easily overwhelmed, or slow to warm up. With the right rhythm and relationship, everyone can find their own way to participate.



No Age Limit – Functional Juggling with Seniors During Lockdown

Odskocznia Studio, Warsaw, Poland

Written by Wiktoria Witenberg

TARGET GROUP

This project, led by Odskocznia Studio, was designed for adults aged 65 and older. Through an open call, we invited seniors to join Functional Juggling (FJ) classes hosted at the Centrum Kultury Praga-Południe in Warsaw. The participants were independent, active older adults—capable of registering and attending on their own—whom I would describe as functioning at an average to high level for their age.

ORIGINS AND CONTEXT

The idea for the project emerged in March 2020, during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Paulina, founder of Odskocznia Studio, reached out with interest in building a circus-based program tailored for seniors. A few months later, as restrictions eased, we began planning the classes. Despite rising case numbers and the looming threat of a second lockdown, we made the collective decision to move forward—carefully.

Our team consisted of four trainers:

- Two **main trainers**, with some prior experience teaching juggle boards
- Two **support trainers**, newly introduced to Functional Juggling

Each group of up to 12 participants was guided by one main trainer and one assistant.

At the time, my own experience included:

- A 3-day workshop with Craig Quat in 2017 (before it was formalized as The Seminar)
- A local pilot with seniors in Warsaw (6 sessions totaling 9 hours)
- Several one-on-one FJ sessions

Kamil, one of the main trainers, had collaborated with me on the pilot project. For Paulina and Julia, this was their first hands-on experience with juggle boards. Before launching NO AGE LIMIT, I conducted a two-hour training to introduce the basic FJ principles and Juggle Board patterns to the support trainers.

No Age Limit – Functional Juggling with Seniors During Lockdown

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GOALS

The project had two primary goals:

1. Trainer Development

To offer new trainers the chance to gain hands-on experience facilitating FJ sessions. The aim was to broaden the base of confident, independent Functional Juggling facilitators in our local community.

2. Participant Wellbeing

To offer seniors a space for joy, connection, and physical engagement—especially during a time of heightened social isolation and anxiety due to COVID-19. We designed the sessions with a strong emphasis on emotional safety, social interaction, and flow-state movement, all while respecting strict health protocols (distancing, masks, and no physical contact).

SETTING AND TOOLS

Classes took place in a spacious basement at the cultural center, chosen to accommodate safe distancing. Instead of the cozy yoga studio we initially envisioned, the open layout allowed us to divide the space into two areas:

- A **seated circle area** for reflection
- A **Juggle Board area**, where each pair had a dedicated table spaced two meters apart

On the first day, all participants chose to remain seated. Over time, however, more and more chose to stand—an encouraging sign of increasing confidence and comfort. From the beginning, we made sure chairs were always available, so participants could begin where they felt safe and explore from there.

Props included:

- Juggle Boards
- Scarves, balls, rings, clubs, poi
- Peacock feathers
- Hula hoops (introduced during the final session)

In two sessions, we moved into a smaller enclosed gym space to explore feathers and hoops. The intimate setting fostered creative chaos while maintaining group cohesion—something more difficult in the open environment.



No Age Limit – Functional Juggling with Seniors During Lockdown

Odskocznia Studio, Warsaw, Poland
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SESSION DESIGN AND FLOW

The program ran for five weeks, with one **90-minute session per week**, always scheduled in the mornings (which we later learned was not necessarily the group's preference—more on that below).

Session Structure:

- Welcome Circle
- Brain Warm-Ups (e.g., two-hand coordination, “pianist” finger exercises for cognitive and wrist mobility)
- First Prop-Based Activity (always Juggle Board)
- Short Break
- Second Prop-Based Activity (rotating: poi, scarves, balls, feathers, hula hoop)
- Reflection and Goodbye Circle

With communicative elder groups, the opening and closing circles naturally extended longer than in other settings. Many participants expressed a strong desire to share, reflect, and connect—an important counterbalance to the isolation they had been experiencing.

Each group (maximum 12 participants) was led by one trainer and one assistant, allowing for attentive guidance throughout.

OUTCOMES AND REFLECTIONS

Trainer Development

Unfortunately, due to the second lockdown, our capacity to mentor the new trainers was limited. Much of my focus as lead facilitator had to remain on managing the sessions and safeguarding the emotional wellbeing of the group. That said, the support trainers gained valuable hands-on experience and a deeper understanding of the foundational FJ patterns.



No Age Limit – Functional Juggling with Seniors During Lockdown

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Participant Wellbeing

This goal was fully achieved. The seniors showed visible engagement and joy throughout the process, and we ended the project with a group of happy, fulfilled participants.

One important reflection emerged around scheduling. We had assumed seniors would prefer early morning sessions, but feedback revealed that many would have favored a later time. This small mismatch reminded us not to rely too heavily on assumptions—even those rooted in well-meaning logic.

To evaluate the experience, we combined verbal feedback with a creative tool: **The Blob Tree**. Participants were asked to color the character that best represented how they felt. Most chose the figure standing in the spotlight on stage. Their comments spoke of feeling seen, appreciated, and connected—after just five sessions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In the midst of fear and uncertainty, this project created a small but powerful pocket of community, joy, and meaning. It showed us that even with masks and distance, even during lockdown, it's possible to create spaces of shared presence.

Functional Juggling and social **circus methods** offered not just physical engagement, but emotional resilience and human connection—reminding us all that age is not a limit, but a beginning.

Movement and Play in Early Childhood Education

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany
Written by Marc Bielert

Introduction

AQUI DEBIERA IR UNA DESCRIPCION DE NICA
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DESDE CUANDO? PARA QUE?
CON QUIENES? CON QUE?



Professional Service



N.I.C.A



EL SITIO WEB



GERMANY

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

This case study explores a long-term circus workshop delivered in a **kindergarten located in a socially disadvantaged area of Eastern Germany**. The project became a valued and consistent part of the weekly routine, engaging a **highly diverse group of children aged 1.5 to 6 years**. According to the kindergarten director, approximately **90% of the children spoke German as a second or even third language**. This linguistic landscape created a persistent communication challenge: some children had learned to signal understanding to please adults, even when confused.

This required facilitators to develop **strong sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal cues**. The team, composed of **two facilitators with 4 to 15 years of experience** in inclusive circus work and academic backgrounds in **Educational Sciences and Social Pedagogy**, encountered a familiar reality in under-resourced communities: a **dedicated but understaffed educational team**. This limited the kindergarten's ability to offer individualized support, making the external workshop a welcomed addition to the children's lives.

PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The project was guided by a **simple yet powerful principle**: children are exposed to a **wide variety of movement experiences in a playful setting**. The pedagogical approach emphasized **equality, eye-level interaction**, and the creation of a **low-pressure, exploratory atmosphere**. Success was defined not by performance, but by **engagement, curiosity**, and the **freedom to try, fail, and try again**.



Movement and Play in Early Childhood Education

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany

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This gentle environment coexisted with **clear structure and boundaries**. Facilitators maintained **rules and adult authority when needed**, ensuring safety and group cohesion. At the same time, children were encouraged to **navigate minor social conflicts independently**, fostering **negotiation and self-regulation skills**.

MATERIALS AND ENVIRONMENT

Workshops were held in a **small sports room** transformed using both **specialized and traditional circus equipment**, including:

- **Juggle Boards**, enabling structured pattern exploration without scattered balls
- **Newton Devices**, for controlled tossing and coordination
- **Curved Wobble Boards**, for balance, crawling, and rolling
- **Parkour elements**, such as beams and mats for gross motor development
- Later additions: **poi, hula hoops, scarves, and spinning plates** to enrich sensory and movement variety

This environment was designed to be both **inviting and developmentally supportive**, allowing children to explore movement freely while fostering key motor skills.

WORKSHOP DESIGN FOR TODDLERS (AGES 1.5-3)

Participation was always voluntary. To ensure fairness, **children were selected through a mix of random choice and educator recommendation**.

The team aimed for a low trainer-to-child ratio (ideally 1:4) to provide the individual attention otherwise unavailable.

Each **60-minute session followed a ritualized structure**:

- A **welcome song with movement** created rhythm and psychological safety
- Immediate engagement with **physical play**, including parkour and Juggle Board games
- **Finger-plays and familiar songs** provided structure and focus
- To prevent overstimulation, **no recorded music** was used—only **live group singing**
- A **farewell song** and a **coloring picture** as a participation token closed the session

This predictable sequence offered **comfort and rhythm** to a group too young for complex narrative structures.



Movement and Play in Early Childhood Education

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WORKSHOP DESIGN FOR PRE-SCHOOLERS (AGES 4-6)

The 90-minute sessions for older children built upon the same foundations but were enriched with a narrative arc. Each session was tied to one of five stories, each linked to a puzzle piece that served as a motivational and symbolic anchor.

The activities followed a dynamic flow:

- High-energy parkour
- Focused coordination with the Newton Device
- Cooperative, calming play on the Juggle Boards

As children completed each phase, they **earned a new puzzle piece**, creating a sense of **progression and excitement**. Recorded music and movement games like freeze dance were incorporated to sustain energy and enjoyment.

OUTCOMES AND OBSERVATIONS

Short-term outcomes were **consistently positive**. Children were **joyful and deeply engaged**. Facilitators observed improvements in **physical abilities** (balance, coordination), **cognitive development** (concentration, focus), and **social confidence**.

A striking observation was the **sustained attention of toddlers**. Children as young as 1.5 years remained focused for the **entire session**—a fact noted with **astonishment by the regular educators**.

The project's strengths—**eye-level interaction, low-pressure play, and empowerment in conflict resolution**—created a deeply **nurturing environment**. However, the very success of the program posed a challenge: **demand consistently exceeded capacity**. The children's enthusiasm made it emotionally difficult to limit group size, and the **ideal trainer ratio was occasionally stretched**.

Movement and Play in Early Childhood Education

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany

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EVOLVING PRACTICE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Over its **seven-year evolution**, the project methodology has continued to adapt. For the older group, facilitators are now **shifting away from rigid narratives** toward **more open-ended, child-led activities**. Traditional circus skills like **poi and plate spinning** are becoming more central.

Additionally, facilitators are **incorporating children's favorite songs** into free-play segments, enhancing **personal relevance and emotional connection**. The project continues to explore how to maintain its **core values of inclusivity and engagement**, while responding flexibly to changing needs and interests.

An Adaptive Circus Pedagogy Workshop for Children with Special Needs

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany
Written by Marc Bielert

Introduction

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DESDE CUANDO? PARA QUE?
CON QUIENES? CON QUE?

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND TARGET GROUP

This case study documents a five-day circus pedagogy workshop for a group of 10 children, aged 7–10 years, from a school for students with intellectual and physical disabilities, held in autumn 2024 in Halle, Germany. The participant group presented a wide spectrum of needs, from significant behavioral challenges to cerebral palsy. This diversity required a highly individualized and flexible pedagogical framework.

The project was staffed to ensure a high level of support, with three professional trainers (from our society NICA e.V.), one volunteer, and 5–6 school personnel (teachers, integration assistants), resulting in a support ratio of nearly 1:1 (roughly 1:3 in regards to our team).

WORKSHOP FRAMEWORK AND TEAM COMPOSITION



Professional Service

The workshop was conducted in a small circus tent on the school grounds, providing a dedicated and protected environment. The daily three-hour sessions were based on circus pedagogy, adapted for an inclusive setting.

The training team's qualifications included extensive professional experience in inclusive circus work (ranging from 4 to 15 years), with academic backgrounds in Educational Sciences and Social Pedagogy. A key structural element was the division of the team: **two trainers led group activities while one conducted individualized 10-minute sessions with each child daily.**



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GERMANY

An Adaptive Circus Pedagogy Workshop for Children with Special Needs

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany
Written by Marc Bielert

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- **Needs-Oriented Experience:** Provide novel movement experiences focused on positive engagement and enjoyment, rather than performance metrics.
- **Accessibility:** Ensure all activities were accessible to every child, regardless of their specific disability.
- **Efficacy Assessment:** Evaluate the potential for observable progress within a short, intensive timeframe of individualized training in a one-on-one session.
- **Systematic Documentation:** Implement a standardized documentation process for individual sessions to track progress and ensure continuity between trainers.
- **Methodological Feasibility:** Demonstrate the viability of integrating resource-intensive, one-on-one training within a group workshop structure and within tight financial constraints.

METHODOLOGIES AND PEDAGOGICAL ADAPTATION

The workshop utilized established inclusive methods such as **Functional Juggling, Spin Poi, and Hula Hoop Integral**, as well as ideas also present in the **IN.ZIRQUE method**. A central part of our work involved adapting activities based on participant responses.

A clear example of this process was the introduction of a “**Tic-Tac-Toe running game**”. Our initial design, which required strategic thinking and multi-step rule-following, proved to be a pedagogical misjudgment, as it was too cognitively demanding for the group. This prompted an immediate methodological shift. We **deconstructed the game into its core competencies: color recognition and spatial organization**, and introduced simpler sorting and pattern-making activities using the same or similar materials.

After building these foundational skills in a playful context, we reintroduced the original game, which the children were then able to engage with successfully. **This incident highlighted the necessity of assessing and building prerequisite skills before introducing complex tasks.**

An Adaptive Circus Pedagogy Workshop for Children with Special Needs

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany
Written by Marc Bielert

DAILY SCHEDULE

Each day started with a **group welcome and warm-up games** followed by concurrent group activities (acrobatics, balancing, etc.) and **individualized 10-minute training sessions**, as well as **shared breaks** to eat, drink and socialize. Each day ended with **cool-down and massage games**, and a **daily feedback round** to guide the next day's planning.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Participant Progression: Observable progress was noted across the group. A significant outcome was observed with a **non-verbal child with cerebral palsy** who had previously shown minimal reaction to external stimuli. Through consistent, one-on-one work with a rolling ball, the child began to participate in a **reciprocal back-and-forth interaction** by the end of the week. This demonstrated the potential of targeted, patient intervention.

It is also worth noting that the progress for different children could be dependent on different trainers (some kids only opened up to female trainers, others only to male ones). This highlights that **it's very beneficial to have a diverse group of trainers**, both in gender and other aspects.

The project was characterized by a **high degree of operational fluidity**, largely attributable to extensive **pre-project planning**, including preparatory meetings with the school to understand the specific needs and potential challenges of the participants.

KEY LEARNINGS AND SUCCESS FACTORS

The project's effectiveness can be attributed to several factors:

- **The Value of Real-Time Adaptation:** The "Tic-Tac-Toe" example underscores that success was not contingent on a flawless initial plan, but on the team's ability to recognize a failing approach and restructure it based on direct observation of the children's needs.
- **Structured Individualization:** The systematic documentation of 10-minute individual sessions proved highly effective. It provided concrete data for progress evaluation and allowed different trainers to work with the same child without loss of continuity.

An Adaptive Circus Pedagogy Workshop for Children with Special Needs

NICA e.V., Halle, Germany

Written by Marc Bielert

CONCLUSION

The **high staff-to-participant ratio** and the **open collaboration** between our trainers and the school's staff created a **supportive and responsive environment** for all participants.

The project also illustrates the value of a **highly structured yet flexible pedagogical approach** in working with children with diverse and complex needs. The combination of **proactive planning, systematic individualization**, and the **willingness to adapt methodologies** in response to direct participant feedback were critical to the project's positive outcomes. It demonstrates that even within a short timeframe, **targeted and needs-oriented interventions can facilitate meaningful engagement and observable progress**.



Where Movement Finds Us Inclusive circus in a Therapeutic Group Context

Jael Rodriguez Hula hoop Integral fundator.
Educational member of Quat Props team

Introduction

Hula Hoop Integral is a pedagogical and artistic project born in Latin America that explores the hoop as a tool for learning, expression, and social transformation. Its approach combines play, movement, and inclusion, offering accessible experiences for people of all ages and backgrounds. Through trainings, workshops, and community-based actions, the project fosters collaborative networks and sensitive methodologies centered on the body, creativity, and diversity.



Professional Service

-  Hula hoop Integral
-  EL SITIO WEB
-  Argentina

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

During the second half of 2023, as part of a pedagogical tour across Europe, I was invited by colleagues from the field of social circus to participate in a therapeutic space for neurodivergent youth between the ages of 8 and 15. The center, located in Eastern Europe, was made up of an interdisciplinary team of educators, psychologists, and movement therapists who carried out individual and group sessions for children and adolescents with varying support needs.

At that time, I had been facilitating workshops across several European countries, including in schools, day centers, and creative settings, with a focus on *Juggling* and *Inclusive Hoop Practice*. This methodology promotes motor, sensory, and social development through a playful, expressive, and accessible approach. It provides tools and object manipulation techniques that are adapted to the individual and the context.

In this case, I joined as an external facilitator to support an ongoing process, offering a series of weekly sessions co-led with the local team.

FRAMEWORK OF THE PROCESS

The sessions were held in a spacious room with padded flooring and access to materials such as mats, ropes, balls, scarves, and hoops. Each session lasted one hour, and the group was composed of five young participants and three adult facilitators. Some of the youth also attended individual sessions before or after the group activity.



Where Movement Finds Us Inclusive circus in a Therapeutic Group Context

Jael Rodriguez *Hula hoop Integral* fundator.
Educational member of Quat Props team

The space was thoughtfully prepared to support sensory regulation, respectful interaction, and the autonomy of each participant. The proposed dynamics included movement circuits, coordination games, object-based exercises, and moments of shared observation, all driven by exploration rather than performance.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The overall aim of the process was to support motor, cognitive, and social development through play with circus elements. More specifically, we aimed to:

- Stimulate visual-motor coordination and body awareness.
- Encourage interaction among peers in a safe, supportive environment.
- Promote positive, joyful experiences of movement and self-expression.

The *Hula hoop Integral* allowed each activity to be adapted to the group's rhythms and needs, blending structure with flexibility. The goal was not to perform a "correct technique" but to offer meaningful experiences through repetition, spatial perception, rhythmic flow, and creative interaction.

SESSION DYNAMICS AND STRUCTURE

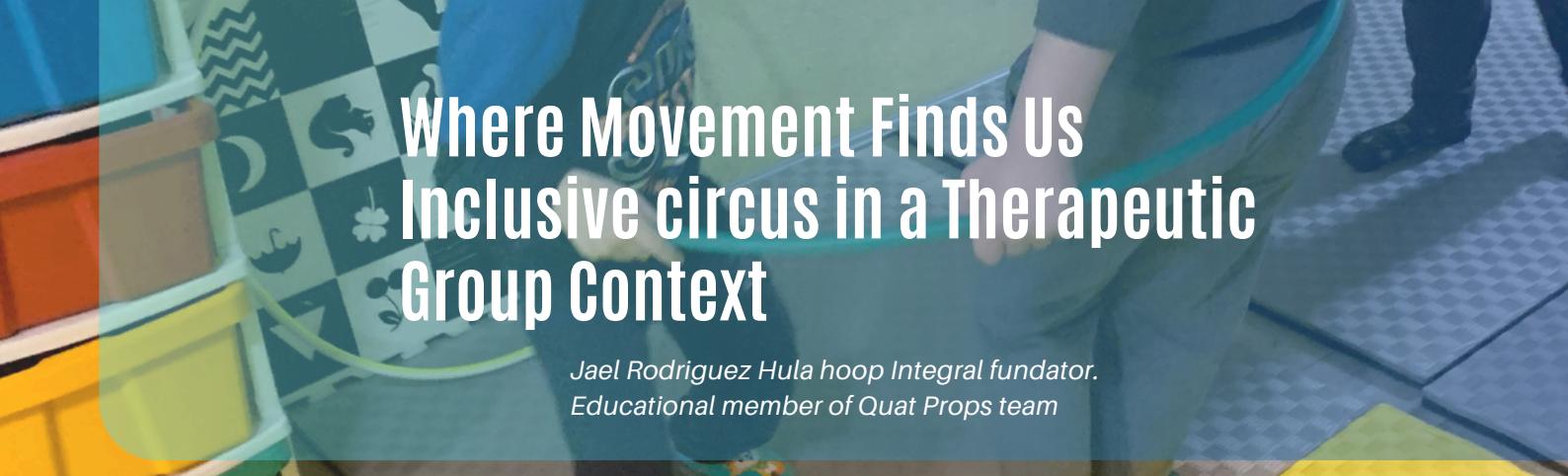
Each session followed a consistent three-part structure:

1. **Welcome and sensory warm-up:** breathing, gentle activation, and simple rhythmic games.
2. Guided exploration with objects: movement circuits, pair games, exchanges, or tossing activities depending on the day.
3. **Closing and farewell:** relaxation, observation, or free expression.

Some examples of activities included:

- Passing scarves in pairs.
- Synchronized walking with hoops placed on different body parts.
- Movement circuits involving balance, jumping, and object manipulation.
- Group improvisations in which each person proposed a movement to be replicated or transformed.

Each session was supported by at least two other adults in addition to myself, ensuring personalized attention and emotional grounding for the group.



Where Movement Finds Us Inclusive circus in a Therapeutic Group Context

Jael Rodriguez Hula hoop Integral fundator.
Educational member of Quat Props team

OBSERVED CHANGES

Over the course of the process, we observed significant progress in several areas:

- **Motor skills:** improved balance, bilateral coordination, and manipulation confidence.
- **Social engagement:** increased spontaneous interactions, shared attention, and cooperative actions that were initially rare or absent.
- **Expressive capacity:** visible enjoyment, independent play proposals, and growing openness to shared activities.

One of the most valuable aspects of the experience was sustaining a group environment in which every participant could feel included—without pressure, without judgment, and with enough emotional support to explore from a place of curiosity and pleasure.

CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

The process was not without its challenges. Some sessions were affected by fatigue or emotional dysregulation among participants, requiring on-the-spot adjustments to reduce stimulation or simplify the activity.

Communication among facilitators also presented obstacles due to language differences, which encouraged us to rely more on visual cues, gestures, and relational presence.

One of the most meaningful lessons was recognizing the importance of the group's inner rhythm and how each person contributes something essential through their own unique way of being. I also reaffirmed the value of facilitating without imposing—allowing responses to arise from the relationship itself rather than from instruction.

CONCLUSION

This experience confirmed the potential of Inclusive Circus Spaces as a tool for bridging body, emotion, and connection. Without the need for constant verbalization or standardized goals, the group experienced genuine moments of discovery, coordination, expression, and belonging.

By cultivating a shared movement language and inviting participation without pressure or hierarchy, the group became a space where joy, focus, and connection could take root—offering meaningful support for both individual development and collective well-being.

Weaving Routines in Confinement An Online Hula Hoop Workshop (2021)

*Jael Rodriguez Hula hoop Integral fundator.
Educational member of Quat Props team*

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

This experience took place during the global lockdown of 2021. The workshop was delivered online and aimed at a group of ten women between the ages of 20 and 46. Some were independent practitioners, while others belonged to educational or artistic institutions. The common thread was the shared need to reconnect with movement, play and creation in a time marked by isolation.

CONTEXT AND INTENT

As an artist and educator, I have been developing the **Hula Hoop Integral** methodology for over ten years—a practice that weaves together movement pedagogy, inclusive circus, and sensory exploration with hoops. Since 2019, I've also been part of the **Quat Props network**, actively collaborating in the development of Functional Juggling training processes.

At the time, these practices were already being shared and explored in different territories, and their adaptability to digital contexts was part of the learning process.

The intention was not only to learn new skills but to approach technical language through **body awareness**, **accessibility**, and **experimentation**. The process invited each participant to explore composition from a space of autonomy and collective sensitivity—reconnecting with the body through play during lockdown.

OBJECTIVES

- To offer playful and pedagogical tools for composing movement with hula hoops
- To share the conceptual and practical foundations of Functional Juggling adapted for the digital context
- To build a shared time and space for movement, imagination, and creation from home



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STRUCTURE AND TOOLS

Sessions were held via videoconference. The diversity of domestic spaces and internet conditions required a flexible approach and great creativity. Participants used the materials they had on hand: **hula hoops, balls, scarves, rings, socks, or fruit.**

The virtual space itself became part of the process, with **pauses, improvisations, and adaptations** that enriched the dynamic. There was no assistant in the sessions, but ongoing support was offered via **group chat and email**. The group was closely accompanied in their processes, encouraging **peer exchange and feedback**.

Each session followed a consistent structure:

- Warm-up and regulation using breath, rhythm, and body mapping
- Sensory and technical exploration with hula hoops and/or household objects
- Creative task or compositional challenge
- Group sharing and reflection (when bandwidth and time allowed)

PEDAGOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

Facilitation emphasized accessibility and improvisation. Some of the adaptive strategies included:

- **The Five-Step Learning Model**, applied from the start using 3 objects (e.g. socks or hoops) instead of progressive addition.
- **Tactile and contact-based variations** (rolling, sliding, bouncing) in place of toss juggling.
- **Use of the floor as a base** for creating fixed movement pathways.
- **Spatial sequencing maps**, developed with 2–4 hoops placed on the ground to guide repetition and pattern formation.
- **Camera framing as part of the composition**, encouraging awareness of space, orientation, and gesture.

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OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The initial goal of facilitating an enjoyable and expressive learning space was achieved. Beyond that, several participants who had never used more than one or two objects at once reported breakthroughs with multi-object patterns. Many managed to replicate elements of the methodology in their own teaching or artistic practices.

The creative capacity of the group turned **limitations into possibilities**. This revealed not only the flexibility of Functional Juggling but also the richness of hula hoop as a **vehicle for inclusion and bodily composition**.

Participants developed:

- Increased capacity to explore **multi-object compositions**
- A sense of connection and **collective creativity**, even in a virtual format
- Confidence to integrate new approaches into their own educational or performative work

CHALLENGES AND CREATIVE DEVIATIONS

Unstable internet connections, limited physical space, and improvisation with non-traditional objects were common. But these deviations, far from being a problem, **strengthened collective trust and flexibility**—turning each obstacle into part of the path.

Sometimes a lack of materials led to improvisation. A piece of fruit or a pillow could replace a hoop. A toddler interrupting class became an opportunity for laughter and group bonding. These moments of **relational presence and spontaneity** helped deepen the process.



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FINAL REFLECTION

One of the most meaningful aspects of this experience was the **possibility of building shared time**, where the body—even at a distance—became a bridge of connection. The screen was not just a limitation; it was also a stage for **mutual listening and observation**.

"I never thought I could juggle with more than two hoops. Now not only do I do it—I teach it to my students."

— Participant feedback

This case study affirms the capacity of inclusive circus pedagogy to adapt to new formats while maintaining its core intention: to create **sensitive, joyful, and meaningful learning environments**, even under constraint.

Functional Juggling to Support Writing Tool Proficiency in a Child with ADHD

Written by Craig Quat
Quat Props, United States

Start Position

Synchronous

Asynchronous

Introduction

texto QUATPROPS
descripcion organizacion.
miembros lo que sea que
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orga.

INITIAL CHALLENGE

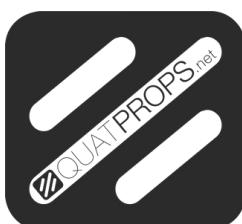
A 9-year-old boy diagnosed with ADHD began attending my circus school in New Jersey, accompanied by his mother, who was seeking support for his struggles with handwriting. Despite being physically capable and cognitively sharp, he found writing frustrating and unengaging. Completing assignments was a battle, and he had developed a strong aversion to the tools themselves. His mother believed his low academic performance was directly tied to his ADHD.

Rather than addressing handwriting directly, I introduced **Functional Juggling** as a way to shift the entire **emotional and sensory relationship** with writing tools. My goal wasn't just to improve motor control, but to reframe how he experienced the activity—transforming it from a task he dreaded into a game he could enjoy.

CREATING PLAYFUL REPETITION

We began with the **Juggle Board**, using its structured rhythm and nonverbal language to spark curiosity. Once he was engaged in that system of play, I replaced the board with a large sheet of paper and swapped the juggling balls for five **colored markers**.

We used the same **sequencing logic**—picking up, passing, and placing the markers—to draw mirrored patterns across the page. Instead of copying letters or words, he was exploring movement through color and shape, with each drawing forming part of a fluid, rhythmic sequence.



Professional Service



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UNITED STATES

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Start Position

Synchronous

Asynchronous

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CREATIVITY

He embraced the format quickly—especially when we incorporated **creative themes** like animals, houses, or imaginary creatures. These themes required not only motor coordination, but also **interpretation, adaptation, and collaboration**. They brought the task to life.

We told stories through drawings. We made jokes. We improvised. Sometimes we worked in silence, other times we built elaborate worlds together. His **attention and motivation exceeded all expectations**.

At the end of each session, he took home his drawings with pride—something he could show, share, and revisit.

PROGRESS THROUGH PLAY

What stood out wasn't just the technical progress—it was the emotional shift. During our first session, he told me he thought writing was "stupid." By the end, he didn't want to put the markers down. He was excited to show his work to his sister. That shift was rapid—and real.

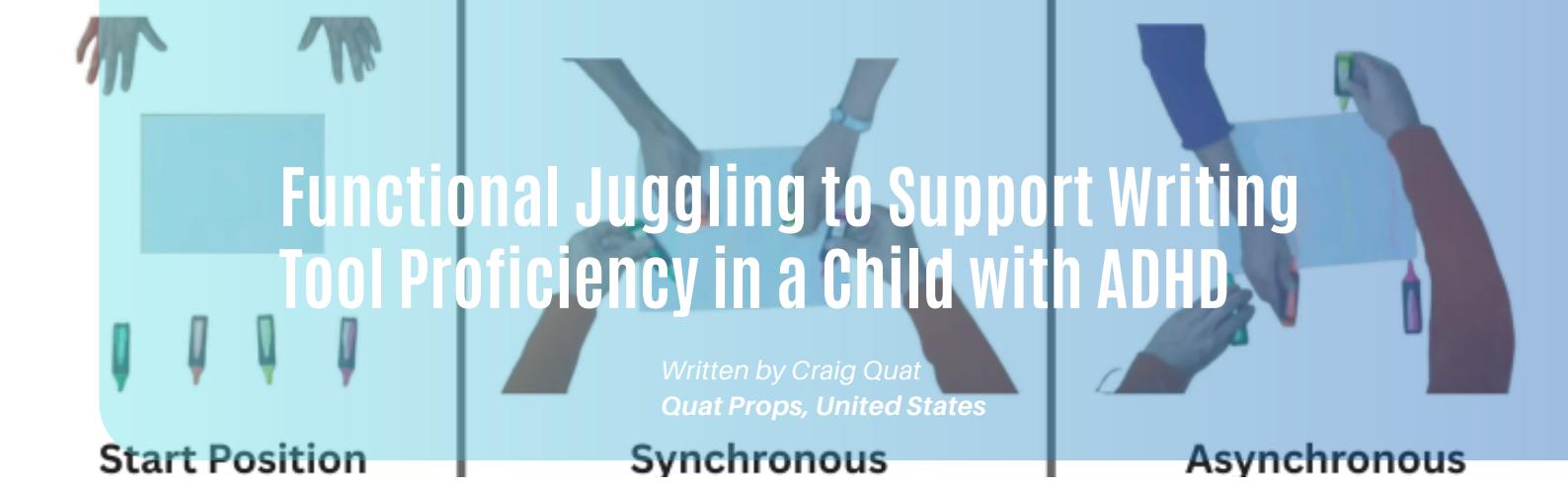
Over time, his **motor control, bilateral coordination, and cross-midline movement** improved significantly. His **writing proficiency** surpassed expectations. But more importantly, his relationship to the tools had changed. He no longer resisted. He wanted to engage.

REFLECTIONS AND OUTCOMES

His mother was pleased—especially by the academic gains. But for me, the deeper transformation was social-emotional. What had once been a source of stress and shame had become a **point of pride and connection**.

This case reminded me that juggling isn't just about movement. It's about how we relate to objects, to rhythm, to ourselves. In this case, it was about a pencil—or, more precisely, what the pencil had come to represent.

By meeting this child in play, we rewrote his emotional script. We created space for autonomy, expression, and joy. We didn't just train a skill—we **transformed a relationship**.



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Start Position

Synchronous

Asynchronous

SCALABILITY AND APPLICATION

This approach requires minimal resources and can be replicated across classrooms, clinics, or home settings. Educators, therapists, and caregivers can adapt the structure using simple tools like markers, paper, or everyday objects—so long as the guiding principles remain:

- **Structured repetition**
- **Embodied rhythm**
- **Playful interaction**

When we offer movement-based learning in a joyful, accessible format, we don't just teach skills—we help build confidence, reshape perception, and create lasting emotional resilience.



Functional Juggling as a Tool for Motor Development and Social Integration in a Job Training Context

Written by Craig Quat
Quat Props, United States

Start Position

Asynchronous

Bilateral

SETTING THE SCENE

A 26-year-old man with Down syndrome was attending a job training center in New Jersey several times a week. His goal: to develop the practical skills needed for employment in a restaurant. One of those skills was pouring water into glasses—a deceptively simple task that, in practice, required a combination of motor coordination, focus, and timing.

The original intervention had him repeat the action with one hand, always from the same side, and without crossing his body or engaging socially. It was rigid, repetitive, and disconnected from real restaurant environments. And crucially—it didn't motivate him.

A FUNCTIONAL JUGGLING APPROACH

That's where Functional Juggling came in.

I introduced a playful, rhythmic system using the **Juggle Board** to create a foundation of patterned, bilateral movement. Once this rhythm was established, we transitioned to **cups of water—five on each side**—exchanging water instead of balls. The goal wasn't just to reduce spillage; it was to build coordination, cognitive flexibility, and the ability to *move while staying socially present*.

This participant was highly social—something that had previously been labeled as a distraction. But in our sessions, his social nature became a strength. The structure allowed him to stay physically active while engaging in conversation. Verbal prompts became unnecessary. He followed the **nonverbal cues and visual rhythms** built into the practice to guide each movement.



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Bilateral

STRUCTURE AND TRACKING PROGRESS

Each session lasted around 12 minutes and followed a consistent structure. To monitor progress, we filled **five glasses with exactly 5 ounces** of water each (25 ounces total). After each session, we measured how much remained to calculate the amount spilled.

In the **first session**, he spilled nearly half—about 12 ounces. But he remained motivated and fully engaged.

By the **third session**, that loss had dropped to less than 4 ounces.

The improvement wasn't just in the numbers—it was in the quality of movement and joy of participation.

A SHIFT IN REPETITION AND ENGAGEMENT

Before Functional Juggling, traditional sessions involved about **200–300 repetitions over 40 minutes**, often with waning focus. With Functional Juggling, in just 12 minutes, he reached **over 600 repetitions**—not out of pressure, but from continuous, rhythmic play. The high-volume repetition was embedded in a format that felt fun, natural, and self-reinforcing.

Even more significant was the change in *form*. He began to use both hands, work across his midline, and maintain fluidity. He started experimenting—changing timing, alternating patterns, improvising. These were signs not just of improvement, but of ownership. He wasn't just practicing the task—he was playing *inside* it.

TRANSFER OF SKILL AND RECOGNITION

The transfer to real-world settings was immediate. He was cleared to handle water-pouring duties at the restaurant where he was training.

- His **supervisor** noticed improved posture, confidence, and initiative.
- His **therapist** praised the method and began integrating elements into broader programming.
- His **parents** were amazed at how proudly he demonstrated his new skill at home.



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Written by Craig Quat
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Start Position

Asynchronous

Bilateral

SCALABILITY AND APPLICATION

This model of Functional Juggling can be implemented with minimal resources and adapted across many support settings. Therapists and educators can recreate the structure using cups, markers, or other everyday objects—focusing on **high-repetition, low-pressure engagement**.

By maintaining a rhythm-based structure that supports **bilateral movement, social connection, and playful interaction**, the method scales easily for one-on-one or small group use. Its benefits extend to neurodiverse learners and individuals working on **life skills**—offering a pathway to **confidence, autonomy, and skill mastery** through accessible embodied play.

Designing Together - Inclusive Circus Props Through Cross-Sector Collaboration (Belgium)

Written by Craig Quat, about the work of Elga Pollet and Circusatelier Woesh

Introduction

texto descripcion

Circusatelier Woesh

organizacion. miembros lo que sea que quieran mencionar sobre la orga.

OVERVIEW

This case study explores a **multi-year, cross-sector collaboration** between inclusive circus educators, university students, and community organizations in Belgium. The project was spearheaded by **Elga Pollet** and the team at **Circusatelier Woesh**, located in the **West Flanders** region. With activities in **Bruges, Oostende, Roeselare, and Kortrijk**, Woesh is known for blending **artistic circus practices** with a deep **social commitment to inclusion**. The project described here formed part of a broader program called **Bushcraft**—a long-term initiative dedicated to creating inclusive, sustainable circus practices in Flanders and beyond.

I had the opportunity to **participate directly in this process** during a residency in Belgium, where I collaborated with Woesh, contributed feedback on student prototypes, and witnessed firsthand how the integration of academic, artistic, and therapeutic knowledge can produce deeply impactful results.

INITIAL VISION AND MOTIVATION

For years, Woesh had implemented **short-term circus projects for youth, adults with disabilities, and elderly communities**. While these programs had impact, they often lacked continuity. A core question emerged: **How can we transform short interventions into long-lasting, self-sustaining initiatives?**

From this inquiry, the idea of developing **Customized Circus Assistants** was born—long-term, supported roles for individuals with disabilities to act as **circus co-facilitators**.



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But the project didn't stop there. During its development, the team began identifying a major limitation: many **existing circus props were not accessible** for people with **physical, cognitive, or sensory differences**. This inspired a second, parallel goal—**designing new circus tools** in collaboration with universities to meet a wider range of needs. The **dual-track project** aimed to train inclusive facilitators while also redesigning the tools they would use.

METHODOLOGY

The program unfolded in two main phases:

Customized Circus Assistants

Working in partnership with **local care centers** and **community networks** (including **VZW De Viersprong**), Woesh trained three different groups of assistants—composed of **adults with disabilities, elderly volunteers, and youth in vulnerable contexts**. These groups received **ongoing training** in circus pedagogy, **basic facilitation**, and **sensory engagement strategies**. The **Juggle Board** and other **Functional Juggling materials** were central to the training process.

Each assistant worked with a supervisor and led activities in **local schools, care homes, and public workshops**. Many learned **sign language** or **pictogram-based communication** to adapt to varied groups. One of the original assistant teams has now been **active for over five years**—a testament to the success of the long-term model.

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Inclusive Prop Design with Universities

The second track focused on **co-creating new circus materials**. Woesh partnered with academic institutions, including **HOWEST University of Applied Sciences**, and worked with students from **product design**, **occupational therapy**, and **physical education** programs. Over the course of **three years**, multidisciplinary student groups were invited to create **inclusive circus props** based on a clear set of criteria:

- **Easy to use alone or with others**
- **Stimulate sensory engagement and emotional response**
- **Offer a visible learning curve**
- **Enable play, flow, and co-creation**
- **Be adjustable, instructable, and replicable**

The design students, most of whom had **no prior circus experience**, were challenged **to experiment beyond conventional forms**. They prototyped **dozens of tools**, using both **low-tech materials** and **3D printing technologies**, and received **live feedback** from educators and users alike.

Designs included:

Juggling towers, flipper boards, juggle ring sticks, the **flower mill**, several **modified tool kits**, and **custom-built rolling frames** that adapted to a variety of abilities.

OUTCOMES

The results of this collaboration were both **practical and cultural**.

On a **functional level**, the project:

- **Produced over a dozen usable inclusive circus tools**
- **Supported long-term employment** for multiple circus assistants with disabilities
- **Inspired similar collaborations** in other cities in Flanders

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On a **deeper level**, it also:

- **Fostered shared ownership** between circus artists and care professionals
- **Sparked interdisciplinary dialogue** between art, therapy, and design
- **Generated lasting community relationships** and **sustainable inclusion models**

The **design students** gained **first-hand insight** into **accessibility** and the **transformative power of circus**. Woesh, in turn, **expanded their toolkit and network**. Most importantly, the project **empowered participants**—both designers and users—to see themselves as **creators and contributors** to an evolving inclusive circus landscape.

NEXT STEPS

The **Bushcraft program continues to evolve**. Circusatelier Woesh is now focusing on:

- **Publishing “adopt-a-prop” instructables** to share the tool designs openly
- **Creating a digital feedback community** to track adaptations and improvements
- **Integrating inclusive assistants into regular circus classes**
- **Exploring partnerships with rehabilitation services** to test the props in therapeutic settings

There is still work to be done—but the team remains committed. The collaboration has shown that **radical inclusion in circus is not just a dream**, but a process of **design, dialogue, and shared imagination**.