

The Care and Feeding of Your Audience: Part 4

By Rich Snowberg

In my first article in this series I mentioned in closing that a key to getting audience members to assist you in the front of the rest of the audience, you want to create an environment of fun and enjoyment that will draw your audience members into the experience. I think of myself as a fun cartoon. It is my goal for the audience to think of me almost like an imaginary figure. I also want my character to be non-threatening as well as one that young or old may want to get to know better. When I need someone to volunteer I want young people to feel as if they are themselves coming into the pages of a comic book or cartoon when they come up to meet me.

Let's step back a moment or two and consider the feelings a child might have as they sit in a group or audience and see you before them. It doesn't matter too much whether this is a small group, say at a birthday party, a larger group seeing you performs in a park, or a still larger audience watching you performs on stage or in a television theater. Many of the children will have reservations about coming up in front of the rest of the children sitting around them. The three most common reasons why they feel this way are fear, not being sure they can do what you expect of them, or fearing that you will make them look foolish before their peers.

Now let's examine each of these three considerations by themselves. Fear is caused by either the unknown nature of a pending situation or some actual previous bad experience. If someone has had a previous bad experience they will need some assurance that an experience with you will not be like that past memory. When I was young I disliked eating liver. I thought the taste was disgusting, and darn if my persnickety sister didn't like it. That didn't make any difference to me; I still found the taste to be very unappealing. It was some years later that someone, not my mother or sister, suggested that liver tasted good if you put mustard on it. Wow, that did make it much better and something I could enjoy. None of us wants to be *liver* in front of our audience. So work to develop means to be more appealing.

The first thing I do as I start a performance exclusively for children is to share with them 'the rules'. I do this in a playful matter something like this: "Boys and girls we are going to have some fun today! I know that some of you may want to come up here alongside me and share in the fun and help me out. I have a very simple rule that I always use. If I need a helper, I'll always ask you to raise your hand if you want to help. That's how I do it. But there is a second part to this rule. If you really want to come up to help me, you have to both raise your hand, and have your bum on the seat or ground." (I point to my rear end as I say 'hum'.) All of this commentary is said in a lyrical or singsong 'fun' manner. It isn't delivered like a school-teacher giving stern directions for taking a test.

What I've described above is something a mentor or mine shared with me over 30 years ago. This technique works because it provides you with only those children that don't fear coming forward, and provides you with visual evidence of who can follow directions. Thus those children with their hands up, but are also standing or jumping are ones that you can eliminate because they are now following the instructions. This is a very positive manner in which to judge who can really be controlled once they come forward to assist in your act. (My shows are fun, but I never reward bad behavior.) Sometimes I'll see someone that I'd really like to select, as I've been watching their responses to what I've done previously, but they are standing with their hand up. When this happens I'll point to two or three of them and say "Oh I really wanted to pick you, so make sure next time to be seated when you raise your hands."

The second cause of reluctance to assisting you is uncertainty as to whether they can fulfill your expectations. So to cover this situation, I try to describe well enough what I'm going to expect of them before I make my choices. If you are going to host a balloon-blowing contest, ask only for volunteers that know how to blow up a balloon. If you plan to place a crown on their head, ask for someone that wants to come up and be a king for the day. You don't have to describe all the details of what you have planned, but at least enough that they will not be anxious about what is expected of them.

Children, particularly as they get older don't want to feel like chumps in front of their friends or other children in the audience. Anytime when I have a child up with me in front of the audience and the audience is laughing very loudly, I have a potential problem. Your assistant may feel that they are laughing at them. I immediately deflect this by asking my assistant why is the audience laughing at me so hard! As a clown you always want to be the brunt of the joke or foolishness. This is what separates us from comedians, who oftentimes poke fun at their audience or even belittle their audience. Nothing is more important than you-the clown, being the fool.

I want to share some other thoughts on selecting volunteers. Many of you have seen my *it always fails* attempt to blow up a balloon. In order to carry out this routine I always ask for one or more volunteers to assist me in this task. I determine how many assistants I needed based upon the size of the audience. From years of experience I have learned that a larger sized audience is more inhibiting to fast responses from my single or two volunteers. If my audience is 300-1000 in size I utilize four volunteers. If an extra one slips up to also assist, that is fine. So at a birthday party show with ten children I'll only use one assistant. As the size of the

group becomes larger I'll use more assistants. I have found that with as many as four assistants, when I ask what I'm doing wrong or what I should do next someone will volunteer an answer. This keeps the routine moving.