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TAP INTO IT.

The AUTISM

perspective



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Words Can Be Heard



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AUTISM MOVEMENT THERAPY

“Waking up the Brain”

By Joanne Lara, M.A. (Founder/Educator)



Joanne Lara, M.A.



According to the Autism Genetic Resource Exchange, autism strikes 1 in every 150 children born in the United States at an annual cost of \$90 billion in subsequent research, education and care. Recent studies indicate that bridging the left and right hemispheres of the brain allows information to be exchanged through the connective tissue (corpus callosum) via transmitters that otherwise may remain dormant in individuals with autism. Autism Movement Therapy (AMT), the first therapy designed for individuals with autism that combines movement and music, is proving to be an effective way of stimulating communication between the left and right hemispheres of the brain by asking the two sides of the brain to talk to each other, whereby increasing the overall cognitive processing in the brain. AMT literally “awakens” the brain through a structured and fun form of music, movement and improvisational therapy.

In a research study conducted by Kristin Hartshorn et al (2001), “Thirty-eight children with autism were given movement therapy in small groups led by a trained movement therapist. After two months of biweekly sessions, the children spent less time wandering, more time showing on-task behavior, less time showing negative responses to being touched, and less time resisting the teacher than those in the control group.”

People ask me how I came to develop Autism Movement Therapy. I was a Moderate/Severe (students with autism) SDC teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District for 10 years. It was during this time that I began to develop the movement and music program. I always did yoga in class with my students and they loved it. I played instrumental music on my CD player, mostly Asian, continuously in the background during the school day. I created an environment in the classroom that was soothing for the kids, with low lighting and soft music. We often did yoga at the end of the day. My students responded positively. Kids who were not talking began to speak; kids who were stimming constantly replaced their perseverating behaviors with more meaningful on-task activities.

Because I had a B.A. in dance and a Mod/Severe K-12 Edu-

cation Specialists California Teaching Credential, the LAUSD Arts in Education program recruited me to teach dance in the arts program during the 2004-05 school year. I became an itinerant dance instructor delivering standards-based curriculum lessons daily to over 500 general education as well as special needs students twice weekly in 6 elementary schools for 12 weeks, rotating with the music, theatre and visual arts disciplines. One of the main focuses of The Arts in Education program at the time was inclusion of special needs students in the arts curriculum. What I soon found out was that many of the kids with autism had behaviors that were often too challenging for the art instructors. Consequently, these kids were often removed from the program, asked to leave the classroom or did not participate in the class at all. Our kids were being excluded from the one class at school that they COULD do, the one lesson that they COULD excel in, the arts!!!!

Most times our kids are asked to perform in academic arenas that are incredibly difficult for them, they are competing in course work that is often frustrating and overwhelming, which leaves them with little or no opportunity for personal fulfillment. Their days are full of “math word problems they can’t solve, language arts papers

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they struggle with, and social situations that leave them isolated and alone." And as if that's not enough, after school they are shuffled from one service provider to another, their days literally full of nothing but a line of more people asking them to perform additional exasperating tasks. They are often left feeling exhausted and confused. This is not to say that the academics are not important in our children's educational plan; we all know that our kids need academic instruction if they are to succeed, have friends and become vital members of their communities. But at the same time, our kids need balance in their lives, just like their typical peers and siblings.

During the year that I taught dance in the LAUSD, I set out to engage and include our students with autism in the dance curriculum by "buddying" them up with a general education peer during the lesson, oftentimes asking them to be my assistant or the line leader for the across-the-floor movement. Our kids were thrilled to be able to participate, they were capable of focusing, and they loved the music. They could dance!

During that one year of teaching dance in the LAUSD Arts in Ed program, I conceived the idea of Autism Movement Therapy. What I discovered and had believed all along to be the truth was that our kids were not only able to interpret the music (receptive language/right brain) and process the body form, but they were capable of executing the patterns and sequences (left brain) just like their general education peers. I knew then that I was on to something. By engaging the left and right hemispheres of the brain through music and movement, our kids were able to speed up the processing and the re-mapping of information or cognitive redirection back and forth across the bridge between the left and right hemispheres. Along with fresh oxygen to their cells, this proved to be a vital tool for interhemispheric integration, or the "whole brain thinking" approach. Furthermore, I observed that this communication between the left and right hemispheres, this "waking up the brain," was advantageous in all areas of their lives, including social, academic, and speech and language development.

WHAT IS AUTISM MOVEMENT THERAPY?

AMT is an instructional technique that bridges both the left and right hemispheres of the brain by combining patterning, visual movement calculation, audile receptive processing, rhythm, tempo and sequencing for a "whole brain" approach.

AMT is a natural strategy for students with limited speech and language communication skills because they are able to express themselves through music and dance, while at the same time experience the sensory thrill of actually moving their bodies through space. This strategy significantly increases behavioral, emotional, academic, social, and speech and language skills through cognitive re-mapping. AMT literally "wakes up the brain" processing through a structured, fun form of music, dance and improvisation therapy.

Martha R. Herbert, Ph.D., M.D., of Harvard Medical School, states: "Joanne Lara knows that the brain needs the body to move. In her DVD she gives the gift of her artful knowledge to children with autism, helping them to fulfill their wholeness and their potential."

WHAT DISTINGUISHES THIS PROGRAM AS BEING SPECIFICALLY GEARED TOWARDS AUTISM?

The pacing is slow, with each of the 3 levels scaffolding upon the previous, a key strategy when delivering direct instruction because the kids know what to expect and the movement is predictable. Routine, sameness and predictability are key strategies in working with individuals with autism. The processing of stored information in the brain is cognitively mapped and stored in short- and long-term memory for easy retrieval. In order to execute the simple patterns and sequencing movements, the student must recall, retrieve and map the information.

The AMT DVD is designed to allow the student to creatively move to structured sequences and patterns in their own home, office or in a classroom for just 15 minutes a day, 2-3 times a week in order to see results. Autism Movement Therapy is a creative new approach that assists with the way that our kids interact with their peers, work in groups, and perform academically in the classroom.

I have found that after 12 weeks of two or three sessions a week, my students were more compliant when asked to complete on-task activities and they interacted with typical general education peers more frequently. And most important of all, the students developed an increased overall self-determination awareness, their self-esteem skills progressed, and they were capable of performing more independently overall. **TAP**

Joanne Lara, M.A., teaches special education courses at National University in Sherman Oaks, California. In addition to her private practice, she is a program supervisor with Inclusive Education and Community Partnership (IECP) in Los Angeles. Autism Movement Therapy DVDs are available on the website at <http://www.autismmovementtherapy.com/> and Joanne is available for lecture demonstrations, conferences, workshops and private consult. Autism Movement Therapy classes are currently offered for individuals with autism at The Vibe in Glendale, Ca. www.catchthevibestudio.com. Joanne can be reached at 323 240-0361.

Autism Movement Therapy Classes in Los Angeles, CA @ The Vibe Dance Studio <http://www.catchthevibestudio.com/> DVD's available at <http://www.autismmovementtherapy.com/> Reference

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