



Notes on movement and learning

A lot of issues that show up in a child's behaviour in school may not even be of an educational but rather of a neurological nature. I feel deeply for all those kids who get bullied and scolded and not 'just' by their classmates. Kids who do their best, yet struggle without getting any help or understanding, just because they fail to interpret their tasks with math or move awkwardly on the sports field.

Most of the children who come to Joya are bright but have some vestibular problem and/or they have retained some of the primitive reflexes which may prevent them from being relaxed and moving freely. Not only in this country, but wherever I have worked, I learned that a lot of teachers have little knowledge of developmental milestones and neurological development. Generally those who teach in Steiner, Montessori or Special Needs education are a bit better informed but overall still fail to sufficiently implement what they know. I did some teaching myself – crash courses of Dutch to refugees from various countries but also German and English in a few secondary schools – so have a bit of 'insider's knowledge'. I know how difficult it is just to manage a rowdy group of 25, let alone find the time 'let them move'. Nevertheless, I see no reason why teacher training couldn't be done better in this respect. "We lack the resources", is not a good enough argument. It's a re-thinking that is needed and a willingness to change and take on board the knowledge that is available.

Parents often instinctively know the potential of their children but just as often they are not taken seriously or believed by teachers. At Joya we work a lot with dyslexic kids but also with children who mainly struggle with math. Both groups often genuinely don't know what is asked from them. They are given some formulas and rules on spelling, they are checked on whether they know the tables by heart, but in many cases nothing is learned or understood beyond the drilling. So they are at a loss, lose interest and may become defiant or get the impression that they are 'dumb' anyway.

However strange that may seem, in order to spell correctly as well as to develop math skills we first of all need to move and become familiar with three-dimensional objects and our own body in time and space. Only then we are ready for the next phase where numbers and words on paper are introduced. From then on it will get so much easier to deal with abstract terminology. Even High School kids often have to go back to 'square one', to the phase of touching and feeling - and learn to relate to dimensions of an object before they can fully grasp and calculate measurements. So, instead of criticising or ridiculing the child who doesn't seem to 'get it', it would be fairer to acknowledge that the system has failed that child and see what can be done to remedy this.

What are the indicators for a possible neurological basis of your child's problems, which may be addressed by sensory integration/movement?

- an unusually high activity level - nervous gestures, easily distracted and excited
- an unusually low activity level - lack of initiative, little interest, easily tired
- lacks self control, can't wait for their turn
- lack of definite hand preference
- poor hand-eye coordination, difficulty with spatial awareness
- overly sensitive to change
- difficulty pronouncing words clearly and correctly
- particularly sensitive to noise, smell, sudden touch
- doesn't like running, jumping, climbing
- has a short attention span
- poor concentration
- frequently makes repetitive noises/sounds

fails to follow up requests

head in the clouds

irregular sleep patterns

overreacts to pain, or the opposite - hardly reacts at all

avoids or again the opposite - craves for - physical touch and nearness

has difficulty learning new movement activities and/or dislikes trying them

sticks out tongue, moves jaw, clenches fists while drawing, reading

has difficulty structuring activities

often squints, rubs eyes, gets a headache

reverses or confuses numbers or whole words

It's obvious that even with three or four ticks in the above list these issues will get in the child's way. Many of the characteristics are behavioural and again it is unfortunate that teachers and parents often will react to these behaviours with disappointment and irritation whereas the child really may be doing his/her best to do what is asked and expected. However, that will only be for a while because the next phase may be one of defiance or a 'couldn't care less' attitude.

In Joya we teach 'braingym' and other exercises training better integration of the senses. Sometimes this happens in groups, sometimes on an individual basis. There are home-based kits as well which we can provide, including balancing boards, little bean bags, and DVDs with lots of visual info that gives you step by step guidance.