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GETTING RHYTHM, HAVING A BALL!
Improvisation in *Functional Integration* – Lessons from Music

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As a dancer and performing artist, improvisation has long been essential to my work. As a *Feldenkrais* practitioner, I find it often necessary to switch horses in midstream, especially when working with children, – to go with the flow, respond in the moment, to improvise. And although I am not a musician, I had some recent experiences with a child which drew on two key facets of music: rhythm and improvisation.

I have worked with a ten-year old girl with cerebral palsy, Christina, for several years. When she first came to me at age 7, her father carried her in. During our time together, our work has been oriented towards developing her awareness of the parts of herself keeping her from walking. She has since gained much freedom in her feet, legs, pelvis, rib cage, shoulder blades, arms, spine, head, neck, jaw, and breath, and found a much greater connection in movement through all the parts of herself.

Christina's walking has developed gradually over time, and she has made great progress in the past year in cognition, following instructions, making eye contact, sitting up straight, walking with knees apart, making heel contact with the floor, and many other areas. She still has been challenged, though, to integrate all of the freedom she has found into effortless walking. She has tended to lurch, draw her elbows into her sides, keep her knees rigid, and has generally brought her fear into the act of walking. She has also remained in her own world to a great extent, often compulsively repeating a litany of names and phrases.

Recently I had the idea to work with the element of rhythm. My thinking was inspired by Ruthy Alon's emphasis in *Bones for Life*[®] on rhythmic movement, the idea that walking is a rhythmic action and that rhythm is an organizing tool – in other words, that rhythm can help the nervous system “tap in” to integrating all the parts of the body into unified movement, and so help transcend the confusion of disparate parts. I was also incorporating ideas from a recent workshop in Atlanta with Anat Baniel, and her emphasis on deeply connecting, engaging and playing with a child.

We are rhythmic beings living in a rhythmic world. Our hearts and lungs work rhythmically, walking is rhythmic, the moon orbits the earth and the earth orbits the sun rhythmically, and so on. But for children with cerebral palsy, voluntary movement is rarely rhythmic. Christina is a highly musical child with the ability to sing any song she has ever heard, but she does not do so rhythmically. She takes piano lessons but does not play rhythmically. She learned to swim at one year old, but does not stroke rhythmically. And without rhythm, walking is a great effort.

I began with Christina lying on her back, feet standing, gently tapping her knees together while counting “1, 2, 3, 4.” After a while, she chimed in on “4,” beginning to participate and

engage in the experience. I pushed upwards from below her knees, alternately left and right, to lift her feet so they could come down in “steps,” still counting. After a while I paused before “4,” and she began to fill in the number. I then asked her to put her *own* foot down, and she began to do so. I provided some resistance so she could feel herself clearly, and soon she was initiating each step. She slowed the process down and it became slightly less rhythmic, but we continued to count.

I moved on to tapping her bent elbows on the table (taking the elbows backward is an action she doesn't do easily), gently clapping her hands left and right on her stomach, and other variations. Christina continued saying a number of the counts out loud and continued initiating the movement against the resistance I provided. At the end of the lesson, with me counting, she took seven steps on her own in perfect rhythm. It seemed clear that she was thinking about the counts, and not about falling. As she walked to the car afterwards – uphill and on grass – she took 20 steps, all in clear rhythm!

My thought was that, if she were to focus on rhythm rather than on the difficulties of walking, she would be able to walk more easily. In fact, stepping rhythmically to the car, she was like a different child. She still leaned on her dad on this trek, but that was OK – she was progressing, step by step.

Christina had been very much engaged in this rhythmic lesson, more so than at any time in the past. She had made repeated eye contact and had never once reverted to reciting her litany of names and phrases. Her breathing – that autonomic rhythmic function – had also deepened considerably.

The next week, she walked in differently. Her father was behind her but she walked without assistance, her arms in front of her, elbows less pulled into her sides. She looked more solid and more confident. She spontaneously lay on the table with feet together, knees *apart* – not her usual preference. When I began “clapping” her feet together in rhythm, she said very clearly and directly, “I don't like that.” For Christina, this was a huge leap in direct communication with me. I immediately stopped and began to tap her *knees* gently together, and she did not object. I had received a definite signal to change horses in midstream.

One of Christina's habitual patterns of movement is to clap her hands forcefully together, lifting her head suddenly off the table. At this lesson we worked with clapping hands in a different way – quietly and gently, sitting, and in 4's – helping her brain differentiate between different kinds of clapping, and helping her know more clearly what she does when she engages in her habitual pattern.

Also in sitting, I worked with stamping her feet alternately left and right on the floor, again counting in 4's. Christina filled in the blanks by saying the numbers and initiating the movements where I paused. Stamping was an especially big development. Recently she has been able to sit with her feet flat on the ground and understands a request to do so. For a long time, though, her feet would hover just above the floor. In her brain, she has not understood gravity's pull on them, or what the floor was for. But when I stamped her feet for her, there was no resistance and they made a loud, clear, “slapping” noise. Her father and I were amazed. She

was also able to do the movement herself and make noise with her heels – not as clear a slapping sound, but distinct nonetheless.

Again inspired by Anat Baniel (from her book, *Kids Beyond Limits*), we also spent time playing with a “juggling scarf” – a soft fabric that wafts rather than falls directly. This delay made it easier for her to catch the scarf and was teaching her success rather than difficulty. She plays ball with her parents at home, but because eye/hand coordination is challenging (she had two surgeries as an infant for crossed and lazy eyes), throwing has been easier than catching. Christina was tremendously engaged with this activity with the “floating” scarf. She didn’t always track the scarf with her eyes, but when she did, she could catch it. At one point she successfully snatched the scarf from my hands, and was extremely pleased with herself.

I also used the scarf’s movement around her when she was lying on her back to encourage reaching – not just to straighten her arm, but to extend through her spine, ribs and pelvis. At one point she rolled over almost to her side in reaching for the scarf, again looking like a different child, as rolling has not been easy for her.

In addition to my stamping Christina’s feet down right and left on the table as she lay on her back (all the time counting), I asked her to *lift* her feet right and left to stamp them. I asked her a couple of times, but this movement was challenging for her. Suddenly, she let out a huge sneeze, and *both* feet (and her head) flew up into the air! She, her father and I all had a huge laugh at this. Christina was being the master of improvisation.

At the end of the lesson as I was counting in fours and extending her arms left and right overhead (left/right alternation of the arms a key component of walking she hasn’t had). Christina began singing with gusto. I barely knew the song but was able to discern some kind of tune and the fact that it was in a four-count. I began to sing the tune with her, counting “1,2,3,4,” over and over. We created a beautiful medley with many different pieces coming together: her singing words; the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4; rhythmic movement; and alternating use of arms. We had a lovely and impromptu blending of musical improvisation and the *Feldenkrais Method*...

When Christina walked out to the car this time, she wasn’t able to find the same rhythmic stepping as before. But again, she walked in a very non-habitual way. Every few steps she would stoop, deeply bend her knees and stick out her pelvis, reaching for the ground. Her parents had taught her to reach for the floor years ago if she felt she was going to fall, but she hasn’t done it much lately. This was a far more relaxed walking than her more usual “lurch” – she was using her arms functionally as opposed to compulsively drawing elbows into her sides, her shoulders were relaxed, and her knees were much more fully bending. In addition, she was viewing the ground as friend, rather than foe.

Again, Christina was developing “one step at a time,” with the idea that she won’t get everything at once, but is continually breaking out of habitual, non-productive patterns and trying something new, evidence of learning that will further and further wake up her brain and allow her to become more and more functional.

In utilizing rhythm, play, improvisation, and a strong connection with Christina in these lessons, we both really had a ball. I can’t wait to see what happens next!