

# A BALANCED BRAIN EQUALS A BALANCED PERSON: SOMATIC EDUCATION

By Martha Eddy, CMA, RSMT, Ed.D.

*"A fully functioning body creates a fully functioning person."*

*I believe that if children do not go through all neuro-motor development patterns then they do not develop their sensory-motor systems completely. When you have gaps in your sensory processing then you cannot make good "connections" and your actions are inappropriate (i.e. no belly crawling relates to poor horizontal eye tracking and in turn poor eye convergence which lead to the inability to see letters properly making it difficult to read well.)"*\* Anne Green Gilbert, Dance Educator and founder of BrainDance.

As Green-Gilbert suggests in the quote above, in order to act at all we first need to sense our world (including ourselves), then to "connect to it," and finally to have the capacity to move in response. Somatic awareness is a key to sensing, feeling (connecting), and acting. The connecting comes when we sense ourselves - it solidifies our knowledge in our body and that prepares us for action. We sense, we register our experience somatically, and then we can decide what we want. We are more equipped to respond accurately and effectively.

## MISSING THE SIXTH SENSE:

The kinesthetic sense (sometimes referred to as the missing 6th sense) is often overlooked even though it is critical in developing the body-mind connection. When we "read" body language we are doing our own subtle assessments of children's integration through their movement. Movement requires sensing both one's body and where we are in space through the proprioceptive sense (the receptors in our joints and muscles that help us feel ourselves). The vestibular system needs to be functioning well for our balance and timing to be "on." This inner ear mechanism is telling us about our relationship to gravity as well as our speed of stopping and starting. Many children with learning difficulties, especially those with attention issues, are not registering

this information.

Since our culture does not routinely train us to use this key to self-regulation it isn't even talked about much, swept under the rug. The good news is that people are demanding a more orderly world - a world that integrates the "hidden" kinesthetic sense (our intero-receptors - proprioception and vestibular awareness) with the more external receptors of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch. This body awareness sense of kinesthesia is a key to the body-mind connection. The body-mind connection has a long history in Eastern philosophy as the "yoga craze" is teaching us. What is not as known is that for over one hundred years Westerners have also been investigating critical body-mind-brain-psyche connections through this process called somatic education. This body of knowledge uses movement, sensitive touch and skillful dialogue to support learning and personal authority.

## THE BRAIN CONNECTION:

Programs making great advances with children also emphasize the neurological underpinnings of movement. Educators and therapists trained in somatic practices are using movement and body awareness for academic learning, stress reduction, classroom management, experiential learning, and one-to-one remedial sessions at different points during the extended school day to address cognitive, emotional and physical delays and disabilities. Somatic exploration is revealing clues for how to fill in gaps in neurological development that leads to big strides amongst children with learning challenges, autism, CP, diverse developmental delays, and hyperactivity. Somatic awareness is also practical for youth contending with the development of scoliosis and other postural and coordination problems.

In the classroom setting, somatic education can be used as the foundation for experiential learning - for example, allowing students to learn anatomy



through exploring each system of the body physically - by touching a body part and moving it. This process is central to one somatic discipline, Body Mind Centering®, and kids love it! Moving a math concept is also experiential and gives students a chance to learn math using a different "intelligence." Teachers can guide the process by asking children how it feels to be shaped like a four; to travel on four limbs; to be attached to four friends supporting a progression from number recognition to basic addition. They can take small quick steps (60) and large slow steps (12) around a clock drawn on the ground with colored chalk to feel the rhythmic and spatial difference between how the minute hand moves and how the hour hand moves.

Somatic Education also addresses sensory processing disorders. Occupational Therapists have sensory gyms that are great for helping to stimulate a myriad of sensory experiences. Somatic Education also focuses on the neurological perception of sensations (how we interpret our world) and the perceptions role in the "sensory-motor loop." Somatic activities include carefully selected types of touch to help the child respond to sensation with assisted motor responses (actions) using neuro-motor developmental knowledge. Through the use of set developmental movement sequences (e.g., those important build-

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ing blocks of movement that foster the brain development of babies – rolling, crawling, sitting, creeping, balancing, standing that later become walking, hopping, skipping and leaping) children have another chance to stimulate neurological pathways. We also use open ended movement explorations to challenge children and to meet their unique neurological demands.

In a classroom setting the process of teaching to diverse learning styles is helped by the neuro-motor system of assessment. Teachers see student's uniqueness as well as find commonality by drawing children's attention to the fact that every human has a body. Educational experiences can focus on particular body parts to begin with and then address internal physical sensations as well as our bodies' abilities to perceive our environment. It is our body that leads us to mathematical, analytic, musical, kinesthetic, natural, social and literary modes of inquiry.

### SOMATIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS:

Leaders of pre-K through grade 12 programs are choosing to include somatic approaches in their dance studios, movement classes, music lessons, gymnasiums, and in their academic classrooms. Why? What is a somatic approach? Somatic education teaches children to be self-reflective by paying attention to body cues in themselves and others. This body-mind awareness is taught so that children can feel more comfortable within themselves, and have access to automatic and balanced responses to stresses (and we know that by definition, learning something new is a change of homeostasis – a stressor). Having greater ease in basic movement coordination then affords children the ease to develop a wider palette of creative choices in any situation. Children become more creative in both their verbal and non-verbal responses. For examples, by being concretely self-aware, children make different artistic choices in a dance setting and they tune in better to their friends' physical behavior at recess supporting creative and peaceful conflict resolution. By teaching any con-

cept or skill using somatic awareness (often using movement and games) there is the extra benefit of enjoying the learning process! We learn best when the discovery process is pleasurable. And we all know that having fun helps to relieve the inevitable stressors of growing up.

While supporting the key educational outcomes of enhanced academic, social, creative and motor performance, the somatic approach aims as well to enhance each individual's overall health, the classroom's "spirit," and the school's emotional well-being. Somatic education also teaches new models of educational leadership inclusive of sensitive communication with parents, and with children with unique stories, across the grade levels.



### MOVEMENT AT SCHOOL:

Movement classes provide children with opportunities to explore their bodies, express themselves rhythmically, and to practice multi-cultural appreciation. Movement therapists know how to integrate body-mind expression into motor skill development in private and group settings. Movement interventions that are steeped in sensory-motor knowledge (i.e., BrainDance®, BrainGym®, Interactive Metronome®, Relax to Focus®, Developmental Movement Therapy and Ways of Seeing®) are each assessment and intervention systems that recognize the body-mind connection.

Somatic education and movement centers exist around the country and world. It will be exciting to see how schools continue to infuse somatic awareness into educational strategies as they seek to help children to learn with more bodily self-confidence, so that youngsters may gain skills and knowledge with more ease!

*Dr. Martha Eddy is the founder/director of the Center for Kinesthetic Education. She has provided her Peaceful Play Programming® and Relax to Focus® method in both independent and public schools through the Tri-State area. She is a member of the faculty at SUNY, lectures internationally, and provides professional training through her Somatic Movement Therapy Training. She*

*maintains a small private practice as a somatic movement therapist for children and adults as well.*

## RESOURCES

### 1) Center for Kinesthetic Education

[www.WellnessCKE.net](http://www.WellnessCKE.net)  
Martha Eddy, CMA, Ed.D.  
Director  
151 West 30th Street #200  
New York NY

### 2) Dancing Dialogue Center

Suzi Tortora CMA, ED.D  
[www.SuziTortora.org](http://www.SuziTortora.org)  
Cold Spring, New York  
Phone #: 845-265-1085  
Fax: 845-739-1096  
Email: [suzitortora.org](mailto:suzitortora.org)

### 3) JABADAO Centre for Movement Studies

[www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)  
Leeds, England

### 4) Moving on Center

[www.MovingOnCenter.org](http://www.MovingOnCenter.org)  
Director - Carol Swann  
Oakland CA  
Phone#: 510-834-1469  
Email: [info@movingoncenter.org](mailto:info@movingoncenter.org)

### 5) Seattle Creative Art Center for Movement and Dance

[www.creativeartcenter.org](http://www.creativeartcenter.org)  
Director: Anne Green Gilbert  
Seattle WA  
PHONE# 206-363-7281  
Fax: 206-525-6358

### 6) Somatic Studies at The Ohio State University - School of Education

Professor Emeritus -  
Seymour Kleinman  
Columbus Ohio

### 7) Sparkplug Dance: Developmental Movement and Creative Dance

[www.sparkplug.org](http://www.sparkplug.org)

### 8) The Developmental Movement Center

[www.DevelopmentalMovement.org](http://www.DevelopmentalMovement.org)  
Director: Bette Lamont  
Seattle, Washington  
Phone # 206-525-8038  
Fax: 206-417-3265  
[dm@developmentalmovement.org](mailto:dm@developmentalmovement.org)