Excerpts taken from Chapter 1 of *Autism Movement Therapy® Method: Waking up the Brain!*

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What is Autism Movement Therapy?

When I left my credentialed teaching position in the Los Angeles Unified School District classroom, where I had taught students with moderate/severe disabilities for over ten years in a special day class setting, and where I first began incorporating music and movement into the daily classroom schedule, I suspected but did not entirely understand the profound role that music and movement would play in actual speech and language production. It was that teaching experience and the ability to work with hundreds of kids in those early years that lent itself to the development and goals of the AMT method.

AMT is a fun, empowering sensory integration tool. The AMT method blends multi-sensory, structured movement and music experiences with Positive Behavior Support (PBS) to connect the left and right hemispheres of the brain. AMT appeals to all people of all ages, and supports strengthening and building a “whole brain,” cognitive approach—or interhemispheric integration—to significantly increase skills and behaviors through the body and brain connection.

AMT combines patterning, visual movement calculation, audile receptive processing, rhythm and sequencing into “whole brain” cognitive thinking skills through connections that can significantly impact and improve a wide variety of autism’s deficits. AMT is a natural strategy for individuals with autism and related disorders, and provides individuals with limited speech and language communication skills, in particular, a way to express what words fail to do. AMT allows the non-verbal or impaired verbal individual self-expression through music and movement while developing a strong sense of self-determination and independence, undoubtedly one of the most important tools that the student will develop in their skill set.

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Big Dreams, Big Goals

The primary goal of AMT is that after 12–14 weeks of two or three 12-minute sessions per week (as demonstrated in the AMT aut-erobics DVD), or one 45-minute AMT class over the same time period, the individual will be more compliant when asked to complete on-task activities, will interact with typical general education peers more frequently and will have better use of the four lobes of the brain for processing. Increased overall self-determination awareness and self-regulation, along with healthier, improved self-esteem that equates to community inclusion and job opportunities is the ultimate goal. We always ask parents where they see their child in 5, 10, 15 years. As parents, this can be a frightening question to ponder. AMT offers a way to track progress and encourage the development of skills that will be necessary to support inclusive futures. With big dreams and big goals, the AMT method helps us to see those possibilities.

Movement and Music Helps Develop Essential Core Skills

In addition to simple, fun exercise and social interaction, AMT helps to develop essential skills and positively affects autism’s challenges, including:

- speech, language and communication
- gross and fine motor skills/planning
- proprioception, balance and spatial orientation
- sensory processing and integration
- social and life skills
- physical health and wellness
- self-esteem, self-awareness and self-determination
- anxiety and depression.

“Joanne’s class helped make my balance better. I feel good about that.”

—Emma, aged 13

It is typical for children like Emma to start out in AMT classes with behavioral challenges, anxiety and body balance/coordination deficits. At eight years old, Emma was unsure—or unaware—of where her body was situated in relationship to the environment and people around her (poor body-to-environment challenge). In class, she was significantly challenged by the movements and routines of AMT. Carol Kranowitz tells us in her book The Out-of-Sync Child that oftentimes perceptual motor therapy, or integrated movement experiences that remediate gross-motor, fine-motor and visual discrimination problems, stimulate alternative routes to the memory and sequencing for children who do not respond to the methods taught in the conventional classroom (2005, p.224).

For years, Emma had participated in intensive occupational therapy (OT). OT had helped with many of her challenges,
but in this new environment, Emma was unable to move her body as a unit through space in the class. Whether attempting to imitate the instructions of “arms in the air,” “feet apart,” “feet together,” or just execute simple slides across the room, Emma struggled to move her body parts in unison. Her head, like many kids with autism, preceded her body as she crossed the floor, her legs behind her. Her brain was not wired (yet) to send the proper and necessary signals to her body for her to follow the routines.

Note: we say “yet,” because the very idea of changing or altering brain connectivity after a certain age remains controversial amongst experts. But we believe in the concept of neuroplasticity, as we will discuss in Chapter 2, which supports the idea that the brain can indeed form new connections that improve both physical and mental abilities.

The initial expectations for Emma when she began taking the AMT class in the winter of 2008 were two-fold: a) to help her to become comfortable in the environment; and b) to introduce her to the AMT movement patterns and sequences. She also needed time to adjust to yet another new and unfamiliar teacher in her life. After several weeks, and as Emma’s trust in the environment grew, she began to bond with her class peers and become more comfortable in her new surroundings. It was exciting to see whole body movements begin to emerge. Over time, Emma developed more confidence and enjoyment in the sessions. She did not become comfortable with becoming a leader for at least a year ... but with us wanting all kids to be leaders, it happened. Not all children are ready in the beginning, but all of them flourish when they become leader. They let us know when they are ready.

Say “Cheese!”

Looking at old film footage of Emma is one way we can see her improvement over time. It is useful to use video and film to document dance, drama, music and art sessions; that way, you can create a realistic visual and auditory baseline of the child’s present level of performance, and then, over time, you and the parents can document growth and development just like you would in a classroom setting. The parents appreciate this as well. “Seeing” is generally better than “telling,” and

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“asking” always trumps telling. When we ask, we stimulate the higher-level thinking skills thereby “waking up the brain.” Case in point, if you “tell your student to go put his backpack away in the cubby,” you have not required the brain to do any “work,” but if you ask, “where do you need to put your backpack?” then you have asked the brain to engage. To formulate a question requires a thought process for an answer. This very act of the student thinking “where do I need to put my backpack?” activates lobes in the brain and stimulates neurons.

Videotaping a child is also a highly useful and effective tool to use in helping a child to “see” themselves. When they see how they present themselves to the world; what their body, their movements and facial expressions look like, new discussions and learning can unfold. Keri used to film and photograph her son, Taylor, when he was a young boy. Taylor is now 27 years old and lives independently through state and federal funding in a small town in southern California. From the time he was one year old and couldn’t crawl or talk, Keri would show him video footage or photographs and ask: “What does Taylor see?” or “Is Taylor happy or sad?” Because he could not speak outside of unintelligible babbles—it would be years before he would speak—she would talk to him as if he understood her. Keri’s intuition and her heart told her he would understand her words if she acted as if he could. This is what we mean by raising the bar.

Keri would add opinions to her questions such as, “It looks to me like Taylor feels sad. Is Taylor sad?” Then she would frown to help model the expression of “sad.” Over time, in the years and language that ultimately followed, Taylor emerged as reasonably sensitive to the emotions and feelings of self and others. He was self-aware, and able to look outside of his previously isolated world. Was this an accident or simply normal development? Considering autism, I don’t think so. It was hard work, creativity and dedication that brought this inward, isolated child out into the light.

The Ease and Naturally Enjoyable Aspects of Autism Movement Therapy

Whether verbal or non-verbal, students new to AMT methods often start the classes overwhelmed and overstimulated. Kids who are bombarded by a barrage of daily and/or
weekly therapies are often emotionally and physically oversaturated by interventions beyond school-time activities. Though highly valuable, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), speech and language, OT and other more rigid interventions overload our children. That is partly why the organically fun nature of AMT can be a welcome relief over traditional therapies. Of course there are structure and expectations that students must follow, but those expectations are “hidden” within the framework of this more relaxed, “recreational” activity. In more intense interventions, obedience determines the reward. In AMT, just being a part of the expressive movement and music is the reward—and the skills gained are the benefits.

The ease and naturally enjoyable aspects of movement and music are key factors in seeing a group of kids—who start out as Neal and Emma did with core anxiety and behavioral issues—transform, flourish and eagerly perform in sync with one another. When our core AMT group in Los Angeles performs in live stage productions, it is a brilliant phenomenon to witness the bright faces and fierce determination of the participants to perform their roles. When the stage lights go on, the curtains go up and the show begins, tears begin flowing from family members; moms and dads who were initially leery that their child could actually perform live on a stage. This happens every time! We make contingencies for those kids who might elope or get stage fright, but we never have to use those contingencies because the reward is in the movement and music, and kids are inspired to “show up” for the show.

Joanne Lara, MA, founder of Autism Movement Therapy, and recipient of two Autism Speaks grants, was the autism expert on the FoxTV show Touch, and is core adjunct faculty at National University in Los Angeles. Lara produced the documentary Generation A: Portraits of Autism & the Arts. For AMT Certification and licensing, visit www.autismmovementtherapy.org.

Keri Bowers is the co-founder of The Art of Autism (www.the-art-of-autism.com) and owner of Normal Films (www.normalfilms.com). Her films, Normal People Scare Me, The Sandwich Kid, and ARTS, embody possibilities, disabilities, and the arts. Kerri is a consultant on the “art” of transitions and skills development. Production on Normal People Scare Me Too is currently underway, and due for release in early 2016.