



Moving Bodies. Moving Minds

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Building bridges through Play- A dance movement therapy perspective on engagement through movement based play with neurodiverse individuals.

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Everyone has something to learn through play:

Play is an activity that consists of a mixture of familiar and new ideas that are an amalgamation of creative imagination and general thinking. There are many psychological theories of development that stress on the imaginative, cultural and interactive elements of play and their effect on the development of an individual. The role of play is often seen in two forms :

(1) a leisure activity for recreation or recuperation.

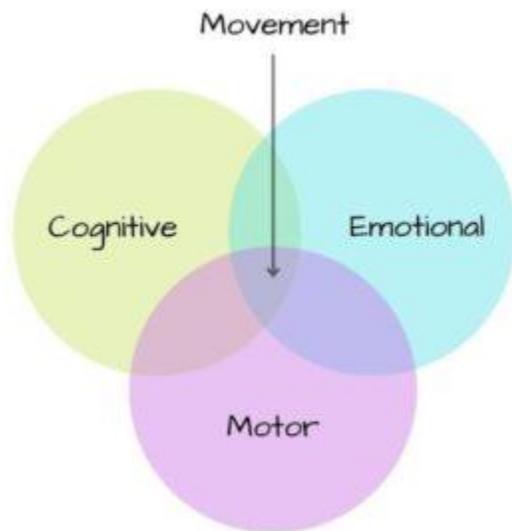
(2) Structured activity focused on developing specific skills, including social and cognitive skills

For Parents/ Caregivers of neurodiverse individuals, building the optimal capacity of independence and functionality becomes a driving force of most interactions. Play, then in this population, takes the form of a structured activity targeted at skill development or self-engaged solitary activity. Play also offers a strong base of support when overwhelmed. It is essential to incorporate various forms of interactions to allow for such holistic development.

This article will expand on movement-based play that is drawn from Dance Movement Therapy.

What is Dance Movement Therapy?

Every individual has a pattern of development that influences their cognitive skills, motor ability, and emotional capacity. The fourth tier of development that is drawn from a child's capacity to engage in specific qualities of movements and body rhythms supports development in other areas. Focusing on developing all these categories parallelly helps the child reinforce learned behaviors through multiple channels.



Some themes of movement-related play include:

Reflective Interactions: The adult reflects or mirrors child-led free movement. The child begins to move in a way that they desire, and the adult follows them like a mirror. This helps build a synchronous movement experience by creating a pathway of open communication and understanding. The child is encouraged to explore free initiation of movement while being able to have that movement accepted and shared with the adult. This parallelly allows the adult to explore and understand the child's perspective from their experience. It also gives an opportunity to learn the child's preferences and comfort zones regarding body movement.

Conversation / Dialogue interactions: The adult and child could engage in an initiation and response-based interaction. This gradually builds into a dialogue of spontaneous movement interaction. The interaction could include verbal and nonverbal elements. The adult and child could take turns in initiating.

Prop Engagement: Sometimes, bringing in an additional prop helps in building playful intentions. These could be toys or games that have a present intention (jenga blocks, percussion instruments, building blocks etc) or free intention (scarves, balls, balloons, bubbles etc). Using a

prop can help build and sustain the child's interest in the activity and help alleviate the pressure of initiating and responding to movement.

Learning-Based interactions: Learning can be categorized into two parts

i) Understanding of a concept

ii) Application of concept in relevant areas

For example, Learning the concept of code-based segregation vs. applying the learned concept in an exam or a real-life situation. Creative engagement can help neurodiverse individuals channel their focus to grasping the content. The engagement can be tailored, keeping in mind the level of sensory stimulation and challenges with sustained focus. Moving beyond a table chair set up, Dance Movement Therapy incorporates the use of space, encouraging the children to move and engage their body supporting the absorption of information. This helps the parent/caregiver understand the child's preferences and work towards strengthening them and making them more efficient.

Aside from the primary role as a Parent/Caregiver they often take on multiple roles, including that of a teacher, physical trainer, and playmate. Having a clearer understanding of these roles and creating variations in interaction and play styles helps create a more stimulating experience for the caregiver as well as the child. Play is a complex interaction between one's inner world and external environment. Through fantasy, giving real situations new meanings, these interactions can help build bridges of communication between the caregivers and the children, giving each an opportunity to share their world while learning more about that of the other.