

Movement with Young Children
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A report from the Gradalis Conference, 1998.

I attended the Gradalis conference, “Therapeutic Education for the Early Childhood Educator”, this summer in Denver, Colorado. The keynote speakers were Bonnie River and William Bento from Boulder, Colorado, and Dr. Bruno Callegaro from Kassel, Germany. I came away with many “gifts” from this conference - perhaps the greatest one being an understanding of the importance of healthy movement for the young child.

Much of the conference focused on the four lower senses; balance, touch, life and the sense of self movement. Early in the conference the participants were led through an obstacle course. We walked across a balance beam, a few feet off the ground, hung off monkey bars, jumped from rock to rock, skipped, hopped and twirled over a bar that was waist high - to name but a few activities. All fifty-five of us completed the course according to our own abilities, experiencing the variety of different movements. In our discussions afterwards, the overwhelming consensus was that we felt challenged but enlivened, uplifted, and full of life. We then explored each activity to find out which of the four lower senses were involved in these various movements. In walking the balance beam, for example, we experienced:

1. Balance
2. Touch - feet on the beam
3. Self movement - An impulse coming from within to actually. propel ourselves forward across the beam.
4. Life - This sense was experienced in those of us who felt fear or “being on the edge”. In talking about the activities of the obstacle course in this way, we realized that each movement involved at least two of the lower senses.

From this simple exercise it became crystal clear how vitally important it is for the young child to experience healthy movement. To run up and down hills, play on the teeter totter, and skip. Playing quietly in the sand box has its merits and can be a therapy for children, but this should not be the goal for outdoor play. All this movement was once a natural part of childhood, but it is quickly disappearing. We are now seeing children who can't or won't move. In the past few years Bonnie River has incorporated into her outdoor play time a simple obstacle course. She leads the children through the course while telling them an imaginative story and singing songs. Bonnie has noticed that children are less and less active. Twenty years ago movement through. obstacle courses was not necessary, but now it is because many children are not initiating movement on their own. (During a parents' evening, the teacher could lead parents through a simple obstacle course so that the parents experience the exhilaration of movement first hand.)

We also participated in two wonderful circles and afterwards we discussed what we observed in the movement. What are the movement elements we need to incorporate into our circles? We discussed forwards, backwards, sideways, up and down, crossing the vertical and horizontal midline barriers and having an active right hand and a supportive left hand. These are all important movement elements that can be experienced during circle time.

So, I have returned to the kindergarten and reexamined my circles to see if they actually contain some or all of these healthy movements, and outdoor play has also changed. We run to the playground and swing and slide and climb all with great joy and enthusiasm. If the four lower senses transform into the four higher senses, then we carry the responsibility to bring these possibilities to the children. We always meet

the four middle senses sight, hearing, smell and taste - so it is really these four lower sense that need attention. The children bring their will to these movements, climbing over and over again until they can finally climb the tree with the same perseverance as when they first learned to walk.