

# BODY AWARENESS TRAINING FOR CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION PROBLEMS<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

I am a somatic educator and martial artist, and in the last couple of years, more and more children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Asperger's Syndrome have been referred to me for body awareness training. Children with these developmental disorders have a hard time filtering out or controlling responses to distracting environmental stimuli, which makes it difficult for them to focus on tasks they are trying to perform. Many display inability to control impulses, physical restlessness, and excessive activity. Many display peculiar or awkward patterns of coordination or gait.

Using the body awareness training methods that I have developed, it is actually fairly easy to teach children with such disorders how to self-monitor and self-regulate. With just a few hours of instruction, most of the children I have seen have learned to focus and maintain focus even in stimulating, distracting environments. In addition, they have learned more graceful, effective styles of movement.

Part of what ordinarily makes it difficult to teach concentration is that it is usually thought of and experienced as a seamless, mental process. How do you concentrate? Well, you just put your mind on something. However, that kind of languaging *names* the process but doesn't explain how to do it, and someone who cannot naturally focus does not benefit from merely being told to do so. In the same way, graceful coordination or impulse management cannot be taught simply by asking people to move gracefully or control their impulses. The key to teaching the skills of concentration, coordination and impulse management is to reframe them as body awareness processes and break those body process down into small, concrete learning steps.

I generally see children with attention problems for three to five one-hour private sessions of body awareness training. That is usually enough to teach them the focusing

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and self-regulation techniques that I have developed. Many children move into my children's Aikido classes after the series of private lessons. The private sessions are much quieter and less complex an environment than a martial art class with ten or fifteen children, and so kids with attention problems find private lessons much easier as a starting point. The Aikido classes offer them a venue to continue practicing self-awareness, focusing, movement coordination, impulse management, and social functioning.

This paper will briefly describe the teaching methods I use, and it will do so through presenting my case notes for one child<sup>2</sup>. My focus was to help the young boy identify what he did in his body which is labeled “not paying attention” and then learn ways to replace those counter-productive somatic behaviors with more effective somatic processes.

Before jumping into the case notes, however, let me say a few words about the somatic education modality<sup>3</sup> I have developed, which I call Being In Movement® mindbody training. BIM is an educational method which uses practical movement experiments to help people learn how to examine the body as the self, and it explores the underlying links between structural/functional efficiency, emotional growth, and social functioning. BIM views the body as both an objective process governed by rules of physics and biology and a subjective process of lived consciousness governed by rules of awareness, emotion, and energy flow. By examining how breathing, posture, and movement simultaneously *shape* and are *shaped by* thoughts, feelings, and intentions, BIM teaches people to develop an integrated mindbody state of awareness, calmness, power, and gentleness and use that state as a foundation for effective action.

BIM<sup>4</sup> has been effective as a complement to psychotherapy for people with such issues in the areas of body image, anxiety, impulse control, dissociation, or abuse. By

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<sup>2</sup> In the field of body awareness education, the standard approach to explaining a specific training method is to describe the experience and the practical results of a series of sessions. This phenomenological way of writing conveys a vicarious understanding of the method. I believe that ultimately it will be important to perform rigorous research evaluating and quantifying the specific results attained by any method, but that will have to wait until researchers become aware of the field and become interested in studying it.

<sup>3</sup> In the last seventy years or so, a whole field of mind/body awareness education has arisen. There is a book which is both an excellent introduction to the ideas underlying the broad variety of somatic disciplines and an encyclopedic listing of all the major forms of somatic work available: *Discovering the Body's Wisdom: A comprehensive guide to more than fifty mind-body practices that can relieve pain, reduce stress, and foster health, spiritual growth, and inner peace*. Mirka Knaster. New York: Bantam Books, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> On my website, in addition to general explanatory material, there are a number of papers about various specific applications of BIM. Go to [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

guiding people to a concrete experience of what they are doing in their bodies and how to change that, BIM offers rapid, practical tools for self-awareness and empowerment and thereby enables the process of therapy to work more effectively. BIM has also been effective in physical task applications ranging from prevention of computer-related injuries to performance enhancement for musicians and athletes.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **FIRST LESSON: 5/7/02**

The following case study describes three private lessons and follow up Aikido classes with a boy we can call Joe. He was seven years old, and he was referred by a pediatric neuropsychologist, who diagnosed him as ADHD with inattentive and overactive/impulsive features, along with some dyslexia.

My first observation about Joe was that he was in constant movement. When I asked him to sit still, he continued to move. When I tried to get him to pay attention to me, the constant movement interfered.

My first task in working with any student is to give them a clear and interesting experience of success at self-management. That lets them understand what I mean by self-management, gives them graphic proof that they are capable of it, and shows them that it is fun and useful. With children, I usually approach this self-management experience through Linden's Glorious Anti-Tickle Technique, and that is what I started Joe's first lesson with. I began by explaining the exercise to him, asking permission to do it, and explaining that he could tell me at any moment to stop tickling him and I would. When he gave his permission, I tickled him. Of course, he was convulsed with helpless laughter.

The essence of not being ticklish lies in keeping the muscles and breathing relaxed and the body quiet and still. To begin teaching Joe how to do this, I had him lie on his back and asked him to observe how he breathed. I noticed that when he paid attention to his breathing, he tensed and elevated his chest when he inhaled, and at the top of the inhalation, he actually held his breathe for a moment. However, he wasn't able to identify or understand that he was breathing this way even when I pointed it out to him.

To give him concrete feedback about how he was breathing, I put a small rock on his tummy and one on his chest. The rocks amplified and made obvious the movements of his breathing. I pointed out that he moved much more in his chest than in his belly. To help him experience an alternate way of breathing, I put my hand on his tummy as a focus and asked him to breathe in such a way that the inhalation pushed his belly out and pushed my hand away. Normally, this is all it takes to get most people to start breathing more from their bellies. (They may not understand or be able to sustain the new way of

breathing, but at least this usually jump starts it.) However, when I asked Joe to breathe and push his belly out, he tensed his breathing, sucked in his belly, elevated his chest, and held his breath at the top of the inhalation. In other words, he did the opposite of what I asked. He was totally out of touch with what he was doing in his body and how to control it.

When do people naturally and normally breathe high in the chest? When they are startled or afraid. The important point is that breathing as though you were fearful elicits the mind/body state of hypervigilance and arousal and ensures that you will react with excessive excitation to stimuli that present themselves. And conversely, deliberately putting the body into a mode of breathing in which the belly is soft creates physical quietness and mental focus.

It was clear to me that Joe was so far from being able to organize his breathing for himself that in order to proceed I would myself have to draw him into a calm physical state. My hope was that once he had experienced a calm, focused body state, I would be able to teach him to deliberately return to that state.

I did about ten minutes of hands-on body work, and at the end of that, Joe was lying quietly and breathing calmly. I pointed out to Joe that he was quiet and relaxed and that he was breathing from a soft tummy. To help him grasp what soft tummy meant, I had him alternate tensing and loosening his belly, which he was now able to do. Then I had him put his hands on his tummy so he could focus on feeling it, and I had him deliberately soften his tummy and breathe from there, which he could also now do.

However, a new skill without an attractive application never seems worth much to students, so I had to set up a situation in which Joe could experience the usefulness of that calm state. We played Thumb War. Once the competition and the stimulation of competing to pin my thumb got him aroused, I pointed out that he could not move his thumb as effectively. Joe felt that being overexcited interfered with his coordination. Then I asked him to soften his tummy and breathe softly, and he experienced that that helped him thumb wrestle better. (With other children, I have often done much the same thing in playing tag, hitting a baseball, or whatever activity the children were interested in.) At this point in the lesson, Joe had experienced a new way of breathing and that it was useful and fun to breathe this way. Now he had both a new skill and an anchor for it.

After that, we went from my office room into the Aikido practice room, which has a mat of 40 x 40 feet. I had Joe run as fast as he could, as wildly as he could, screaming as loudly as he could. But when I clapped my hands, the game was that he had to instantly drop to a *seiza* (pronounced say-zah) sitting position on the mat and practice soft tummy breathing. *Seiza* is the Japanese way of sitting, kneeling with the feet tucked under you. *Seiza* makes it much easier to maintain a balanced, erect sitting posture, and it is very conducive to calm, open breathing, which is why it is employed in the Japanese martial arts.

Joe loved the game, and it gave him an opportunity to practice switching from hyper mode to calm, focused mode. After all that, we went back into the office, and I had him focus on soft tummy breathing while I attempted to tickle him. And he was surprised to find that the same tickling movements I had made forty minutes ago no longer felt at all ticklish. That capped for him a sense of how much he could accomplish by paying attention to himself.

I suggested to him and his parents that between lessons Joe could spend sixty seconds a day sitting seiza and practicing soft tummy breathing.

### **SECOND LESSON: 5/28/02**

Joe came for his second lesson three weeks later, and I asked him about his homework. He showed me how he was practicing soft tummy breathing: when he inhaled, he tensed his throat, puffed up his chest, and raised his eyebrows. That did not surprise me. A person's manner of breathing is a very fundamental part of their body identity, and changing from one breathing style to another is a profound shift in the way the body/self operates in the world. It is very common that between body awareness lessons an old, habitual style of body use sneakily reasserts itself, and people think they are practicing a new mode when in fact they are doing the old.

Raised eyebrows are part of the fear/startle response package, so I began by helping Joe notice when his eyebrows went up and how to soften them and let them down. At first, he found it hard to tell when his eyebrows were up or down, but he gradually was able to feel when they were up and let them relax down. Next, I helped him notice what it felt like to elevate and tense his chest and what it felt like to let his chest soften and stay down.

In addition to the specific element of chest function, overall posture also plays a part in breathing. A key element is postural stability. Breathing is aided and the mind calmed when the musculoskeletal system is placed in an upright, stable, strain-free posture. Joe had no sense of how to use an economical, efficient posture to support easy breathing. I had already made a beginning at teaching postural stability by having Joe sit in seiza, but now we went into this in more detail.

I noticed that when Joe wasn't focused on belly breathing, his habitual sitting posture was a limp slump. It was only when I asked him to deliberately breathe from his belly that he sat up "straight" and rigid. In essence, he knew only the two states of slumping and being rigid. When he attempted not to do the one, the other was what he did. In order to give him a better foundation for easy breathing and body stillness, I had to teach him more about sitting in a posturally stable manner.

I usually teach basic postural stability by showing people the most efficient way of straightening up from a slump. Most people think that straightening up is done by

throwing the shoulders back or by straightening the back, and practically no one notices that the whole process is built around pelvic rotation. When the pelvis rotates backward (the direction in which the guts in the pelvic bowl would spill out over the back edge of the pelvis), the stack of vertebrae has no foundation on which to rest and it slumps down. Rotating the pelvis forward provides a foundation for the spinal column and the torso as a whole and creates upright posture. However, to create postural stability, the pelvic rotation must be accomplished in the appropriate way.

Most people rotate the pelvis forward by using the superficial muscles in the back to pull upward on the rear edge of the pelvis. I show people instead how to rotate the pelvis forward by using the iliacus and psoas muscles (which are muscles deep in the front of the body) to pull downward on the front edge of the pelvis. This new sitting posture creates an effortless stability and a physical sensation of exhilaration and power.

I had Joe sit in seiza and slump, and then, using my hands on his back, I showed him how to roll his pelvis forward into the new position. Once he had done so, I pushed on his chest, and he was amazed to find that he was as stable as a rock and without any appreciable effort. I had him sit slumped and then rigidly straight, and in both cases when I pushed, he toppled easily. I suggested that it was really cool to be strong without effort, and Joe liked the idea. We went back to the Anti-Tickle Technique, and Joe found that combining the breathing with the new sitting process made him even less ticklish. However, after just a moment, his customary sitting posture reasserted itself and he slumped down. Again, that didn't surprise me, and I told him that he'd need more practice, and after a while, he'd figure out how to maintain the new sitting posture.

### **THIRD LESSON: 6/4/02**

Again I started the lesson by asking about his homework, and Joe told me that he was doing much better at the soft tummy breathing. As I watched him do it, I could see that he was indeed able to sit upright and still and keep his attention focused on the internal experience and the external form of the breathing exercise.

A key element in body awareness training is generalizing the skills so that they are applied outside the office in daily activities. Joe's parents commented to me that they had seen him use the soft tummy breathing for self-calming in the time between the lessons. Joe's parents wrote the following:

From the very first lesson, the message of "soft tummy breathing" has really enabled Joe to refocus and snap back very quickly from situations where control was lost. We started to tell Joe "soft tummy" or "soft tummy breathing" *before* an event would erupt, and Joe would immediately start to use the breathing, focusing and self-regulation that is part of the technique. We have progressed to the point where he is beginning to use the technique himself. You can see him start to breathe and regulate. It has made a remarkable difference in his behavior.

Joe's parents had all along wanted to enroll him in my children's Aikido class, and since I judged that he was nearly ready for that, we did some Aikido exercises in the third lesson. Aikido is a non-violent Japanese martial art, and it can be very helpful to children as a venue for learning physical coordination, self-regulation, and cooperative social functioning. It is particularly captivating to children because it plugs into kids' fantasies about being fighting heroes, such as they see in their cartoons. However, the children learn that to do the Aikido moves effectively, they must be kind, gentle, relaxed and perceptive, just the opposite of what they have been exposed to on TV. Aikido defense movements are soft and non-aggressive, and Aikido has no tournaments or competitions. I emphasize that fighting isn't a game and should be avoided if at all possible. I teach the art with a focus on self-awareness in action and on learning to attain a state of calm alertness and balanced, efficient movement.

The body education I do dovetails neatly with Aikido; the body work is detailed education in body awareness, breathing, posture and movement, and the Aikido provides a more extensive movement and social situation in which to apply and practice what was learned in the body education lessons<sup>5</sup>. It is important to keep in mind that children with attention issues may not be able to participate in Aikido classes effectively without prior body awareness lessons as a foundation. When children with attention issues come to me for Aikido lessons, I usually do three to five private sessions to prepare them for the classes. In the private sessions, I can teach at the child's pace, monitor their learning, and break down the basic skills of self-monitoring and self-regulation in whatever ways the child needs. Also, the private lessons offer a quiet environment without much environmental stimulation, so it is easier to teach the child to focus inward on body sensations and events. The private lessons, of course, can stand on their own for children who are not interested in continuing on to the Aikido class.

In Joe's third and last private lesson, we practiced dodging a straight down strike to the head delivered with a soft foam wand. At first, Joe was excited and tense. He was displaying all the body behavior that is so ingrained in our culture's view of being ready for combat. He crouched and tensed and breathed excitedly, but I soon convinced him that that way of getting ready was really not ready at all. When Joe got ready for my attack by tensing, he moved so slowly and awkwardly that it was easy for me to hit him. In Aikido, we do not block or stop the attack movement. Instead, we dodge it and help it along its path until the attacker loses balance and falls. Clearly, in order to do that, an Aikidoist must be relaxed and balanced, free of aggression and effort.

I reminded Joe of the soft tummy exercise and showed him how to maintain postural uprightness and balance in a standing position. Once he could maintain that mindbody state, I again attempted to hit him on the head with the foam wand. As he simply and effortlessly stepped aside, I missed. From Joe's perspective, we were playing

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to realize that many schools teach Aikido without the body awareness emphasis which is so important in helping children with attention issues.

a game that was tremendous fun. From my point of view, we were reinforcing the idea/experience that self-awareness in the service of calm alertness was useful in controlling the environment. When people experience that an internal state is useful in practical action, it strengthens their grasp on that somatic state and motivates them to use it in their daily lives.

Though Joe perceived the exercise as a game, he was really practicing reducing extraneous movement, staying quietly poised, and keeping his attention focused on a task. It was very obvious to him that if he jittered and skittered around the mat, he was physically unready to execute the dodging movement efficiently. By the same token, if he looked away, or started talking, or began to daydream or think about anything except how and when I was going to attack, then he got hit. It became quite clear to Joe that he had the ability to stay focused and that it was useful to do so. All he had to do was remember soft tummy and postural stability, and keep watching me like a hawk.

These case notes from Joe's lessons illustrate the basic processes I use in teaching, but there are many variations I use. Very often I will use non-Aikido focus games. For example, I might have a child attempt to balance a stick upright on her or his hand. That takes calmness and coordination, and once they can balance the stick, I make the game more interesting by throwing tissues at them. Their job is to use soft breathing and postural stability to maintain focus in spite of the distraction. Or I may have a child practice reading aloud. They experience that by focusing on the body state of calm alertness, they can read much more easily, even when I try to distract them by throwing tissues at them, tickling them, or talking to them. Very often further lessons go on to include more work with posture, work in improving gait or voice control, and practice in managing frustration and anger.

#### **AIKIDO CLASSES: 6/18/02**

In the middle of June, Joe began Aikido classes. His first three classes were very difficult. Being in a class with many other children was very stimulating and distracting. In addition, I was not focusing solely on helping him manage himself. Typically I demonstrate a defense technique and then have children pair off and practice the technique. Of course, I keep my eagle eyes on the room as a whole, but I move from pair to pair offering suggestions, corrections and encouragement. So Joe had to maintain his composure and self-control on his own, and he bounced around like a frantic rubber ball.

My response was to target Joe with constant reminders to soften his tummy, breathe, and stand still. He knew why that was important, and he knew he could do it, and he did do it for a moment after each reminder.

The fourth class showed a wonderful transformation. Joe simply stopped his random and frantic talking and moving. He was still excited to be in class and still occasionally launched into stories he wanted to tell, but his behavior was well within the

norm for any seven year old boy. By staying relaxed and focused, he was able to do the Aikido movements better and interact better with the other children in the class.

Over the course of the summer, Joe took ten Aikido classes, and he maintained and improved his self-control. Now, as I write this paper in mid-September, I don't see any out of control behavior. The reminder to "soften your tummy and breathe" is a normal and constant part of all the games and defense techniques I teach. All the children work on that, and Joe does too, simply as an ordinary part of the class.

In the beginning of September, Joe went back to school, and by his parents' report to me, his teachers were surprised at the changes in Joe:

The ongoing Aikido lessons have reinforced and improved on the basic techniques learned in the first few lessons. During school registration, we talked to all of Joe's teachers, instructors, and coaches. We told them about Aikido and "soft tummy breathing." Some of his teachers have used the technique, but all have noticed a new ability to focus on tasks on Joe's part using this technique. Most of his teachers have had Joe in kindergarten or first grade. All have noticed improved behavior and improved learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

It was exciting to see how much Joe learned and how rapidly he was able to learn it. The self-observation and self-regulation skills he mastered will have profound effects on his whole life. However, his was not an isolated or unusual case. As one other example out of many, I once worked with a nine year old boy with Asperger's Syndrome. In his first lesson, his mother mentioned that he always got lost going from classroom to classroom because the commotion in the hall was more than he could handle. He became over stimulated and couldn't think clearly about where he was going. I taught him soft tummy breathing, and at the beginning of the second lesson, he told me that navigation between classes was no longer a problem. He could force himself to stay calm and alert in the hallway, and as a result he could get from class to class.

I have worked with children on issues of movement coordination, anger management, conflict resolution, anxiety, and self-protection—all as concrete somatic processes. In my teaching, I simply don't make any distinction between "physical" and "mental" issues. Because I address the whole person as a process of simultaneous somatic action and feeling, I can work with a broad range of issues and attain rapid results.

Somatic instruction can make complex, seemingly abstract processes specific, concrete, and learnable. Body awareness training is a resource than can be very helpful to many children with attention issues.

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