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Mindful and Creative Movement for Children and Teenagers

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In my grade school, middle school, and high school physical education classes, I learned little about movement, body awareness, and physical health. We had to do a certain number of situps, climb the rope, run 60 meters under a specific time frame, do a certain number of jump rope repetitions in a minute, and throw a ball at a particular distance to get a good grade. I dreaded the gymnastics attributes because I never understood how to use them: instead of jumping over a "horse" or a vault, I would run and then stop right in front of it, ashamed. The physical education classes were coeducational up until high school – boys would make fun of the girls for being too slow or not strong enough. The girls felt self-conscious about their changing bodies. The atmosphere was about competition, grades, and performance. I did not learn to love movement in these classes and I did not look forward to these breaks from scholastic study. What would my life as a student and mover have been like if the physical education classes in my youth had included a mindful or a creative movement component? What if I had been encouraged to explore movement and the uniqueness of my physicality and kinetic expression rather than perform for grades?

In what follows, I will take a look at some ways in which mindful and creative movement can serve the population of children and teenagers. By mindful movement, I refer to practices and movement experiences where the participants are guided to sense how their bodies feel as they move. Somatics is an umbrella term for a variety of body awareness practices that teach how to feel the body from the inside out – noticing sensations such as tightness, expansion, warmth, tingling, ease, relaxation, pain, and so on.¹² A somatically tuned movement class teaches participants how to connect to their breath, muscles, bones, organs, and tissues, how to be aware of what is happening inside of the body, and how to adjust movements and posture so that participants feel better and move with greater ease, balance, and comfort. The emphasis is not on the outer performance and measuring one's skills, body type, and physical ability against someone else's.

Typically, somatic or mindful movement methods like the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method®, Body-Mind Centering®, Continuum Movement®, SuryaSoul®, Nia dance, JourneyDance™, and 5Rhythms have been developed with adults in mind. These practices ask for curiosity about one's self and one's movement, the ability to slow down and pay attention to the body from the inside out. Would somatic dance, mindful movement practices, and therapeutically oriented movement methods be of value to children and young adults? In what way?

Yoga and Mindfulness

Yoga for kids and teenagers is a growing trend. Teaching children and teenagers breathing practices, meditation, and yoga poses is gaining in popularity. A Yoga class is

taught somatically or mindfully if the focus is not just on physical performance and the outer look of the postures but the students are also guided to feel, sense, and connect to the inner world. Taking time for a guided meditation, or a few minutes to focus on inhaling and exhaling, or practicing yoga postures can help students focus and lessen stress and anxiety. According to Zelazo and Lyons, emerging research suggests that age-appropriate mindfulness exercises are feasible to use with young children and may foster healthy development of self-regulation, which has implications for children's performance in school and their emotional and social development.³ In one study, a sample of preschool children randomly assigned to a brief mindfulness training program showed improved sustained attention and perspective taking.⁴

Yoga postures, meditation and breathing practices, and training in physical awareness can help students manage their emotions and, particularly in teenagers, counter feelings of frustration, anger, rebelliousness, stress, and overwhelm. Kristin Bruning, MD, noted in a recent roundtable discussion on training youth in mindfulness that in her practice as a child psychiatrist, she has observed that “many of these young people lack skills – actual techniques they can utilize – to manage their anxious and negative thoughts and intense feeling states.”⁵ The participants of this roundtable argued for the efficacy of mindfulness techniques in helping young people adopt critical coping skills, make healthy changes in their thinking patterns, and lessen reactivity, anger, and self-criticism.⁶

Ann Moradian, a choreographer, movement artist, and a Yoga instructor, has created a program called “Survival Skills for Teenagers,” in which students learn, over the course of six weeks, how to notice their physical sensations and connect their skills of physical awareness to challenging situations in their lives.⁷ Moradian combines elements

from Yoga philosophy, martial arts, and mindfulness practices to help the participants take the reins in their lives and enjoy making choices, so that they can stop thinking of themselves as victims and passive participants in their lives. In each session, the teenagers turn inward and connect to their physical sensations to get information about how they feel emotionally and physically.

The first task is to identify the feedback that the body is constantly providing. For example, when turning their awareness inward, a student might discover that physically he/she feels discomfort, pain, or tightness. The second task is to do something about this feedback: to change the position of the body, to stretch, to stand up and move, to rest. Students will learn that options are constantly available for them, on the level of physical movement but also on the level of how they act in life. “We are constantly making choices,” Moradian explains. The classes show the students how to be creative and responsive to what they are encountering in their body.

A yoga practice, mindfully taught, is excellent for helping participants get to know their mind and how it works. Yoga can be defined as “the stilling of the whirling of the mind,” Moradian notes. It helps us understand “where you create an interaction between stimulus and response – in what moment you make a choice,” she said. “Rather than jumping to a judgment about ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ or ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ which narrows us into an emotional cycle, I ask them to discern what it is that they are encountering. What do you meet and how do you respond,” Moradian explains. “We feel what we feel – we cannot tell ourselves to feel differently, really. But we do have control over how we choose to respond,” she says. With these movement based classes, Moradian helps students understand who they are, what they need, and how they feel;

how to be a whole happy human being and feel confident and have skills. Students are “allowed but not directed” – there is a space and time for them to explore. “You can’t have an agenda to make them feel a particular way or act in a particular pre-conceived way. Every adult in their lives has an agenda for them. My job is to be with them and to see what they need, to be fully present,” Moradian says.

Therapeutic Movement

Mindfulness and dance practices can be beneficial to children and teenagers with special needs. Corinne Ott, certified dance movement therapist and adjunct professor of dance therapy at Université Paris Descartes Institut de Psychologie, has worked with children with special needs for over ten years, in the United States and in Europe. The children, in the age range of five- to ten-year-olds, have come to her with a wide variety of special needs, such as the Kabuki syndrome (which might include growth delays, intellectual disability, distinctive facial features, and skeletal abnormalities), twins born without a part of their brain, selective mutism, developmental damage as a result of epileptic seizures, undetected hearing loss that has affected development, and behavioral issues.

Dance movement therapy sessions have a structure – a set beginning, a movement exploration, working with elements students have gathered or learned, and a conclusion – but the sessions are driven by the specific needs of the children. Children come to these sessions with different approaches toward movement: some kids are uncomfortable with movement and feel like they are “not good enough” in physical activities and do not want to feel like a failure. Some kids are unaware of their movement and cannot regulate or

direct their movements. Some kids have very fixed movements and are not keen to explore different ways of moving. According to Ott, the latter is a growing problem also in neurotypical kids: children do not go outside and just play and explore and as a result have a limited range of different movements available to them.

“The students have a lot of self-consciousness about what they can and cannot do. Already from a very early age children know they cannot do certain things, certain movements, and they feel very bad about it,” Ott notes. Ott helps them by breaking the movements down: frequently the issue is not the movement itself but the fact that the children have never been taught how to perform certain movements. For example, if students have problems with climbing, Ott shows them how to place and move the feet. Dance movement therapy sessions help students with activities like skipping on one foot, jumping over objects, crawling, feeling comfortable moving on the ground, jumping rope, hitting a ball back, tying a knot. All of these activities are not simple and are asking for coordination and control of movement. Ott recounts one case: “One of the participants, an eight-year-old, had pretty severe learning disabilities, cognitive difficulties, but was very social. She was not able to do any movements and coordinate the movements and was in denial about movement. My goal with her was to have an overall better mastery of movement. She had no stamina – lifting her arms up felt immediately tiring. After four years of working together – she was also taking ballet classes at the same time – she choreographed a dance.” This example demonstrates new movement confidence and ability that the student had gained.

Playing out storybooks, such as the story of Tarzan, in movement, is an activity that children enjoy as it engages their imagination and helps them find different

movements in a fun way. Another exercise Ott likes to do is asking the participants to mirror each other's movement. "A lot of the kids these days are about me, me, me. To sit quietly and follow someone else's movement is hard for people," she said. "I also teach them where their eye focus is, where their gaze goes. I help them relax. In dance movement therapy sessions, there is no peer pressure, no expectations placed on them. We do guided meditations and breathing techniques. We work with taking a break, slowing down, controlling impulsivity," she notes.

For the kids to open up and communicate their emotions through movement takes longer, Ott points out. Building trust with the facilitator takes time. "The kids show their inner world to you. There aren't that many places where kids can show how they feel. Even at home things can be very codified. At school, it is about learning, performance, and competition. I feel very privileged to do this work, to feel the trust of the students," she said.

In a group session, a dance movement therapist can help students with social skills, being able to share the space, to not dominate, and to learn how to take turns. With teenagers, the focus could be on putting together a dance routine rather than playing and exploring movement. "I let them choose the music; we jam to it, and then I help them identify movements that they did that were nice and I help them put these together. To feel free enough to jam to a song, that is already hard for many people. To remember and to rehearse movement – these are big tasks as well. People find it hard to practice – they want to be good at something right away. The idea of having to perform in front of other people gets them to pull themselves together; they focus on it," Ott says. Across all levels, students develop awareness of the body and movement.

Creative Movement and Choreography

Movement explorations can be beneficial for children of different ages and experiences with movement. Hillman et al note that “physical activity and aerobic fitness have been shown to have positive implications for children’s cognitive performance and brain structure and function. [...] The findings indicate that daily physical activity or higher aerobic fitness is related to greater volume and integrity of brain structure, efficient and effective brain function, and superior executive control.”⁸ “Childhood health behaviors have implications not only for cognitive and brain health but also for scholastic performance and educational attainment,” Hillman et al suggest.⁹

Creative movement or creative dance is one way in which students can practice moving their bodies and using their imaginations and playfulness. In a creative movement class, students are not asked to master and perform segments of choreography or learn a particular position for their feet and arms. Rather, they explore small and big movements, moving in space, using different types of energy and speed, making shapes with the body, interacting with other movers. They might be acting out imaginary scenarios through movement. Dancer and author Connie Bergstein Dow points out, “Evidence is mounting about the benefits of movement in the learning process. Creative dance is the perfect vehicle for enhancing the mind-body connection in young children and an important part of early education.”¹⁰ Dow suggests that in creative movement classes, children learn skills that are helpful in other realms of life: “Creative movement gives children opportunities to move in new ways and helps them learn that there can be more than one solution to a question, a problem, or a task.”¹¹ “Movement allows young

children to approach tasks through the body, or kinesthetically, and come up with new questions, new answers, and innovative solutions,” Dow adds.¹²

Students who are interested in dance do not often get to practice their creativity in movement in class settings. “Creative movement” in the United States context is typically seen as a movement class for little kids – a class they take instead of a technique class. It is usually offered for pre-K and grade school ages. Ballet expects kids to start training at the age of 7 or 8 and the focus moves to mastering technique rather than exploring movement. Ballet does not encourage improvisation or creating choreography. Ballet, jazz, and tap classes are often seen and taught as competition dances.

Ellen Robbins, in her 70s and based in New York, is one of the few teachers who emphasizes improvisation and composition in working with children and asks kids to make up their own dances from the age 5 on. She has been teaching modern dance to children since the 1970s. Her students dance to music, design their own costumes, and invent a title and a title card illustration for each dance. In Robbins’ class, students learn how to “translate ideas and sounds into movement, how to tell a coherent story with their bodies.”¹³ She offers students descriptions that generate mental images. In dance writer Marina Harss’s words, “she has a knack for tapping into the creativity of her students while painlessly introducing the rudiments of music theory and compositional structure through exercises that feel more like intricate games than like lessons.”¹⁴ Even five-year-olds have a chance to make up their own dances – by the time they are teenagers they are composing group works across several arts and put on a show with costumes, music, and professional lighting at New York Live Arts in Chelsea. Robbins’ goal is not necessarily to develop professional dancers but to “give them tools to make their own artistic

choices. They also learn to give and receive constructive criticism.”¹⁵ Studying a particular technique is not the aim: “I try to get them to understand their bodies as Mother Nature put them together.”¹⁶ Having studied with modern dance masters Erick Hawkins, Mary Anthony, and Pearl Lang, Robbins never felt like she needed to adhere to one particular style in her teaching. In Harss’ words, “the students develop their own ways of moving, listening to their bodies and integrating styles they learn in other dance classes or see on YouTube: ballet, Broadway, even Pina Bausch.”¹⁷ Students will develop their own artistic signature.

For teenagers, dancer, educator, and author Susan Bauer has created a somatic curriculum for teaching body-mind awareness, kinesthetic intelligence, and social and emotional skills. In her impressive and path-breaking account *The Embodied Teen* (2018), Bauer offers a plethora of awareness exercises and movement explorations to develop “kinesthetic intelligence that includes attention to students’ subjective experience – their inner sensations, emotions, and perceptions.”¹⁸ She notes, “Adolescents need structured and experiential means to develop a level of comfort with their own bodies. This includes a clear context to learn about their bodies and develop a healthy body image and self-perception. They also need to be seen and appreciated for *who they* are, not just for what they can accomplish.”¹⁹

Bauer’s is the first and most thorough account to date dedicated to bringing awareness of somatic methods to school curricula for adolescents. She convincingly shows the value of somatic awareness methods (such as Authentic Movement, ideokinesis, dance improvisation, and experiential anatomy) for teenagers’ holistic health and development. The account offers a systematic curriculum and abundant clearly

organized and well-explained exercises for exploring movement, the skeletal system, the joints, the proprioception, touch, the organs, the fascia, balance, and breathing, among many other topics. Written with teenagers in mind, this account also has many lessons to offer to adults.

Parents and Kids Dance

One type of class that I teach is a dance class for parents and kids. We do simple choreography together and there is a lot of time for free improvisation. I draw from my experience as an instructor of Nia dance, a practice that blends dance arts, martial arts, and healing arts. In the mother-daughter classes, we play out imaginary scenarios: for example, we might imagine that we are moving about with an imaginary wand and make miracles happen around us. Parents and kids dance together, sometimes next to one another, sometimes facing one another. They could be mirroring each other's movements. Kids might dance together in one group and the parents amongst themselves. Occasionally, if the participants are willing, I ask the kids to dance with someone else's parent.

After one class, a mother in her early 40s came up to me with her teenage daughter. "I don't have the best relationship with my daughter right now. It has been difficult for both of us because my daughter resists the new partner I am dating because he is not her father," she said. Toward the end of the class, as a cool-down for an hour of vigorous movement, I asked the mothers and their kids to give each other 14 hugs. I encouraged them to find 14 different ways of hugging and to stay in the hugging poses for a little bit. For example, a child could hug the mother's leg or the two could put their

backs together and reach for each other's waist. They could hug each other while bent over. The mother who had come up to me said, "When we were doing the 14 hugs, there was a connection between me and my daughter. I felt more at peace."

Movement offers a way to connect differently. Sometimes we do not want to or find it challenging to talk in words. We sometimes do not know where to begin in order to tackle difficult topics. When we move together, some of this discomfort can start to melt and transform. The difficult situation will not necessarily disappear but movement can pave the path for a conversation: it can soften something inside of us. When we dance together – parents and kids – we deepen relationships.

Adriana Samaniego, one of the participants in my mother and daughter dance classes, noted that these classes would be beneficial to young adults especially if they are self-conscious or shy. She said, "Teens are constantly on their phones or laptops. Somatic dance classes would help them reconnect with others and with their own body. Teens are also facing mind and body changes. These classes could possibly help them release stress, unravel bundled-up energy and just simply move without pressure like classic dance classes." She added, "The class did create an unconscious bond. It felt natural and not forced. This class would be great for tense mother/daughter relationships or fractured relationships."

Valentina, Adriana's 14-year-old daughter, said that she loves to dance because it makes her feel free and she can do what she wants with her moves. She enjoys the freedom of movement she experiences in these classes while in other classes she is told what to do. She said, "I love dancing with my mom because it's making a connection with my mom and with my mom and the other children and adults – it makes me discover

them by dance.” After the classes she feels relaxed and she has energy. “I think dance classes can impact my other activities because when I do them I have a lot more ideas. I remember one time just after your class I had an idea for a story. I didn’t have any clue as to what my story could talk about and how to proceed, but you helped me,” she pointed out. These kinds of classes would help students in their projects or “if they feel sad because the classes could help them be happy or feel alive and have energy.”

Conclusion

During the global pandemic of COVID-19, social relationships have taken a blow. Our abilities to dance and move together have been hindered. A generation of “Zoom freshmen” have not even really gotten to know their classmates because the classes have been mostly conducted online, with limited possibilities of interaction between students under circumstances where they can get to know themselves and build trust and mutual interests both inside and outside of the classroom setting. Movement classes online add more online time to the schedule that is already full of online activities. However, dance and movement does give a boost, makes us feel better emotionally and physically. Children and teenagers, as well as their parents and educators, can benefit from movement practices that include a mindful, somatic, or creative element. When we move with joy and curiosity about our sensations and movements, we feel more whole, engaged, aware, and confident.²⁰

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