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Newsletter for Parents of SAMA Member Schools

Dear Montessori Parents

After a very successful conference in Knysna, we are inspired for a new year in our Association.

Our current edition of the National Newsletter deals with aspects of education related to movement. One particular article, written by Susanne van Niekerk, an expert in movement education, struck me as being so valuable for parents to read and understand. I have edited it here for you (your child's school will have a copy of the full article should you wish to read it in its entirety).

Warm Regards
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MONTESSORI, MOVEMENT AND LEARNING READINESS (Susanne van Niekerk, The Brain Connection and Little Learners Montessori School, KZN)

Research conducted in Pretoria (2003) found that up to 51% of children at school have some sort of learning difficulty. Labels abound – ADD/ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Low Muscle Tone to name but a few. The question on everyone's lips – *WHY?*

Much research points to the fact that most learning difficulties stem from an under-developed or inefficient neurological system – in other words, that the brain has not formed adequate neural pathways required in order for efficient learning to take place.

Learning readiness in the young child depends mainly on three broad factors: Attention, Balance and Coordination. In order to be able to learn, the child must be able to pay attention to what is being taught. In order to be able to pay attention, the child must be able to focus his conscious awareness upon a specific task while rejecting all other irrelevant sensory stimuli such as background noise, movement etc. Coordination requires that the child has successfully passed through all the normal developmental stages of primitive and postural reflexes in order to build a solid foundation for automatic motor control.

But by far the most important factor affecting the child's ability to function and learn efficiently is his sense of **BALANCE**.

Through a pre-programmed innate developmental movement sequence, every child in the world gains mastery over his own body through repeated movement resulting in his being able to maintain his balance over an increasingly smaller area of support – the newborn infant requires a supporting surface for the entire body, whilst the toddler, through innate knowledge and constant repetition has built enough balance to allow him to progress through the stages of crawling, sitting and eventually walking which requires a much more advanced state of balance in order to be supported only by 2 feet!

Efficient balance is crucial as the child continues to develop in order that he may develop the concepts of proprioception (the knowledge of his body in space), muscle tone (the degree of readiness to respond in relaxing muscle), laterality (knowing that there is a midline and being able to cross this midline spontaneously), and directionality (choosing a dominant side and being able to identify the concepts of right, left, above, below, in front of and behind). All these are base concepts that are required for the later efficient inter-hemispheric higher level concepts of reading, spelling, writing and maths.

Preschoolers today in general are not developing adequate balance skills on which to build an efficient 'learning-ready' system.

In our increasingly more technologically advanced and frantic lives, we have allocated very little time or inclination for our children to be able to move as freely as they were created to do. Babies are no longer left to lie and roll on the floor, to strengthen head, neck, eye and arm muscles. Instead they are carried around in car seats and rockers that inhibit head movement. Or placed into moulded 'doughnuts' or walking rings that inhibit the very movements that are required in order for the child to learn to sit and walk unaided.

In short, the children that come into our pre-schools are already at a disadvantage in terms of their neurological development.

As Montessori educators today, we are all aware of the vast advantages that Montessori children have in our classrooms. What many of us fail to realise though, is just HOW widespread and fundamental Dr. Montessori's understanding of the human body and brain's development was.

In terms of 'learning readiness' – a child who goes through the Montessori system in the manner that Dr. Montessori intended the philosophy and the materials to be used, should by all intents and purposes certainly be well equipped with the 'Attention, Balance and Coordination' required in order to be fully learning ready when moving on to 'big school'.

So – when in doubt, let us trust in Dr. Montessori's training and research and remember above all to – FOLLOW THE CHILD – he knows what is required in order to build the most efficient neural pathways in his brain!

“One of the great mistakes ... is to think of movement by itself, as something apart from higher functions.... Mental development must be connected with movement and be dependent on it.” (Dr Maria Montessori)

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