

Children and Learning

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Easy Does It: Taking the Strain out of Learning

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By kindergarten or earlier most children lose a bit of what makes learning easy—some of their sixth sense. Also called proprioceptive awareness, this sixth sense gives the brain information from our joints and muscles about position, balance, and effort. Infants and children instinctively rely on this awareness, but gradually learn to block it out.

That's why a 9-month-old sits up better than a 9-year-old, and why you take your eye off the ball, or continue to slump despite your best efforts. Faulty sensory awareness accounts for many back problems. And sometimes it turns patience and pleasure into frustration and stress when we learn new skills.

Pioneering educators John Dewey and Maria Montessori both valued Alexander Technique. Dewey wrote prefaces to three of Alexander's books. According to Dewey, Alexander Technique "bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities." Montessori imported Alexander's first assistant from London to Italy to give lessons to the children in her school. And today, some of my colleagues use Alexander Technique in the public school classrooms where they teach.

What is unnecessary tension? How do we get it? And what do children sacrifice when they learn to ignore it? Everything we do requires a certain amount of tension. However, we habitually use more. When we wash dishes, exercise, work at a computer, or simply walk and talk, we often use muscles that aren't meant to be involved and overuse ones that are. Of course, we don't notice this. But we do notice the pain, discomfort, or dysfunction that these habits eventually produce.

No one knows how we got this way. Alexander claimed that modern industrialized society had reached a point where instincts alone could no longer guide our coordination. Overstimulation and some of the activities we invented for ourselves may have forced us to suppress our sixth sense.

Experience and heredity determine how well we sense ourselves and to what degree poor sensory awareness affects us. Children often

have patterns of unnecessary tension similar to those of their parents. Genes play some part in this, but how they are touched, what they see, and what they hear influence children as well. Unconsciously they imitate our posture, gestures, and breathing patterns.

What happens when a child tries to get something right? Let's suppose she sits at a desk and practices printing neatly. If she has trouble achieving her goal—staying within the lines—most likely she keeps trying. If she still has trouble she may try harder. What does she do to try harder? Does she tighten her grip on the pencil? Does she scowl, push her tongue into her cheek, or hunch her shoulders? Do her concentration and effort to achieve her goal override the sensation of inappropriate muscular tension?

If the answers are yes, she will probably achieve her goal, but this experience and others like it reinforce a pattern of learning with unnecessary tension. She relies less and less on her sixth sense. Instead she learns to learn by interfering with it.

Habits of unnecessary tension get stronger over time and produce physical deterioration. The tension further impairs our sixth sense. So as we get better at responding with excess tension, we get worse at sensing what we're doing.

Alexander Technique offers a way to unlearn these unconscious habits and prevent the physical and emotional strain that often comes with "trying to get it right." In acquiring a way to learn that's natural and efficient, children are more likely to approach new skills and experiences with appropriate confidence, energy, and ease.

To help children learn with "ease:" allow young children to squat, kneel, and sit on their heels instead of restricting them to sitting on their bottoms or in a chair; observe children when they try to do something, and if you see overly tense muscles, including facial muscles, gently encourage them to ease up; learn to sense muscular tension in yourself, especially in your neck when you bend down, write, or read out loud.