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Brain Games Improve Learning

Movement is one by-product of the interaction between mind and body most people take for granted. It's so instantaneous, people don't usually notice the brain's role in the creation of physical motion.

If a sprinter, for instance, had to think about each electrical, muscular and biochemical reaction in his body that takes place during the 100-meter dash, he'd never finish.

Yet, the athlete prepares for a race by exercising the body parts that produce the movement in order to be physically, and mentally, ready.

If it works for sports, can it work for learning?

The answer is a resounding, "Yes," according to Helen Cox, director, of Options in Health and Education Center in Peoria Heights.

Options uses edu-kinesthetics - learning through movement - to do three things intended to enhance the learning process: build self-esteem, physically reduce stress and get both hemispheres of the brain working together equally.

Along with vision and nutrition therapy, the movements Helen and staff teach to students of all ages are called "Brain Gym®," a series of activities and exercises developed by Dr. Paul Dennison.

"When children recall something learned in a stressful situation, they recall the stress. As more and more skills are acquired under stress, tension is stockpiled," said Helen, a registered nurse. "By third grade, some children's early enthusiasm for learning is replaced with an attitude of 'I don't like school,' or 'I have a stomach ache, I can't go to school.'"

"We believe self-esteem raised at the time of learning, if the emotion at the time of learning is positive. To make it so, the learning process has to be working efficiently," she said.

One person Brain Gym® has helped is J. D., 10, whose Mother was concerned when she received all F's - except for a B in conduct - on her report card.

"We tried after-school tutoring and summer school, nothing helped. The teacher suggested retaining her for another year," said L.D., J. D.'s mother. "Since March, her grades have really improved, up to C's and B's, and her self-esteem is higher. She feels good about herself."

J. D. said that PACE - a series of stretching movements intended to prepare a student for a learning experience - "helps me think more."

"I was skeptical at first, but it works. Nothing else helped," said Linda. "And J. D. likes to come here."

Besides feeling good about learning, Brain Gym® gives students access to parts of their brains they have been taught or learned not to use.

According to Helen, the brain is divided into three dimensions:

- right-left (which deals with communication)
- top-bottom (responsible for organization) for organization)
- front-back (the centers of comprehension.)

As toddlers, humans are full of dynamic energy that encourages great leaps in learning. They easily, and without conscious thought, receive and translate information, a right brain function. By the time they are five, however, they have been guided toward a left brain orientation that requires repetition and drill.

An individual's distinct learning style - visual(reading), auditory (listening) and kinesthetic (doing) - is also taken into account.

Brain Gym® and thinking skills can help balance, or re-pattern, these individual learning styles and brain functions, said Helen.

"Our whole society is geared toward the left brain, which is analytical, verbal, logical and objective, as opposed to the right, which is intuitive, visual, emotional and subjective," said Helen. We put more money into computers than painters. Whenever there are budget cuts in schools, the arts are the first thing to go.

"In education, children need the ability to go back and forth constantly, depending upon which style we need at the time." she continued.

Whether it is a child with attention deficit, dyslexia or another learning disability, low grades or the potential required to repeat a grade in school, Brain Gym® is used to improve listening and reading comprehension and whole body or eye-hand coordination.

Brain Gym® is also used to improve organizational skills expressive oral reading, spelling, creative writing, math, home study skills, test taking, creative thinking, speed reading, personal ecology skills and riding on a plane, train or automobile.

Paul Dennison, a Ph.D. educator and director of the Valley Remedial Group Learning Centers in California, found that if he could get children to successfully perform certain types of movements on the playground, he could teach them to read in the classroom.

He eventually found that the ability to walk a balance beam improved the ability to read because it requires both right and left brain use. Because the left brain controls the right side of the body and the right controls the other, Brain Gym® activities are called "midline movements" because they cross over both sides and require both hemispheres to work together.

Like acupuncture stimulates nerves, Helen said Brain Gym® movements stimulate different muscles connected to all parts of the brain, causing them to work together.

There are many Brain Gym® exercises that cross the midline.

They include, but are not limited to, the cross crawl, moving the right foot up behind the back while using the left hand to touch it, or touching the one hand to the opposite knee; drawing sideways "lazy 8's" on a chalk board or in the air; pressing "brain buttons," which requires rubbing deeply with the thumb and forefinger just below the collarbone, to the right and left of the sternum, while holding the other hand over the navel.

"Balance Buttons" are used to keep bodies relaxed and minds alert.

To stimulate them, Brain Gym® touch two fingers to the indentation at the base of the skull, just below the ear, while resting the other hand on the navel, breathing upward. After a minute, they do the other side of the head, behind the other ear.

Besides coordinating brain activity, the exercises help students, including preschoolers and adults, relax and slow down to look at details and absorb new material.

Children labeled as "hyperactive" can also benefit from Brain Gym®.

"Their bodies say get up and move, but the teacher tells them to sit still. Then, the child is kept inside during recess as discipline. That's the worst thing that could be done. They need time outside, even if it's just to jump rope."

Parents are involved in the entire process, said Helen, from the child's initial assessment to at-home exercises and nutrition.

Some area schools are getting interested in Brain Gym®, said Helen, and she plans to teach it to inmates at the Canton Correctional Center.

"Teachers can use the exercises as a bridge between reading and math, for instance," she said.

"Edu-kinesthetics looks at how each child learns, not what they achieve. Achievement will follow once the child has the tools to learn. Most of our students raise their grades at least one level with no problem," Helen added. "If traditional education hasn't worked, more of the same may not help. It may be time to try something different."

"We aren't teaching a student how to gorge and purge information before a test. It isn't a temporary thing. We want it to become permanent."