



Some Thoughts about Sitting Still

Tom Hunter

SITTING STILL IS OVERRATED. It makes sense for the opera or for meditating, but in most classrooms and child care centers, it's given far more honor than it deserves. Children need to move. Movement is one of the ways brains develop. Dendrites grow, connecting this part of the brain to that one and complementing this function with another. Sitting still makes us dumber. The brain doesn't grow.

Without movement, the body doesn't grow either, and that worries an increasing number of doctors, especially orthopedic specialists. Muscles are weaker and bones are too. Certain injuries among teenagers now have never been seen in such numbers, probably because in early childhood so many bodies sit around, often in front of screens, both television and computer. Educational computer programs for kids may sound like a good idea for growing the brain, but all the research suggests that if we want smarter and stronger kids, we should shut off the machines and go play in the park with our children.

Sitting still is also one reason why circle time is such a problem in many places. Children aren't being rebellious by moving around. They're not practicing how to flout the authority of the teacher, nor are they growing into a lifetime of irresponsibility. They're just moving, and they're moving because they need to. It makes them smarter and stronger.

I find that many kindergartners will sit still, and some four-year-olds will too, when there's a story or a song or something to look at that interests them enough. I'm pretty sure they shouldn't have to, but the fact that every now and then children do tells me we don't have to worry about teaching them to pay attention because they will likely pay attention when they have their own good reasons.

Mostly we bribe or threaten children into paying attention, and if they do, it's for someone else's reasons and not their own. Over time the bribes and threats have to get bigger to get the same response. If, however, we're doing something children are interested in because we've paid enough attention to them to know what they are interested in, odds are children are going to pay attention. Not because we tell them to or bribe or threaten them but because they want to. They want to be interested.

It is better for the brain and body for teachers simply to notice that children need to move and then encourage them to do so by creating an environment in which they can be active and safe, with more dirt piles and loose parts than plastic toys and electronic gadgets.

My grandmother was always telling me to stop fidgeting. If she were still alive, I'd tell her that we now know it's good to fidget. My need to move may have driven her nuts, but it made me smarter.

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Knowing Things Before We Know Them

Tom Hunter

I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW THEY GET SHIPS INSIDE BOTTLES or how a piece of paper disappears into one fax machine and another machine miles away receives its message.

I also don't understand where we got the idea that children can't learn colors unless we teach them colors. Colors are all around us. Unless there's some problem, colors are part of what children see when they look at anything at all. They're in the pictures in storybooks and in songs too. People even talk about colors from time to time, sometimes directly but more often as part of something else they're talking about, like hair or cars or flowers.

You'd think that colors would be among the things kids would just pick up without direct instruction, things hard not to learn. It's like toilet training; some people say children won't get it right unless someone trains them, but others say that most kids will figure out how to go to the bathroom at some point on their own.

I think there are a lot of things we just pick up, like walking and talking and how to pour water. Most of us do things when it's time. I was watching a mom at the playground with her toddler when the little girl all of a sudden stopped playing and focused her attention on older kids on the swings. Mom saw her watching them swinging and said, "Before you know it you'll be doing that too." Exactly. There are things we know how to do before we know we know how to do them—knowledge we have before we realize we have that knowledge.

Songs are like that. In a class on using music with children, we adults were singing songs that most of us knew: "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," "Old McDonald," and so on. One teacher said, "I know all those songs and no one taught them to me." Kids who come to kindergarten and first grade from homes and preschools where they sang songs and did fingerplays have a huge head start on language, not because anybody taught them directly with drills or flash cards or ditto sheets, but because they sang and played and the songs became part of their lives. They learned not by instruction but by experience.

Some brain research suggests that, at least in early childhood, direct instruction diminishes learning, that the demand for children to be aware of what they know decreases what they actually do know. This is why a lively environment is so important for young children and why lively adult companionship is too—children are learning all the time, absorbing from what and whom is around them. They're probably busy learning colors all on their own.

How ships get in bottles and how fax machines work will come later and, for some of us, much later.

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Modeling Possibilities

Tom Hunter

ON THE WALLS OF THE HALLWAY outside a kindergarten classroom, all the child-made pumpkins looked pretty much the same. The teacher confirmed my hunch that she had not directly told the kids in her class to make all the pumpkins look the same. What she had done was put out materials and suggest one possible way to make a pumpkin. She said she was sure the children knew pumpkins in real life don't look the same "because I know they've seen them in stores and fields." But they made them the same anyway, on their own.

It is a rare child who will break out past what a teacher suggests. Often, modeling how to do something is as good as telling kids that they must do it the way it has been modeled. In the name of increasing possibilities, possibilities actually decrease. Suggestions might even be made with the intent of helping. It doesn't matter. Creativity and imagination often suffer when a possibility is presented.

This is not only true for children. At a workshop for teachers, we were singing a song that had hand motions for sun and rain, for growing roots and stems, and for flowers. I think—and more strongly all the time—that children and adults often don't need to be told exactly what to do for hand motions. True, there are sometimes distinctive and expressive hand motions and sign language worth teaching, but often it's more fun and creative to let kids and grownups do whatever they want.

In the song I was singing with the teachers, I planned to let them make their own flowers and not show them mine. The problem was, as we sang, I forgot the plan and fell into my habit of opening up both my hands to form the petals of a flower. I interrupted the song and said, "Sorry, why don't you make flowers any way you want to?" Immediately a teacher blurted out, "I can't. I just saw yours."

I think there are a lot of things kids can figure out for themselves, and it's almost always better when we let them. They might need help tying a shoe, resolving a conflict, or carrying a heavy load across the yard. The key is for teachers to become better observers, to watch and become better at noticing when we are not needed. We know that learning goes deep and lasts long when it comes from kids figuring out things for themselves. Modeling often discourages that kind of learning, while intruding less encourages it. Intruding less, and modeling less, can open up more room for each child to learn his or her own way. It can also make the pumpkins look different, as different as they do in real life.

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Taking the Long View

Tom Hunter

WHEN MY SON AEDEN GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL, he wanted to call one of his preschool teachers with the news. He hadn't seen Bill since our co-op days in San Francisco, and it took us several calls to find him living and teaching in the California Sierra foothills. Aeden, his younger sister, his mother, and I gathered around the speaker phone as Aeden told Bill why we were calling. There was a pause, and then Bill's voice joked, "Is this a crank call?"

It was a wonderful conversation, newsy and full of laughter, and before we hung up, Bill said, "Teachers wonder all the time what's happened to the kids they've had in class. We get stuck looking at what's right in front of us, and most of the time we don't look out much farther. Thanks for calling; it means a lot."

I used to backpack. I'd hike along feeling the weight of the pack, breathing hard on the way up and braking hard on the way down. There were uneven rocks to look out for, and precipitous drop-offs, so mostly I looked down at the trail. I had to; looking down was how I made sure the footing was secure and safe. But there were other moments too, when I'd stop for a breath or a drink of water, moments when I'd look up and out. That's when I knew why I backpacked in the first place—to be in a place I could get to only by walking, and to have only what was on my back and the views. Often I would just sit and look at those views, out over mountains and forests and lakes and sky—a long look, sometimes a very long look.

Our family phone call gave Bill that kind of long look. He could look up from the trail for a moment and know that he was a remembered part of Aeden's life, important enough for Aeden to want to thank him. I've started collecting stories of teachers meeting those they once taught:

A teacher in line at a movie theater was recognized by a man in his mid twenties. He said he had been in that teacher's first-grade class during her first year of teaching.

"Do you still go out under the tree and sing songs on Friday afternoons?" he asked.

"We sure do," she replied.

"Thanks, Mrs. Anderson, I'll never forget that."



After watching her first high school football game, a kindergarten teacher went down to the hallway outside the locker room to find the star quarterback.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

"Sure, but what are you doing here?"

"I promised," she said. "One day, back when you were in kindergarten, you

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and two of your buddies wouldn't settle down, and I was so mad I could spit. I blurted out that if you'd only sit still for a while, I'd come and watch you play football some day. Well, you sat still, and here I am."

Without saying anything, the young man gave her the sweatiest, smelliest hug she'd ever gotten.



A first-grade teacher at a wedding reception was approached by a young man and his wife.

"You're Mrs. Douglas," he said, "and you used to teach fifth grade, right?" The teacher agreed that he was right about both things.

"You were my teacher then," he continued, "and it was a hard year for me. My parents were getting a divorce, and it was nasty. You said a lot of things that really helped. I can still quote you. Thanks."

These are times of measurable outcomes and test scores, of more push-down academics and less unstructured play, of more televisions and computers and less time when adults simply spend time with children. There are seemingly endless requirements, regulations, and a lot of time when we who work with young children are looking down at the trail. We have to know where the rocks are uneven and where the drop-offs are dangerous. But it's easy to get stuck looking down. Now and then, it's important to stop for a breath and a drink of water, and take a look around. That's when we get the long view.

Don't miss it. It's one of the big reasons we work with children in the first place.

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Winter, Outside My Window

Tom Hunter

ON THE WALL OF A PRESCHOOL IN SAN DIEGO, there's a poster of children sledding, throwing snowballs, and building forts. They are bundled in warm, colorful clothing, and across the poster words proclaim, "In winter it snows." It looks like fun, but there's a problem: it hasn't snowed in San Diego since December 13, 1967. In winter in San Diego, there is sunshine and balmy temperatures, fog now and then, and occasionally a rainy day. In some places it does snow in the winter—like Minneapolis, for example, and Fargo and Montpelier. In some places, it snows so much that people get tired of it and travel to places like San Diego to get away from the snow, regardless of what the poster on the wall says.

We've standardized much of what we teach these days. In winter it snows, everywhere. "Apples are red," another poster says. The sky is always blue. In this one-size-fits-all style of education, it doesn't matter where you are or what's really happening. I guess we think this is the best way to teach seasons or colors, or at least the best way to prepare children for the standardized tests that dictate so much of how we currently teach.

But every now and then a child notices how silly this is or how wrong. I often sing a song that invites children to sing about the "world outside my window." One day in a kindergarten class someone wanted to sing about the sky, and I asked "What color is it?" "Blue," he said, right away. We started singing "the sky outside my window is as blue as blue can be." At that point I heard a little voice interrupt, "No, it's not."

Several children stopped singing and looked out the window. I did too. It was a cloudy day and someone not only noticed but said so. It led to a wonderful conversation about gray and white, about rain and the sun hiding, and big puffy clouds that look like marshmallows. All the children were at the window looking and trying to find the right words for what they were seeing and thinking about. Eventually we sang "the sky outside my window is as gray as gray can be," and then we sang "white" because it was white too, and black, and other colors as well. It was far more involving, and educational, than singing about a "blue sky" that wasn't blue.

The children we work with are concrete, literal-minded people. That's basic child development, and it means they're primarily interested in what they really see, right here and now, and not in standardized caricatures. What's outside the window, and not any window, but this one, right here? Are all apples really red? What shades of yellow and green, and spots, and brown do you see when you look at one closely? What sounds do you hear, right now? What happens in winter, on this particular day in winter, right here?

We can learn different things based on the different places we live, and what's outside our windows. Dealing with those things first does not teach

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kids to ignore places and issues beyond those windows. Instead it creates a strong base from which children can later wonder more effectively about what they can't see, like snow in winter if they live in San Diego or a balmy winter beach if they live in Butte or even rainforests if they live in Kansas.



A poster of winter where I live would have children in rain gear of earthy colors and would say, "In winter it rains." But that might not be true where you live, so maybe it's best just to look out the window and forget about the posters. Tomorrow might be different anyway.

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What about Mr. Baker?

Tom Hunter

IT WAS THE FIRST SONG AT CIRCLE TIME, and these kindergarten kids sang it well.

Good morning, I like the shoes you've got on.

In fact, I like 'em so much, I'm gonna put 'em in a song.

In a song, in a song,

I'm gonna put you and your shoes in a song.

The children were used to putting new words in the song. We changed *shoes* to *shirt*—*I like the shirt you've got on*—and then *sox*, *nose*, *underwear*. A boy in front asked if we could put *hair* in. *Good morning, I like the hair you've got on. In fact, I like it so much I'm gonna put it in a song.* Right then, the boy stopped singing. His face turned cloudy. We finished the verse—*In a song, in a song, I'm gonna put you and your hair in a song.*

The boy leaned toward me and said quietly, “But what about Mr. Baker?” “Who’s Mr. Baker?” I asked. Staring straight at me, the boy lifted one hand from his lap not more than two inches and pointed to his left. He didn’t want to make a scene, even though 25 children and 15 parents were watching him. “Over there,” he whispered.

I saw a man leaning against the bookshelf. He was totally bald and trying hard not to laugh. So were several parents. None of the children found it funny at all.

For the children, we had a problem, and I believe it’s at such moments that major issues come alive. We were singing a simple and straightforward song. Hair seemed to be a simple and straightforward suggestion. All of a sudden, with that suggestion and the awareness of at least one of its consequences, we were in the middle of issues not simple and straightforward at all. We had wandered into acceptance and rejection, inclusion and exclusion, who’s invited in and who’s left out. The boy had suggested hair, but Mr. Baker had no hair. What about Mr. Baker?

It’s the fundamental question when differences are noticed. Janice has dark skin—what about Janice? Art is in a wheelchair and he moves his arms differently than others—what about Art? Al has only one hand—what about Al?

Children notice differences. Show a series of pictures of light-skinned people to babies, and they’ll soon act bored. Change to a dark-skinned person, and they’re attentive again. They notice that something is different. Children do not naturally make judgments about the differences, but they do notice. They learn the judgments from the world around them.

One conclusion is that it makes no sense to ignore or deny the differences that children notice naturally. We’re not just groups of people, standardized and general. We have details and differences, and young children see them

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clearly. Janice has darker skin than I do. Art is in a wheelchair, and I'm not. Al has one hand, and I have two. Mr. Baker has no hair, and I do.



Noticing such things does not make what's noticed better or worse. It's just noticing. Gradually, awareness grows until one day a group of children and parents are singing a song and one child makes a suggestion about hair and the suggestion comes back to worry him—he's left out Mr. Baker.



Most often, an issue unintentionally elbows its way into the moment. Nobody planned to deal with who's in and who's out that morning. It wasn't part of our agenda. It just showed up, and that boy noticed.



Sometimes big issues pass without notice. Other times, when issues look too difficult, we miss them on purpose. This time, the boy's response wouldn't let us miss the issue. We had to wrestle with the notion that Mr. Baker was left out. This was even more pressing for the children because they liked Mr. Baker. He was a father in the school, and every week or so, he would come to tell stories. The children would lean against his legs and sit on his lap. He didn't seem to mind. To leave Mr. Baker out was not funny.



So what about Mr. Baker? The singing stopped, the parents stifled their laughter, and there was silence. The question hung in the air, and the children went to work to answer it. One girl shrugged and said, "He won't care," No one seemed convinced. There was more silence. Someone repeated the question: "Yeah, what about Mr. Baker?" Someone said, "My finger hurts." Someone else said, "My daddy is bald." Another said, "I like the story about the hats." Some children looked for something more interesting to do.



Finally, a girl whispered loudly to the boy, "Say *skin*." He showed no sign of having heard her. Then, after a long pause, he leaned toward me and said, "Sing skin this time."

Good morning, I like the skin you've got on.

In fact, I like it so much I'm gonna put it in a song.

In a song, in a song,

I'm gonna put you and your skin in a song.

The singing was even better than before. The cloud left the boy's face. He glanced over toward the bookshelf. Mr. Baker gave him a thumbs-up, as if to celebrate another issue faced, another problem solved.