

# **BODY AWARENESS TRAINING FOR CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT, AUTISM, OR ASPERGER'S<sup>1</sup>**

**Paul Linden, Ph.D.**

Columbus Center for Movement Studies

[www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com)

## **INTRODUCTION**

I am a somatic educator and martial artist, and in the last few years, more and more children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), high functioning Autism, and Asperger's Syndrome have been referred to me for body awareness training. Children with these developmental disorders have a hard time filtering out distracting environmental stimuli or controlling responses to them, which makes it difficult for them to focus on tasks they are trying to perform. Many display inability to control impulses, physical restlessness, and excessive activity. Many display peculiar or awkward patterns of posture, coordination or gait.

Using the body awareness training methods that I have developed, it is actually fairly easy to teach children with such disorders how to self-monitor and self-regulate. In a short time, most of the children I have seen have learned to manage aversive stimuli, as well as focus and maintain focus even in stimulating, distracting environments. In addition, they have learned more graceful, effective styles of movement.

Part of what ordinarily makes it difficult to teach calmness and concentration is that they are usually thought of and experienced as seamless, mental processes. How do you concentrate? Well, you just put your mind on something. However, that kind of languaging *names* the process but doesn't explain how to do it, and someone who cannot naturally focus does not benefit from merely being told to do so. In the same way, graceful coordination or impulse management cannot be taught simply by asking people to move gracefully or control their impulses. The key to teaching the skills of concentration, coordination and impulse management is to reframe them as body processes and break those body process down into small, concrete learning steps.

I generally see children with attention or self-regulation problems for three to five one-hour private sessions of body awareness training. That is usually enough to teach them the focusing and self-regulation techniques that I have developed. Some children

---

<sup>1</sup> **Copyright © 2002 by Paul Linden.** This article is copyrighted by Paul Linden; however, it may be freely reproduced and distributed for non-commercial uses as long as the complete article, contact information, and this copyright notice are included.

continue with private lessons, and the focus often shifts to practice of Aikido. Aikido is a non-violent, Japanese martial art, and it is an excellent vehicle for further teaching of body awareness, coordination, and focusing.

Many children move into my children's Aikido classes after a series of private lessons. The private sessions are a much quieter and less complex environment than a martial art class with ten or fifteen children, and so kids with attention problems find private lessons much easier as a starting point. The Aikido classes offer them a venue to continue practicing self-awareness, focusing, movement coordination, impulse management, and social functioning.

This paper will briefly describe the teaching methods I use, and it will do so through presenting my case notes for three children<sup>2</sup>. The first case study is a detailed description of my work with a boy with ADD. My focus was to help the young boy identify what he did in his body which is labeled "not paying attention" and then learn ways to replace those counter-productive somatic behaviors with more effective somatic processes. I use basically the same somatic awareness methods with high-functioning Autism and with Asperger's Syndrome, so the next two case studies will be much shorter and will present primarily the unique elements of those cases.

Before jumping into the case studies, however, let me say a few words about the somatic education modality<sup>3</sup> I have developed, which I call Being In Movement® mindbody training. BIM is an educational method which uses practical movement experiments to help people explore the underlying links between structural/functional efficiency, emotional growth, and social functioning. BIM views the body as both an objective process governed by rules of physics and biology and a subjective process of lived consciousness governed by rules of awareness, emotion, and feeling. By examining how breathing, posture, and movement simultaneously *shape* and are *shaped by* thoughts, feelings, and intentions, BIM teaches people to develop an integrated mindbody state of

---

<sup>2</sup> In the field of body awareness education, the standard approach to explaining a specific training method is to describe the experience and the practical results of a series of sessions. This phenomenological way of writing conveys a vicarious understanding of the method. I believe that ultimately it will be important to perform rigorous research evaluating and quantifying the specific results attained by any method, but that will have to wait until researchers become aware of the field and become interested in studying it.

<sup>3</sup> In the last seventy years or so, a whole field of mind/body awareness education has arisen. There is a book which is both an excellent introduction to the ideas underlying the broad variety of somatic disciplines and an encyclopedic listing of all the major forms of somatic work available: *Discovering the Body's Wisdom: A comprehensive guide to more than fifty mind-body practices that can relieve pain, reduce stress, and foster health, spiritual growth, and inner peace*. Mirka Knaster. New York: Bantam Books, 1996.

awareness, calmness, power, and compassion and use that state as a foundation for effective action.

BIM<sup>4</sup> has been effective as a complement to psychotherapy for people with such issues in the areas of body image, anxiety, impulse control, dissociation, or abuse. By guiding people to a concrete experience of what they are doing in their bodies and how to change that, BIM offers rapid, practical tools for self-awareness and empowerment and thereby enables the process of therapy to work more effectively. BIM has also been effective in physical task applications ranging from prevention of computer-related injuries to performance enhancement for musicians and athletes.

## **FIRST CASE STUDY — ATTENTION DEFICIT**

### **FIRST LESSON**

The following case study describes three private lessons and follow up Aikido classes with a boy we can call Joe. He was seven years old, and he was referred by a pediatric neuropsychologist, who diagnosed him as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) with inattentive and overactive/impulsive features, along with some dyslexia.

My first observation about Joe was that he was in constant movement. When I asked him to sit still, he continued to move. When I tried to get him to pay attention to me, the constant movement interfered.

My first task in working with any student is to give them a clear and interesting experience of success at self-management. That lets them understand what I mean by self-management, gives them graphic proof that they are capable of it, and shows them that it is fun and useful. With children, I usually approach this self-management experience through Linden's Glorious Anti-Tickle Technique, and that is what I started Joe's first lesson with. I began by explaining the exercise to him, asking permission to do it, and explaining that he could tell me at any moment to stop tickling him and I would. When he gave his permission, I tickled him. Of course, he was convulsed with helpless laughter.

The essence of not being ticklish lies in keeping the muscles and breathing relaxed and the body quiet and still. To begin teaching Joe how to do this, I had him lie on his back and asked him to observe how he breathed. I noticed that when he paid attention to his breathing, he tensed and elevated his chest when he inhaled, and at the top of the inhalation, he actually held his breathe for a moment. However, he wasn't able to identify or understand that he was breathing this way even when I pointed it out to him.

---

<sup>4</sup> On my website, in addition to general explanatory material, there are a number of papers about various specific applications of BIM. Go to [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com).

To give him concrete feedback about how he was breathing, I put a small rock on his tummy and one on his chest. The rocks amplified and made obvious the movements of his breathing. I pointed out that he moved much more in his chest than in his belly. To help him experience an alternate way of breathing, I put my hand on his tummy as a focus and asked him to breathe in such a way that the inhalation pushed his belly out and pushed my hand away. Normally, this is all it takes to get most people to start breathing more from their bellies. (They may not understand or be able to sustain the new way of breathing, but at least this usually jump starts it.) However, when I asked Joe to breathe and push his belly out, he tensed his breathing, sucked in his belly, elevated his chest, and held his breath at the top of the inhalation. In other words, he did the opposite of what I asked. He was totally out of touch with what he was doing in his body and how to control it.

When do people naturally and normally breathe high in the chest? When they are startled or afraid. The important point is that breathing as though you were fearful elicits the mind/body state of hypervigilance and arousal and ensures that you will react with excessive excitation to stimuli that present themselves. And conversely, deliberately putting the body into a mode of breathing in which the belly is soft creates physical quietness and mental focus.

It was clear to me that Joe was so far from being able to organize his breathing for himself that in order to proceed I would myself have to draw him into a calm physical state. My hope was that once he had experienced a calm, focused body state, I would be able to teach him to deliberately return to that state.

I did about ten minutes of hands-on body work, and at the end of that, Joe was lying quietly and breathing calmly. I pointed out to Joe that he was quiet and relaxed and that he was breathing from a soft tummy. To help him grasp what soft tummy meant, I had him alternate tensing and loosening his belly, which he was now able to do. Then I had him put his hands on his tummy so he could focus on feeling it, and I had him deliberately soften his tummy and breathe from there, which he could also now do.

However, a new skill without an attractive application never seems worth much to students, so I had to set up a situation in which Joe could experience the usefulness of that calm state. We played Thumb War. Once the competition and the stimulation of competing to pin my thumb got him aroused, I pointed out that he could not move his thumb as effectively. Joe felt that being overexcited interfered with his coordination. Then I asked him to soften his tummy and breathe softly, and he experienced that that helped him thumb wrestle better. (With other children, I have often done much the same thing in playing tag, hitting a baseball, or whatever activity the children were interested in.) At this point in the lesson, Joe had experienced a new way of breathing and that it was useful and fun to breathe this way. Now he had a both a new skill and an anchor for it.

After that, we went from my office room into the Aikido practice room, which has a mat of 40 x 40 feet (approximately 13 by 13 meters). I had Joe run as fast as he could, as

wildly as he could, screaming as loudly as he could. But when I clapped my hands, the game was that he had to instantly drop to a *seiza* (pronounced say-zah) sitting position on the mat and practice soft tummy breathing. *Seiza* is the Japanese way of sitting, kneeling with the feet tucked under you. *Seiza* makes it much easier to maintain a balanced, erect sitting posture, and it is very conducive to calm, open breathing, which is why it is employed in the Japanese martial arts.

Joe loved the game, and it gave him an opportunity to practice switching from hyper mode to calm, focused mode. After all that, we went back into the office, and I had him focus on soft tummy breathing while I attempted to tickle him. And he was surprised to find that the same tickling movements I had made forty minutes ago no longer felt at all ticklish. That capped for him a sense of how much he could accomplish by paying attention to himself.

I suggested to him and his parents that between lessons Joe could spend sixty seconds a day sitting *seiza* and practicing soft tummy breathing.

## **SECOND LESSON**

Joe came for his second lesson three weeks later, and I asked him about his homework. He showed me how he was practicing soft tummy breathing: when he inhaled, he tensed his throat, puffed up his chest, and raised his eyebrows. That did not surprise me. A person's manner of breathing is a very fundamental part of their body identity, and changing from one breathing style to another is a profound shift in the way the body/self operates in the world. It is very common that between body awareness lessons an old, habitual style of body use sneakily reasserts itself, and people think they are practicing a new mode when in fact they are doing the old.

Raised eyebrows are part of the fear/startle response package, so I began by helping Joe notice when his eyebrows went up and how to soften them and let them down. At first, he found it hard to tell when his eyebrows were up or down, but he gradually was able to feel when they were up and let them relax down. Next, I helped him notice what it felt like to elevate and tense his chest and what it felt like to let his chest soften and stay down.

In addition to the specific element of chest function, overall posture also plays a part in breathing. A key element is postural stability. Breathing is aided and the mind calmed when the musculoskeletal system is placed in an upright, stable, strain-free posture. Joe had no sense of how to use an economical, efficient posture to support easy breathing. I had already made a beginning at teaching postural stability by having Joe sit in *seiza*, but now we went into this in more detail.

I noticed that when Joe wasn't focused on belly breathing, his habitual sitting posture was a limp slump. It was only when I asked him to deliberately breathe from his

belly that he sat up “straight” and rigid. In essence, he knew only the two states of slumping and being rigid. When he attempted not to do the one, the other was what he did. In order to give him a better foundation for easy breathing and body stillness, I had to teach him more about sitting in a posturally stable manner.

I usually teach basic postural stability by showing people the most efficient way of straightening up from a slump. Most people think that straightening up is done by throwing the shoulders back or by straightening the back, and practically no one notices that the whole process is built around pelvic rotation. When the pelvis rotates backward (the direction in which the guts in the pelvic bowl would spill out over the back edge of the pelvis), the stack of vertebrae has no foundation on which to rest and it slumps down. Rotating the pelvis forward provides a foundation for the spinal column and the torso as a whole and creates upright posture. However, to create postural stability, the pelvic rotation must be accomplished in the appropriate way.

Most people rotate the pelvis forward by using the superficial muscles in the back to pull upward on the rear edge of the pelvis. I show people instead how to rotate the pelvis forward by using the iliacus and psoas muscles (which are muscles deep in the front of the body) to pull downward on the front edge of the pelvis. This new sitting posture creates an effortless stability and a physical sensation of exhilaration and power.

I had Joe sit in seiza and slump, and then, using my hands on his back, I showed him how to roll his pelvis forward into the new position. Once he had done so, I pushed on his chest, and he was amazed to find that he was as stable as a rock and without any appreciable effort. I had him sit slumped and then rigidly straight, and in both cases when I pushed, he toppled easily. I suggested that it was really cool to be strong without effort, and Joe liked the idea. We went back to the Anti-Tickle Technique, and Joe found that combining the breathing with the new sitting process made him even less ticklish. However, after just a moment, his customary sitting posture reasserted itself and he slumped down. Again, that didn't surprise me, and I told him that he'd need more practice, and after a while, he'd figure out how to maintain the new sitting posture.

### **THIRD LESSON**

The next lesson was one week later. Again I started the lesson by asking about his homework, and Joe told me that he was doing much better at the soft tummy breathing. As I watched him do it, I could see that he was indeed able to sit upright and still and keep his attention focused on the internal experience and the external form of the breathing exercise.

A key element in body awareness training is generalizing the skills so that they are applied outside the office in daily activities. Joe's parents commented to me that they had seen him use the soft tummy breathing for self-calming in the time between the lessons. Joe's parents wrote the following:

From the very first lesson, the message of “soft tummy breathing” has really enabled Joe to refocus and snap back very quickly from situations where control was lost. We started to tell Joe “soft tummy” or “soft tummy breathing” *before* an event would erupt, and Joe would immediately start to use the breathing, focusing and self-regulation that is part of the technique. We have progressed to the point where he is beginning to use the technique himself. You can see him start to breathe and regulate. It has made a remarkable difference in his behavior.

Joe’s parents had all along wanted to enroll him in my children’s Aikido class, and since I judged that he was nearly ready for that, we did some Aikido exercises in the third lesson. Aikido is a non-violent Japanese martial art, and it can be very helpful to children as a venue for learning physical coordination, self-regulation, and cooperative social functioning. It is particularly captivating to children because it plugs into kids’ fantasies about being fighting heroes, such as they see in their cartoons. However, the children learn that to do the Aikido moves effectively, they must be kind, gentle, relaxed and perceptive, just the opposite of what they have been exposed to on TV. Aikido defense movements are soft and non-aggressive, and Aikido has no tournaments or competitions. I emphasize that fighting isn’t a game and should be avoided if at all possible. I teach the art with a focus on self-awareness in action and on learning to attain a state of calm alertness and balanced, efficient movement.

The body education I do dovetails neatly with Aikido; the body work is detailed education in body awareness, breathing, posture and movement, and the Aikido provides a more extensive movement and social situation in which to apply and practice what was learned in the body education lessons<sup>5</sup>. It is important to keep in mind that children with attention issues may not be able to participate in Aikido classes effectively without prior body awareness lessons as a foundation. When children with attention issues come to me for Aikido lessons, I usually do three to five private sessions to prepare them for the classes. In the private sessions, I can teach at the child’s pace, monitor their learning, and break down the basic skills of self-monitoring and self-regulation in whatever ways the child needs. Also, the private lessons offer a quiet environment without much environmental stimulation, so it is easier to teach the child to focus inward on body sensations and events. The private lessons, of course, can stand on their own for children who are not interested in continuing on to the Aikido class.

In Joe’s third and last private lesson, we practiced dodging a straight down strike to the head delivered with a soft foam wand. At first, Joe was excited and tense. He was displaying all the body behavior that is so ingrained in our culture’s view of being ready for combat. He crouched and tensed and breathed excitedly, but I soon convinced him that that way of getting ready was really not ready at all. When Joe got ready for my attack by tensing, he moved so slowly and awkwardly that it was easy for me to hit him. In

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that many Aikido schools teach the art without the body awareness emphasis which is so important in helping children with attention issues.

Aikido, we do not block or stop the attack movement. Instead, we dodge it and help it along its path until the attacker loses balance and falls. Clearly, in order to do that, an Aikidoist must be relaxed and balanced, free of aggression and effort.

I reminded Joe of the soft tummy exercise and showed him how to maintain postural uprightness and balance in a standing position. Once he could maintain that mindbody state, I again attempted to hit him on the head with the foam wand. As he simply and effortlessly stepped aside, I missed. From Joe's perspective, we were playing a game that was tremendous fun. From my point of view, we were reinforcing the idea/experience that self-awareness in the service of calm alertness was useful in controlling the environment. When people experience that an internal state is useful in practical action, it strengthens their grasp on that somatic state and motivates them to use it in their daily lives.

Though Joe perceived the exercise as a game, he was really practicing reducing extraneous movement, staying quietly poised, and keeping his attention focused on a task. It was very obvious to him that if he jittered and skittered around the mat, he was physically unready to execute the dodging movement efficiently. By the same token, if he looked away, or started talking, or began to daydream or think about anything except how and when I was going to attack, then he got hit. It became quite clear to Joe that he had the ability to stay focused and that it was useful to do so. All he had to do was remember soft tummy and postural stability, and keep watching me like a hawk.

These case notes from Joe's private lessons illustrate the basic processes I use in teaching, but there are many variations I use. Very often I will use non-Aikido focus games. For example, I might have a child attempt to balance a stick upright on her or his hand. That takes calmness and coordination, and once they can balance the stick, I make the game more interesting by throwing tissues at them. Their job is to use soft breathing and postural stability to maintain focus in spite of the distraction. Or I may have a child practice reading aloud. They experience that by focusing on the body state of calm alertness, they can read much more easily, even when I try to distract them by throwing tissues at them, tickling them, or talking to them. Very often further lessons go on to include more work with posture, work in improving gait or voice control, and practice in managing frustration and anger.

### **AIKIDO CLASSES**

A couple of weeks after his last private lesson, Joe began Aikido classes. His first three classes were very difficult. Being in a class with many other children was very stimulating and distracting. In addition, I was not focusing solely on helping him manage himself. Typically I demonstrate a defense technique and then have children pair off and practice the technique. Of course, I keep my eagle eyes on the room as a whole, but I move from pair to pair offering suggestions, corrections and encouragement. So Joe had to

maintain his composure and self-control on his own, and he bounced around like a frantic rubber ball.

My response was to target Joe with constant reminders to soften his tummy, breathe, and stand still. He knew why that was important, and he knew he could do it, and he did do it for a moment after each reminder.

The fourth class showed a wonderful transformation. Joe simply stopped his random and frantic talking and moving. He was still excited to be in class and still occasionally launched into stories he wanted to tell, but his behavior was well within the norm for any seven year old boy. By staying relaxed and focused, he was able to do the Aikido movements better and interact better with the other children in the class.

Over the course of the summer, Joe took ten Aikido classes, and he maintained and improved his self-control. By mid-September, I didn't see any out of control behavior. The reminder to "soften your tummy and breathe" is a normal and constant part of all the games and defense techniques I teach. All the children work on that, and Joe does too, simply as an ordinary part of the class.

In the beginning of September, Joe went back to school, and by his parents' report to me, his teachers were surprised at the changes in Joe:

The ongoing Aikido lessons have reinforced and improved on the basic techniques learned in the first few lessons. During school registration, we talked to all of Joe's teachers, instructors, and coaches. We told them about Aikido and "soft tummy breathing." Some of his teachers have used the technique, but all have noticed a new ability to focus on tasks on Joe's part using this technique. Most of his teachers have had Joe in kindergarten or first grade. All have noticed improved behavior and improved learning.

## **SECOND CASE STUDY — AUTISM**

George was ten years old. He had high-functioning autism, with difficulty translating words into movements and with gross and fine motor deficits. From the beginning, I structured our work as Aikido practice.

In his first lesson, I began by working with George on developing soft breathing and a more upright and stable standing posture. We applied that in an Aikido movement of dodging a straight down strike with a foam noodle. I showed him that he could dodge effectively only when he was relaxed and upright, and by the end of the first lesson, George was beginning to feel a bit more balance and ease in his movements. His second lesson was two weeks later, and we went further with instruction in posture and breathing.

During his third lesson, we started with soft tummy breathing and how to maintain a stable sitting posture. Then I asked his mother what would make George anxious, and she said vacuum cleaners. Children with autism are often scared of such everyday objects as vacuum cleaners, and I thought that George's fear offered a perfect opportunity to bridge the gap between what we did in our lessons and what he did in his daily life.

As soon as I pushed the vacuum cleaner into my office, George freaked and jumped up on the couch. I had him stand on the couch, relax his breathing, and balance his posture. It happened that there was an Aikido class going on in our large practice space, so George and his mother and I went into the Aikido room. I asked the instructor to execute a sword cut straight down on my head, and I showed George how staying relaxed and simply stepping to the side rendered the attack harmless. I also showed him how flinching and holding my breath prevented me from calmly and easily stepping off the line of the attack. I explained that if he could stay relaxed, then he could evade the vacuum cleaner as easily as I had evaded the sword cut.

Then we came back into my office, and I pushed the vacuum cleaner toward him with it turned off. Even though the vacuum was off, George expressed worry that it would go over his toes and suck him in. His movements became tense and awkward. I stopped moving toward him when I was still far away, and I asked him to keep breathing with his tummy soft, which he was able to do. Then I pushed the vacuum toward him again, but this time I moved a bit closer, and I asked him to stop flinching and holding his breath and instead stand upright and breathe calmly. Once George could keep his breathing and his posture relaxed and stable when I moved the vacuum near him, I repeated the movements with it turned on. And again he flinched and held his breath, but he was quickly able to regain his soft breathing and upright postural alignment.

George's fourth lesson was one week later. Up until that point, we had practiced only staying standing still and staying calm in the face of the vacuum cleaner attack, but in the fourth lesson we continued on to the next step, which was dodging the vacuum cleaner as I came at him.

In his fifth lesson, we began by working without the vacuum cleaner. I walked up to him and right into him, as though I were a steamroller. I reminded him to breathe calmly and dodge me, and then I showed him that once he was off the attack line, he could grab my shoulders and throw me down on the floor. Next, I had him do the same dodging and throwing defense as I came at him with the vacuum cleaner. We started with it turned off. However, by the end of the lesson I was attacking him slowly with the vacuum cleaner turned on, and he was able to calmly dodge my attack, throw me down, and turn off the vacuum cleaner.

By the end of the sixth lesson, I was pushing the vacuum at him quickly, and he was gleefully dodging it, throwing me down, and turning off the vacuum. That was quite a different response than he had shown at first. Not only was he not scared, but he was

moving in a fairly balanced and graceful manner. He had begun to learn how to use his body efficiently.

By combining body awareness training and Aikido movement, I was able to help George experience his ability to overcome anxiety and relax. We continued doing Aikido in private sessions, and he continued to make major improvements in his physical coordination and ability to understand and execute movement instructions.

### **THIRD CASE STUDY — ASPERGER'S**

John was a boy of fifteen who had Asperger's Syndrome. We did seventeen private body awareness lessons, and then he switched over to Aikido classes. He was very thin, with a caved in chest and a gangly body style. He sat in a limp, slumped posture, and he walked with an awkward, unrhythmical gait. In his first lesson, we started with the anti-tickle technique and soft tummy breathing, and then we worked on upright sitting.

He started his second lesson by saying he'd had a bad day at school. I had him describe in detail how it was bad and accompany the description with exuberant body gestures of great joy. He was surprised to find that he didn't feel nearly as bad, and I used that as an opportunity to suggest to him that much of what he felt was a product of how he held his body and moved.

In the next few lessons, we continued to work with relaxing John's breathing and balancing his posture. To give him the experience of what it was like to have his chest open instead of caved in, I had him lie on his back with a towel roll under his waist, which arched his back and elevated his chest. Then I showed him how to sit with his body more upright and open.

The way he customarily held his chest affected his breathing, and that affected his speaking, so in the next lessons we focused on how he spoke. He generally spoke with a tensed chest, restricted breathing, and an awkward, hesitant vocal rhythm. I had him sit slumped and talk, and then I had him sit upright and talk, and he could hear how much more fluent his speech was when he adopted a better posture. I asked him to try loosening his chest, softening his tongue, and relaxing his throat, and he could hear that his voice was much softer and smoother, and his speech was more continuous and better modulated.

Next we worked on his walking and running gaits. His gait was as awkward, imbalanced, and hesitant as his speech. I noticed that when he stood, he kept his weight back on his heels and let his shoulders fall back and down, which created an exaggerated arch in his back. Standing in that position of imbalance and strain, he couldn't efficiently start his body walking forward. By moving his weight forward on his feet and letting his back relax into a more natural, lengthened position, he could go from standing still to walking forward with much less effort.

When he walked, he normally held his arms stationary and out from his sides a bit. In a normal walking gait, the function of swinging one leg and the opposite arm forward simultaneously is to damp down the rotational movements that would otherwise swing the body back and forth. Because John did not use that contralateral arm/leg movement, his body stiffened to handle the rotational forces. Once I was able to help him use a relaxed contralateral walking movement, his whole walk became more fluid. We extended that into running, having him focus on a smooth pumping action with his arms. Not only was moving gracefully more enjoyable to John, but it helped him look less personally awkward and socially out of place. As he continued with his private sessions, we shifted over to Aikido practice, and he continued to improve the postural support and balance of his movements.

I had another boy with Asperger's who actually walked and ran moving his same side arm and leg forward simultaneously, which was even more awkward, but he too was able to learn a more graceful gait. As one other example of the application of body awareness training with Asperger's kids, I once worked with a nine year old boy. In his first lesson, his mother mentioned that he always got lost going from classroom to classroom because the commotion in the hall was more than he could handle. He became over-stimulated and couldn't think clearly about where he was going. I taught him soft tummy breathing, and at the beginning of the second lesson, he told me that navigation between classes was no longer a problem. He could compel himself to stay calm and alert in the hallway, and as a result he could get from class to class.

## **CONCLUSION**

It was exciting to see how much Joe, George, and John learned and how rapidly they were able to learn it. The self-observation and self-regulation skills they mastered had significant effects right away and will continue to affect their lives. However, these were not isolated or unusual cases.

With most kids, just a small number of body awareness lessons focusing on breathing and self-calming are sufficient. In many instances, more extensive body awareness lessons focusing on elements of body use in such areas as gait, speaking, and social interaction are helpful. I have worked with children on issues of movement coordination, anger management, conflict resolution, anxiety, and self-protection—all as concrete somatic processes.

With some children, private lessons in Aikido are helpful as a way of continuing and deepening the body awareness instruction, and many children enjoy moving into the Aikido classes.

Somatic instruction can make complex, seemingly abstract processes specific, concrete, and learnable. Body awareness training is a resource that can be very helpful to many children with attention and developmental issues.

---

PAUL LINDEN is a somatic educator and martial artist, founder of the Columbus Center for Movement Studies, and the developer of Being In Movement® mindbody training. He holds a Ph.D. in Physical Education, is an authorized instructor of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, and holds a fifth degree black belt in Aikido as well as a first degree black belt in Karate. His work involves the application of body and movement awareness education to such topics as stress management, conflict resolution, performance enhancement, and trauma recovery. He is the author of *Comfort at Your Computer: Body Awareness Training for Pain-Free Computer Use* and *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*.

He can be contacted at the Columbus Center for Movement Studies,  
221 Piedmont Road, Columbus, OH 43214, USA.  
(614) 262-3355.  
paullinden@aol.com.  
www.being-in-movement.com.