

# Moving On

## Dance-Movement Therapy Association of Australia

October 2009

**Contents include:**

**A series of articles developed from conference papers by:**

Sharon Chaiklin  
John Howard  
Heather Hill and Sue Pratt  
E. Connor Kelly  
Alice Owen  
Sharon Paetzold  
Maria Sangiorgi

**Articles from**

Sara Boas  
Anastasia Nikolitsa



DTAA 2009  
Volume 8, No's 1 and 2.  
ISSN 1447 - 333X

# **Dance-Movement Therapy Association of Australia Inc.**

## **Volume 8, No's 1 and 2, 2009**

Published by the Dance-Movement Therapy  
Association of Australia  
Website: [www.dtaa.org.au](http://www.dtaa.org.au)

**DTAA Editorial Team:**  
**Jane Guthrie and Naomi Aitchison**  
e-mail: [jguthrie@alphalink.com.au](mailto:jguthrie@alphalink.com.au)  
ph: (03) 9592 4017  
e-mail: [naitchison@optusnet.com.au](mailto:naitchison@optusnet.com.au)  
ph: (03) 98781602

Assisted by: Jenny Czulak Riley

**General DTAA Inquiries**  
DTAA, PO Box 641, Carlton South, Victoria 3053  
e-mail [dtaa@alphalink.com.au](mailto:dtaa@alphalink.com.au)  
ph: 0419 531 218

**Desktop Publisher**  
Jane Guthrie

Opinions expressed by contributors do not  
necessarily reflect the views of the Dance-  
Movement Therapy Association of Australia  
Inc.

The Association does not necessarily endorse  
events and products advertised in this journal.

### **Acknowledgements**

The DTAA wishes to gratefully  
acknowledge the assistance of the following  
in the production of the Quarterly:

- Staff at the University of Melbourne's  
Early Learning Centre in Abbotsford  
for their administrative assistance.
- Ausdance (Victorian Branch),  
Melbourne, for their ongoing support  
of the DTAA.
- Chris Greene for his computing  
assistance.
- Kate Durham for the use of her  
drawings

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# Dance Movement Therapy – Communication - and a Boy With Autism

Alice Owen



*Alice Owen - Dance/Movement Specialist, LCST, Speech and Language Pathologist (Qld), Member SPAA, Grad .Dip. Movement and Dance (Melb.Uni), Dip. Dance–Movement Therapy (IDTIA), Ass. Member DTAA, Cert. IV in Workplace and Assessment Training, Makaton Accredited Trainer, and Creative Dance teacher-works with people of all ages with and without disabilities. She uses Laban Movement Analysis to assist people to explore and improve their movement range and potential. She runs Creative Dance workshops in an Aged Care Hostel for Adults with a disability in a Community Centre, and for children with cerebral palsy at the Cerebral Palsy League at Northside in Brisbane. She is also a member of Brisbane Playback Theatre and runs an improvisation group for QUT drama graduates. Alice also has many years experience as a Speech Pathologist specializing in Voice Therapy and Augmentative Communication.*

This paper reports the progress made using dance movement therapy with a nine year old boy with severe autism. The dance movement therapy took place over a seven month period. The boy, whose name is Luke, used and continues to use Facilitated Communication to express himself through typing and his writings from this commentary form an integral part of the report. As Luke's Speech Pathologist, as well as his dance movement therapist, I worked with him for some time before his behaviour improved to the

point where dance movement therapy could become an option.

I postulated that dance movement therapy would assist him to gain more control over his movement and decrease his Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) symptoms. Being able to clearly articulate his thoughts and feelings through his communication aid, he was able to assist me in planning appropriate material for each session. Luke's mother was also involved and captured the sessions we had together on video and she also transcribed all her son's communications.

This paper attempts to describe the progress that was evident to me and captured on the video footage. The report is based on an analysis of this footage, which demonstrates changes in the different parameters observed, as well as from the child's transcriptions on his communication aid, and from the therapist's recorded commentary on video. At the time we started to work together Luke had been using Facilitated Communication at fluent sentence level for eighteen months. His typed comments were made with the use of a QWERTY board which involved me facilitating his writing at his wrist level.

**Facilitated communication (FC)** is a "process by which a facilitator supports the hand or arm of a communicatively impaired individual while using a keyboard or other devices with the aim of helping the individual to develop pointing skills and to communicate". Some "Proponents of FC suggest that some people with autism and moderate and profound mental retardation may have 'undisclosed literacy', or the capacity for other symbolic communication, consistent with higher intellectual functioning than has been presumed". (Wikipedia online dictionary and see FC web details at the end of the article.)

The dance movement therapy used in this case largely focused on taking Luke from where he was at in the moment, collaborating with him in a totally spontaneous and creative way, developing the parts of our session that he enjoyed and liked. It combined my creative and improvisational dance background with my dmt training, specializing in Leventhal's five part session, and Laban background, all entwined.

Luke has no speech but demonstrates a facility with language when he types. He can then communicate with the therapist holding his wrist and assisting him to stay on task - and not get distracted by his body's autistic impulses (described in detail in his commentary). He was keen to try dance movement therapy as he had very significant movement difficulties, and as a consequence, behavior management issues, and he knew another child who had made great progress with a combined dance movement therapy/Facilitated Communication approach.

**The aims of the program** were to use the communication system to aid the achievement of therapy goals and assist the client to explore his inner experience. Another aim was to demonstrate the utility of this approach.

The therapy goals were to use an action research approach to find a point of entry into a disordered movement system characterized by an almost complete lack of stability when weight bearing and controlled considered movement. Luke had an excess of "repetitive obsessive" autistic movements and rituals with a preponderance of fighting movement qualities of Strong, Sudden, Direct and Bound in LMA terms and very little evidence of an ability to access stillness, Light Weight, Indirect Space and Free Flow. He described himself as being completely trapped by his body's movement patterns and in need of help to break out and access different movements.

### **Description of Session 1**

I was sitting on the floor with legs out straight and Luke lying back being supported between my legs. There was a lot of screaming and intermittent struggling going on but I used my hands to support him, and a quiet gentle voice cueing and assisting him to stay on task. This was simply to stop the struggling and screaming long enough for Luke to experience something different and more rewarding so that eventually he could expand his movement options. At this stage we were also working on arm movements - aiming for anything that was more gentle, that slowed his movements in response to the gentle music that he had chosen. His ability to stand still when on his feet was very limited as his calf muscles were very contracted causing him to stand on his toes. Also his gait was almost like a controlled falling rather than walking: constantly driven by his autistic movement habits. We were positioned in front of the mirrors so that he could occasionally focus on himself. After a minute he stopped struggling and managed some arm circles with me assisting him. This lasted for about 30secs and then he tried to hit me and scream and

struggle again. After another few minutes he stood up and we circled around each other with one arm outstretched, holding hands with each other.

Luke's comments from Session 1.

"I do want to do this but my body wont let me."

"I'm just being awful."

"I'm not very good today but I do like the music."

And later in the same session .....

"I'm enjoying the music and I like the scarf and streamer but my body is just mucking up today. Make me do things-I liked the arm thing."

Later again in the same session this progressed to:

"It was great, sorry I'm a shit today but please don't give up. I feel good now and sort of relaxed and sort of woken up inside."

I asked him - *Do the movement words help?*

"Yes I don't think about them much but they help."

**In Session 2, the following week**, working in a similar way with 'gentle' movement, Luke wrote: "My body is saying no no no I'm very silly I cant dance, but I want to feel this music in my body."

I asked him - *How can I help you?*

"I like you holding me. I liked it on the floor. Lets do more just the arms but not legs."

On the video: we were standing holding one hand and using the other to stretch, as in counterbalancing - there is a pause in the music and there is a complete pause in Luke's movement.(a new thing!). We are working on moving and stopping and gentle and slow (the music - Shakahachi and piano - is very peaceful), but after a few minutes Luke loses his concentration; goes down to the floor again, beginning to struggle and squeal. Despite this the video clearly shows some progress being made and Luke starting to use a broader range of movement options and dynamics, even if only involved in them for a few minutes.

Luke can be seen on the video making his comments using his FC and becoming enthusiastic and positive.

"Yes I liked that. I loved it I liked the finger dance. This music is great."

"This is great. I am beginning to get it. I see what you are trying to do Alice and I'm happy to be here with you. I love this music can we do more next time."

**Then in Session 4**, Luke communicated:

"Good but my body is fighting hard." (in response to my comment that he was improving)

"Am I? It doesn't feel like it." (in response to my comment that he was "dancing" more.)

"Not really I'm just doing my autistic thing, but maybe it could be a dance."

Then later in the same session:

"This is great I'm able to make my body do more."

And at the end of this session:

I asked - . *What did you like best today?*

"I'm not sure. I enjoyed the whole thing. Lets do more next week. Can I have this music at home."

**In Session 5**, following a few minutes of drumming, Luke wrote:

"Do more. How about we do more drumming hands."

He was starting to show concentration and involvement.

### **Description from the video's**

We are sitting on the cushions with me leaning on the wall opposite the mirrors. Luke is sitting in front of me, between my legs, and I am helping him with his arm movements, holding his wrists, - forwards and backwards, up and down and around, and drumming on his chest and on his legs. I begin leading with 'dancing spiders' with my fingers in the air. Then I begin drumming on his back in time to the music - which he obviously enjoys as he is laughing and smiling (and, more importantly, not trying to move anywhere else). The music supporting the movement is from the CD 'Dance the Devil Away' by Outback. This lasted for a long timespan of 20 minutes. And then the comment:

"Great OK Mum we will do this at home."

I asked him *How do you feel?*

"Good and happy."

### **In Session 6:**

Luke became willing to involve his feet for the first time.

I asked - *How was that?*

"Good - I just needed to get my feet going" (in response to my comment that it felt different today).

"It was good I was able to feel my feet for the first time." "Usually they are not there."

My question - *Are they in a fog?* (reference to a previous discussion about sensory perception)  
"I think they are ignored."

I asked - *Did you enjoy the dance we did together?*

"Great and very relaxing."

During the program there were long gaps between dance movement therapy sessions because Luke became quite ill due to his epilepsy medication problems and subsequent chest infections. He was unable to dance but we continued to meet and he was able to type with me and his mother on a regular basis.

Some of our discussion about dance movement therapy during this time follows which demonstrates his understanding of the purpose and usefulness of this for him. Insightful, for a nine year old boy.

## **Dance Movement Therapy Chats with Luke**

### **Chat 1**

**Alice:** Dancing... what did you like?

**Luke:** I liked you doing the stuff on the floor with me lying back on your tummy. I felt very safe and I could feel you dancing so I could dance too. My body was taking your dancing and using it to be able to dance.  
I'm not struggling, I'm dancing. Round and round is fun but behind is better.

**Alice:** What about your hands?

**Luke:** Yes I felt your hands helping my hands move.

**Alice:** What about your fingers?

**Luke:** Yes I felt my fingers for the first time and they could do great things so I was very happy.

**Alice:** Do you have a fog feeling, can you feel your body?

**Luke:** Not fog more like wool it's as if I'm apart from the world and I can't touch it and it can't touch me.  
It's tightly packed. Sort of grey but not dark. Feet are lost hands are lost.

**Alice:** If you are looking at your hand can you feel your hand better?

**Luke:** No. No. No. I don't need too.

(Got upset and started hitting out)

**Luke:** I hate people who say "he isn't looking".  
Sorry.

(This was also the day Luke wrote his first story)

And at the end of that chat session:

**Luke:** I'm my own worst enemy. Terrible. Luke go to your room and stay there.

## Chat 2

**Alice:** OK I'd like to talk about the dance session.

**Luke:** Yes I felt like I was able to be there and be in it and not trying to get away and fight. That is what I do and it is exhausting.

OK, I'm needing to be more relaxed so I think the gentle music is good for me.

Normal for me is...no aaarg word. So I need music to help me.  
OK I need to have nice massages too.

Pummelled is a great word I like it.

Yes that was because I wanted the very gentle feeling you were giving me. I felt like my body could move differently.

Yes I think it needed to be a slow process because I am so used to my crazy body.

Wow that's a big idea. Good girl. You are funny you just make things up.

Good I want to be your experiment. OK  
ONE DAY I WILL BE ABLE TO TALK  
I HOPE.

We were able to return to some more dance movement therapy sessions following Luke's health improvement – that is dance and chats.

Two examples of these follow:

### Dance and chat 1

**Alice:** How are you Luke?

**Luke:** I'm good today I'm glad to be here but I want the music we had last time.

I want to be able to type by myself but right now I can't. Right now I'm too crazy. It's hard to be focused when I am so full of crazy yellingaaaaa....and ooooo...and eeeeeee. And stuff like that.

**Alice:** Sounds that you hear things inside your head rather than words?

**Luke:** Yes. How did you know about the words I was scared to tell anyone because they might think I'm crazy.

### Dance and chat 2

**Alice:** How are you Luke?

**Luke:** I am good when are we going to dance again?

**Alice:** I wasn't sure if you wanted too.

**Luke:** No I'm just being a shit.

Can we go and dance at Alice's soon?

**Mum:** Yes.

Luke spoke about his sister and excused his behaviour because of being disabled.  
Got upset and had a break.

**Luke:** I'm very grumpy, get frustrated, so slow words backed up.  
Want to talk about how I'm feeling get all full of feeling and can't get through the bog. How can I get control and get on with my life? I want to be a normal boy doing normal things but it's too hard and I get upset. You must make me type. Keep telling me I'm clever and I can do it.

**Alice:** How does that help?

**Luke:** I forget.

**Alice:** Nice move but we're not dancing today.

**Luke:** OK funny ha ha. Not very dancey today.

### More chat.....

**Luke:** Feel very strange now I feel very different.

**Alice:** Physical or in head?

**Luke:** Both. My body has stopped to be stupid and I'm trying to be sensible.

**Alice:** Is the cushion helping?

**Luke:** Yes, and using the board.

### Speech Therapy with Alice and Luke's carer

**Luke:** I want to be a normal boy who can dance and sing. I want to be able to stop my body just getting around all on it's own with me inside going "Stop, stop you silly body". I am so glad that I can learn to dance but I know it will take a while. Can

you keep doing it with me? For a while?  
OK I didn't think I was that good.

**Alice:** Re head banging - what happens?

**Luke:** It's nice I just get itchy inside and have to twitch and wriggle and try to get away, even though I want to talk. Why wouldn't I? I am stuck in my head all day long so I need to talk. I need to sing.

The following is a sample of Luke's creative writing, which he began developing at the same time as he began dance movement therapy:

### **Luke's own Scary Story**

He is a big scaredy cat....he wasn't able to go into the woods on his own.

One day he went for a picnic with his mum and dad and his sister Ugly-Wugly. They even took the cat Smoochy Britches, and they spent all day eating and playing games of hide and seek. But when he was hiding he got lost and he waited, and waited, but no one came. He was getting scared it got dark and he began to cry. "Help, help, help." He was just beginning to panic when he saw a.....

Large, nasty, sort of furry thing coming through the woods. It was big and gross and sort of brown black, with an oozy look to it.

It fell on him and he was swallowed up and "aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa" he said.

When he woke up he was safe at home in his bed, he had just gone to sleep and been carried home by mum.

By Luke Bennett (age 9)  
10/4/07

### **And from a proud Mum who transcribed Luke's writing ....**

"This is the first story Luke has written through facilitated communication, I have taken some liberties with punctuation but it is all his own words!"

In conclusion, looking at Luke's progress throughout our time together, which must have spanned a period of eight months or more, the changes in him were significant. The most significant being his ability to access a much broader range of movement options, particularly the more indulgent qualities such as gentle, soft or smooth and to stay focused for much longer periods of time. Not only did his range of movements expand but also, at the same time, his understanding and ability to write creatively. He also demonstrated a great appreciation and love of

music. At each session he chose his music, wrote stories to it and as the therapist I sang his words back to him. He has an amazing imagination and wonderful sense of rhythm.

I have the greatest respect for the power of creativity through dance, music and communication. We still do an occasional dance movement therapy session together and when we do I let Luke choose what he wants to do.

In closing, I'd like to present one of Luke's songs.

### *Golden Fields*

*Shining in the sun*

*Golden fields waving, waving, waving.*

*Ripples flowing, swirling and dancing,  
Then still and quiet.*

*Wind comes*

*Wind comes*

*Wind comes, waving, waving, waving,  
Dancing, swirling, whispering, shushing.*

*Golden grass gleaming in the sun, waving,  
waving. Waving, waving.....*

*Luke Bennett 10 years old*

9/7/08

*Music: track 5 of "Sounds of an ancient land",  
Terra Australia label*

### **For information about Facilitated Communication**

Deal Communication Centre

<http://www.home.vicnet.au/~dealcc/>

Facilitated Communication Institute

<http://www.suedweb.syr.edu/thefci/>

Donna Williams (also good on autism)

<http://www.donnawilliams.net>

(these sites all have links to others of interest)

### **For information about Autism and movement disorders**

**Donellan,A. and Leary, M.(1995).** Movement Differences and Diversity in Autism and Mental Retardation: Appreciating and Accommodating People with Communication and Behaviour Challenges. California. DPI Press

**Owen, Alice (1999).** Using Laban Movement Analysis to assess progress in Dance Therapy. Dance Therapy Collections, 2, pub. DTAA.

### **Autism from the inside**

<http://www.autistics.org/library>

Wikipedia, (2009).

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facilitated\\_communication](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facilitated_communication)