

# **Dance Therapy for Children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)**

Beatrice Lucas

IDTIA

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*Dance is a universal language, expressed and enjoyed by young and old, by different ethnicities, and by the neurotypical and neurodiverse.*

A short video on the history of dance therapy:  
“ADTA Informal Slide Show”

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpQVYTBuk\\_o0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpQVYTBuk_o0) (5')

# 1. About me

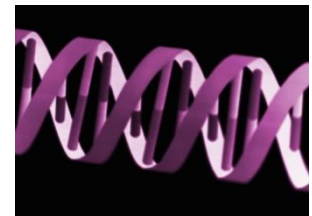
- Primary school teacher in Switzerland and Melbourne
- Studies in dance/movement education (M.Ed), dance therapy, and counselling
- Dance/movement therapist at autistic special developmental schools and psychiatric health settings in Melbourne (1988-1994)
- Advisory Teacher - ASD and a dance therapy facilitator for 15 years in the Far North Queensland Region
- Since 2012 guest lecturer for pre-service mainstream teachers and teachers of students with ASD in Bachelor and Masters programs in Switzerland (until 2022)
- Until 2019 also as a freelance educator and workshop facilitator for dance therapy in Switzerland, Brazil, and Australia.

## 2. The needs of the population

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPknwW8mPAM> (1'30'')

### Facts about ASD:

- Numbers in the US (CDC): 1:68 (2014); 1:59 (2018) 1:54 (2020), 1:44 (2021).
- Increased numbers are also confirmed in other countries:  
UK: 3.5%. - Far North Queensland, Australia: 3%.
- ASD is diagnosed by behavioral observation
- Average age for diagnosis: mostly before 6 years
- Autism is a neurobiological developmental disorder.
- 65 genes were identified in 2017, but there are possibly 500-1000 *interacting*



## 2. The needs of the population in quotes

Chee:

**The worst problem for me is socializing.** I cannot make friends and I need friends badly. When you have friends you get more support and you can ask a lot of things from them and they'll help you because they are your friends...And because I don't have friends it means that I'm cut off from help. Whenever I have a problem I have to handle it on my own. I don't know how to socialize and that means I don't know how to use people to my advantage"

Luke:

**"I don't mind my own company** at all and have nothing in common with most other boys. This seems to cause teachers a problem. One teacher told me it was time I stopped being a 'Billy No Mates' and got out there and started having fun. As if his idea of fun was the only way – yeah right! That actually upset me quite a lot. Being alone doesn't. I would say that if you don't want to mix with people and are quite happy on your own, then carry on and don't let anyone push you into anything different."

Therese Jolliffe:

“Reality to an autistic person is a **confusing interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights**. There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything. Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life.”

Donna Williams:

“I was exploring the **concept of consistency**. It may have seemed that my world was upside down, but I was looking to get a grip on consistency. The constant change of most things never seemed to give me a chance to prepare myself for them. Because of this I found pleasure and comfort in doing the same things over and over again.”

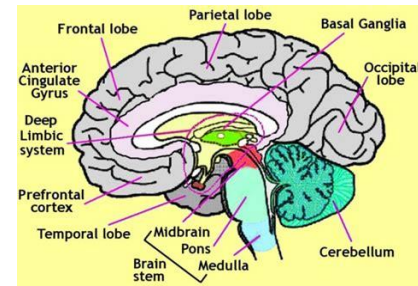
Robert:

“Do you think you could find a room just for me with no windows and an opening under the door big enough to pass food through and reading information. That would be great as **I wouldn't have to deal with anyone and I could also read all day which I like doing. I can learn by myself.**”

Luke:

“For some people school is like **fitting a square peg in a round hole**. For me at the moment the hole (school) has changed its shape slightly to accommodate me and the square peg (me) has tried to soften its edges. So a better description would be a rounded square trying to fit itself into a circle with sticky out bits.”

# ASD / Autism is ...



- Not a disease or illness, therefore not “curable”
- Affects more boys than girls (Previous: 4:1. Attwood: 1.8:1 (2017))
- A disorder? A disability? An enrichment? – Perhaps most likely a condition or a state of mind.
- A different way of perceiving and dealing with the environment, one's own emotions, and the emotions of others
- A different way of thinking and processing information
- Often “a pre-occupation with the non-social world” (Volkmar, 2016)



## **a) A dance therapy program for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will focus primarily on:**

Body awareness

Body boundaries

Sense of self

Personal space and  
environmental space

Energy dynamics

Sustainment of movement flow

Developmental locomotor  
activities

Self-expressive movement

Movement achievement and  
mastery

**Social skills** such as

- Turn-taking
- Waiting
- Moving and dancing together
- Appropriate physical contact
- Eye contact and awareness of others
- Appropriate reciprocal interactions
- (Adapted) Performing for others / entertaining

## **b) Sequential and Developmental Movement Experiences Presented in Dance Therapy (Leventhal, 1980)**

- Identification and sensory, tactile and kinaesthetic stimulation of body parts and boundaries
- Articulation of joints and body parts
- Weight and gravity experiences
- Exploration of personal space (kinaesphere), movement and energy dynamics, sustainment of movement flow
- Developmental locomotor movement

## c) The Five Part Session (Leventhal, 1980)

- Warm-up :Greeting ritual, kinaesthetic preparation  
Tuning in
- Release: Letting go of tension
- Theme: Relationship, Self-initiation  
Range exploration and development of  
movement vocabulary
- Centering: Here and now  
Anticipation of next session
- Closure: Goodbye ritual

## **d) The Role of the Dance Therapist in the Attachment– Separation Process (Naess, 1982; based on Mahler, Winnicott)**

1.      Patterning child through movement.  
Supporting from behind.
2.      Attuning and Mirroring child's movement.  
Being opposite.
3.      Moving parallel to the child.
4.      Encouraging increasing freedom away from the  
therapist. Maintaining active, then later  
passive/empathic presence.

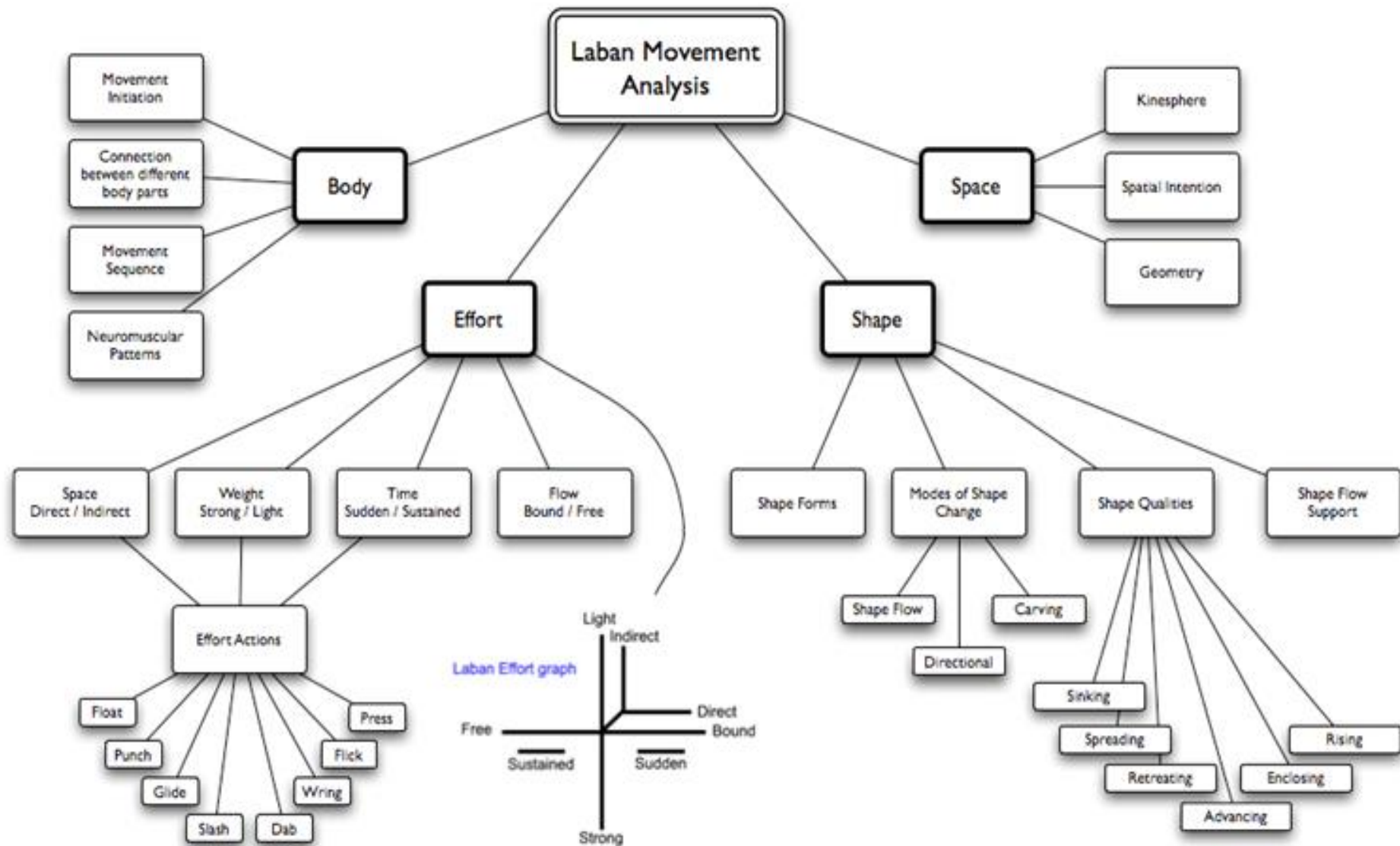
## **e) LMA - Laban Movement Analysis**

LMA – Body, Effort, Shape, Space

LMA – Planes

LMA - Shape Flow is about

- Growing / shrinking through breathing
- Body parts in relation to each other



# Videos to illustrate DMT

A short video by one of the pioneers who worked with autistic children: “[Looking For Me](#)” by Janet Adler (3’08”)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsRfMm7DCww&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy\\_XlvmSHa6v&index=14](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsRfMm7DCww&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy_XlvmSHa6v&index=14)

A short video on dance therapy used at a school: “[Movement therapy helps young kids](#)” (6’29”)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1RCZeW2wXE&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy\\_XlvmSHa6v&index=33](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1RCZeW2wXE&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy_XlvmSHa6v&index=33)

Dance/Movement Therapy & Autism: Dances of Relationship (12’43”)  
Talk by Christine Devereaux

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65DLHYrHlIM&index=35&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy\\_XlvmSHa6v](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65DLHYrHlIM&index=35&list=PL-94M5xLYIGocXSU0AAqMGy_XlvmSHa6v)

## **4. My liaison with the institution and line of management**

- Term timetable with weekly group sessions under guidance of Principal. Also 1:1 sessions with severely autistic children
- Dance therapist working with regular class teachers and teacher aides as supports
- Integration project with neighbouring state primary school



# 5. Simulated session

Weeks 1-3

All activities initially sitting comfortable on the floor (on cushions if required) or at a table

## WARM UP

Shoes off

Greeting ritual /song

### 1. Body part identification and stimulation

Using a variety of touch via props, e.g. light, strong, squeezes... Props such as a small ball to roll on body parts, feathers (both ends for either gently stroking or poking), various kinds of material (velvet, silk, cotton, wool, nylon) for stroking, wrapping/unwrapping of body parts when named, etc.

Start off with the trunk, works towards the periphery / extremities (fingers, toes, squeezing firmly the “ends of the body”). The child needs to experience his body boundaries. If working 1:1 use a mirror to introduce and name body parts.

## RELEASE

**2. Rocking** This is the first rhythm: forwards, backwards, sideways from right to left, circling to right, then to left. Children who are unable to rock by themselves re being supported by an adult who sits behind them (later opposite, and later beside).

Use music to rock in unison, e.g. classical adagios, andantes, children’s songs, ballads, New Age music. Or make up and sing own songs.

Use props to enhance group activity, e.g. Circle: everybody holding on to an elastic band or role or hoop whilst rocking in the same direction.

Aim for “movement synchrony”. This is a sucking and breathing rhythm (Kestenbergl).  
Keywords: smooth, repetitive, continuous

## **THEME**

### **3. Free movement activity to music**

Taking turns

Teacher mirrors child's movement as accurately as possible and names what the child is doing. Make contact with the child through movement synchrony and sharing. Allow the child to withdraw when necessary. Repeat many times. This can happen on the floor or standing up. - Make eye contact, alternate between verbal and non-verbal cues.

## **CENTERING / CLOSURE**

### **4. Group activity**

Simplified Folk Dance

Talking about the session and what was special how children danced. Can we dance like...?

### **5. Talk about what happens next and session:**

Goodbye ritual / song

Shoes on

## 6. Discussion



# References (Quotes, Concepts)

## **Quotes**

Kluth, P. (2003) 'You're going to love this kid' Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom, Maryland: Paul H Brookes.

Molloy, H. & Vasil, L (2004). Asperger Syndrome, adolescence and identity: looking beyond the label. Jessica Kingsley Pub.

Student R. (2004) NSW DET High School, Year 11.

Volkmar (2016) Presentation at European Autism Conference, Edinburgh.

**Concepts** based on Marcia B Leventhal in  
DTAA Journal, Moving On, Volume 11, No's 1 and 2, 2013

Also see separate list of **References**

# Links to relevant articles

- <https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/autism-dance-therapy/>
- <https://www.adta.org/clinical-info-sheets> (DMT for various populations, incl. ASD)
- <file:///C:/Users/egg07/Documents/DMT-IDTIA/ASD-DMT-Workshop2022/ASD%20and%20ID%20References%20Revised%202015.pdf> (handout)
- <https://dtaa.org.au/dance-movement-therapy-communication-and-a-boy-with-autism/> (case study)
- <https://www.griffith.edu.au/arts-education-law/autism-centre-excellence> (research into anxiety and ASD)