

Being happy in our own skin

Dance therapy has a lot to offer deafblind people...

Mea Nordenfelt is a Dancer, Dance Teacher and Dance Therapist. Mea has been working as a dance teacher for more than 20 years, both with children and adults. Mea has experience of working with deafblind people, and since 2006 as a dance therapist.

Therapeutic dance

Is it possible to develop communication through complementary ways? This article describes the development of mutual experiences through music, dance, movement and body

action. It describes a project which aims to explore possibilities for contact, social interaction and communication.

Communication is difficult and complicated for deafblind people. This problem in communicating with others affects deafblind people very severely when it comes to their ability to make contact and interact with their surroundings. The creative arts offer a variety of routes to expression and thereby strengthen communication.

The lack of deafblind habilitation can result

in aggressive behaviour, passivity, emotional and social problems. Many deafblind adults are passive, due to lack of experience of good interaction. It is important for the adult congenital deafblind person to demand more from their social surroundings and support. A response from their surroundings is a prerequisite if the deafblind person is to regain the desire to explore the world around and to be more motivated in interactions with other people (Nyling, 2003).

The Project

The project was based on four sessions during one month, focussing on an individual way of working with a congenitally deaf blind person. To evaluate and to document the work, all the sessions were filmed and analysed. The documentation was based on the films and collected experiences from previous work with deafblind people. It had a psychodynamic perspective, based on dance therapeutic methods, as this is my area of interest and expertise. It describes mutual experiences and their development through music, dance, movement and body action. The aim was to explore possibilities to contact, social interaction and communication.

Mea Nordenfelt



The project was supported by Iréne Karlsson Marki from Resource centre Mo Gård and Lena Hammarstedt from the Swedish Resource Centre for Matters regarding Deaf Blindness.

In the sessions I used my own body movements, sounds, rhythms as well as physical contact to gain the attention of my partner. I also used musical instruments and different props, like bean bags, scarves, balls, pillows etc.

The basis of the study

The project was based on a number of key principles.

- Everybody can participate in their own way – right and wrong does not exist
- Success originates from an individual's own presumption
- Communication through music, dance, movement and bodily interaction is possible without using tactile language or any other language
- Work is only with the deafblind person's own movements, sounds, and body expression
- Create a confident atmosphere, both mentally and physically, the holding environment
- Have a playful, flexible and tolerant atmosphere, taking care of creative resources. This will increase the joy and give courage to be

more daring to explore ourselves through dance

- Be unprejudiced, have very sensitive ears and to be open for situations here and now

This will lead to:

A strengthening of the bodily anchorage, creating more stability, and improve self esteem by giving more opportunities to arouse experience and happiness.

Dance and Music are communication!

In dance you express something as you execute a movement with both your body and your feelings. Dance and music is also about rhythm, timing, sounds and song. With dance and music you can arouse your own joy and happiness, and at the same time you also can arouse other people around you, and in doing so, connect internally and with others at the same time. Dance and music give you power and energy: they give you joy and a feeling of affinity with other people.

Understanding our body image and its importance

Using body contact and touch of different kinds a constant flow of sensory signals are experienced – even though the senses of hearing and sight are missing. Our skin is the

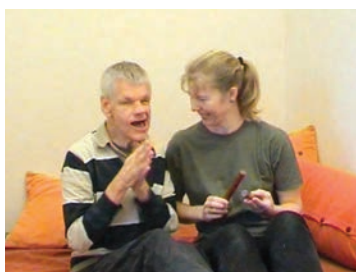
greatest sensory organ. Touch is necessary for our cognitive experience and reactions and, as a result, it also affects our feelings. (Langlo Jagtøien, Hansen, Annerstedt, 2002).

Grönlund (1988) stresses that understanding our body requires both an intellectual and an emotional knowledge. Birkestad (2004) claims that touch is basic for our understanding and knowledge of our body. By touching different parts of the body we create a map of the different parts of our body, and feel our body image boundaries.

Our sensory impressions from our body must be organised by the brain to be able to create self-knowledge, understanding and a picture of our body – the body image. Our body image is the foundation for our body awareness and stays in our nervous system, providing a foundation for all the planning and control of our movements (Langlo Jagtøien, Hansen, Annerstedt, 2002, p. 53).

The body image is essential to how an individual moves and how the body phenomenon is understood. It has a great influence on all interaction with other people; it is emotional and constantly changing. The body image is based primarily on kinaesthetic and tactile input (Duggan 1980, p. 49).

A positive and realistic knowledge and



understanding of their body provides a confident personal identity and becomes decisive for all the mental functions. A person with a disturbed understanding, or a lack of awareness in this area has no possibility to interpret, judge or to try to influence the world around him (Grönlund 1988).

Take your partners...

Wilhelm

Wilhelm (assumed name) was born 1945 with the diagnosis congenital Toxoplasmosis. Wilhelm was born blind with a hearing loss. He uses his hearing aids, when motivated, like when he is listening to music e.g. if I sing a melody he can easily catch it and sing along with me, but not with words. But we don't know how much he understands. He was paralysed when he was three years old, which affects his ability to move his left side. His physical balance is affected by his injured knee. Wilhelm likes bodily interaction, assuming that he is motivated for it, and likes to take your arm and put it around himself.

The behaviour, caused by deafblindness, has made it difficult for the environment and community to understand his specific needs. Wilhelm has, from an early age, been separated from his

parents. His history, like many of the congenitally deafblind people, has largely involved long periods in hospital and different medications. On account of the lack of communication and personal development he has never been able to learn tactile sign language. Using his body and the bodily interaction is the essential way that he communicates.

A session with Wilhelm:

Because of Wilhelm's unstable balance we worked sitting on the floor during the sessions. This is a simple example of how body understanding influences all intervention and communication.

The sessions were based on a "namesong". The namesong could gradually change into a bodysong in different ways. Together, in a playful atmosphere, it is possible to explore the different body parts. The session's show how the concept of "self", "you", and "we" can be experienced using a namesong.

We worked using the room space with me moving into different positions, by sitting in front, at the side and back-to-back during the session with Wilhelm.

We worked with: **rhythm**, using singing, clapping and body movement

coordination, by playing with beanbags putting them on different parts of the body and let Wilhelm pick or throw them away from his body

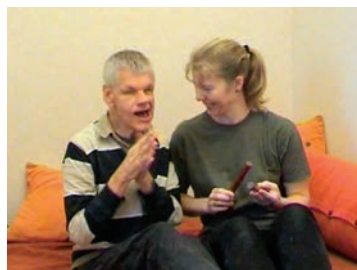
perception e.g. the tactile and kinaesthetic perception in the physical body contact, playing with beanbags and the auditive perception by singing and by using different music instruments

contact, for instance by moving closer to me or moving away from me or start to join me in the song

teamwork, for instance by sitting back to back feeling each back pushing and leaning towards each other and creating trust and confidence

fantasy and expression, which has to do with joy. In a playful and trusting atmosphere we have explored the possibilities of the body by using sound, body movement, different polarities and mirroring and with different props.

During the sessions, using dance and movement, Wilhelm built up a more expressive body language. To do this it is essential to dare to play together and to use the body as a sensitive instrument. Being playful



and exploring together means you can be humble and creative in our way of thinking and doing.

During the session we developed our interplay and I believe that Wilhelm's body image and his self-esteem had been invigorated. Wilhelm's body was looking more "whole" and during the last session, Wilhelm held his arms together and knew they were connected with each other. It looked like Wilhelm could allow himself to enjoy his whole body and soul, and to begin to take better care of himself.

And now...

Nowadays, it is clear that Wilhelm uses his whole

body when he is enjoying life! He is explosive, curious and playful. When he gets structure in his life and when he is treated in a sensible and equal way, Wilhelm shows that he is a charismatic person with a desire for physical body contact. He has gradually developed his body movements and body awareness. This has directly affected his ability to care for himself.

And finally..

The project resulted in the establishment of new dance therapy sessions. Dance therapy happens once a week with groups of three congenitally deafblind people and their helpers.

The purpose of the therapy is both therapeutic and educational.

To have had the opportunity to work with Wilhelm was very instructive and important; especially with the statement from the UN Standard Rules in mind "that ensure that persons with disabilities are integrated into, and can participate in cultural activities on an equal basis."

From my own experience I know that dance therapy has a lot to offer to deafblind people and these cultural expressive forms complement all forms of communication.

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