



Help your Special Needs Child Through Inspirational Dance by Dzagbe Cudjoe

The author and one of her many dancing partners.

www.dance-to-health-help-your-special-needs-child.com

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This book is about “How to...” but it’s not about making money, the number one theme of most e-books. It’s about improving the Health and Wellbeing of your special needs child through Dance.

This manual is absolutely unique. It really is the only one of its kind! It is written to encourage and to help the parents and carers of children with special needs to set up their own Dance Movement therapy groups. No other professional Dance Movement therapist has suggested that this is possible.

Yes, I know - there are books on Dance Movement for the use of teachers in schools. But this is often using dance only to reinforce lesson work. This is a good thing but I offer MUCH more. It is also true that an increasing number of dance schools welcome the child with special needs. Again this is a good thing but what is practised is not necessarily Dance Movement therapy. The dancing is usually geared towards the able-bodied majority with little or no adaptations for the child with special needs. The special needs children strive to reach often unobtainable standards. This does not encourage the children to enjoy dance. My method is fun and totally involves everyone in a relaxed atmosphere. This increases the children’s feelings of self-worth and confidence to try new things. It is also good exercise which increases lung capacity, flexibility and improves posture.

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Following my suggestions you can unlock the fountain of natural, joyous, spontaneous dance within your child. Movement that comes from deep within a person is a true expression of themselves. These movements truly express the person dancing and are never, ever ugly. Such dance strengthens the mind/body/spirit connection. You will get to learn new things about your child and to deepen the bonds between you. You will be helping your child to release his or her full potential. This manual has been written because I believe from the bottom of my heart that the parents of children with special needs can be taught to help their child through Dance Movement therapy.

Dance Movement therapy is gaining acceptance in general, but in many parts of the world is unobtainable, and in others expensive and hard to find. My suggestions can be made relevant to any culture in the world.

I hope that this manual will give you the confidence and know- how to start your own Dance Movement Therapy group.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I would like to introduce myself to you. I have an MA degree in Ethnology from the Ludwig Maximilian’s University, in Munich, Germany. After I graduated I worked at the Ghana National Museum before moving to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. For a short period I was a Research Fellow at this university.

I then moved on to become Publications Editor for “New Culture” magazine which was published in Ibadan.

Since those days I have been involved in a whole range of activities. Among them as Co-Chair of the Bath Black Mental Health Group in Bath, England, Fund Raiser for the charity “Action on Disability and Development in Frome, England, Session Social Services Support Worker for Child Access visits by mothers with mental health problems, and a Befriender with MIND (a UK Mental Health Charity).

This was my background before training as a Dance Movement Therapist. You have, no doubt, noted that I don’t have professional dance qualifications. I took ballet and tap lessons as a child. As an adult I have some experience of Middle Eastern, Brazilian, Flamenco and Sacred Dance as well as of Physical Theatre and Dance.

My practical training was mainly with Marie Ware of ADMT.UK and Leah Bartel of ADT International. In Marie Ware’s group I worked with adults who were deaf/blind, Down’s syndrome, autistic or brain damaged due to accidents. We also worked with long-stay mental patients in a hospital situation.

Leah Bartels’ training emphasized the psycho-spiritual element in health and the role of the arts in healing.

I hold the certificate of Dance Therapists International as a qualified “Dance Therapist in the Community”.

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Since completing my training I have worked with adults suffering from a range of problems including severe mental ill health, stress, medication dependency, and personality problems. Other areas have been with women’s groups on” Dance as a means to Self-Discovery”, and “Dance and Movement as a Key to Spiritual and Emotional Well-Being”. However my main work has been with children with Special Needs – much more on that later.

I have a great-nephew who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

A few years back I produced a self—instructional dance video “Dance in Our Footsteps” featuring three traditional northern Ghanaian dances. This was shot on location in Ghana.

STEP#1

How Parents can help their Special Needs Child using Dance Movement Therapy

Now that I've told you something about myself I want to get right back to the purpose of this manual. I've already stated with total conviction that I think parents can become Dance Movement teachers to their children with special needs.

Why do I believe this?

Let me ask you some questions first.-

- **Do you desperately want to help your child who has special needs?**
- **Are you looking for a method to calm/stimulate him or her?**
- **Are you looking for a method to have a very deep level of communication with him or her?**
- **Are you looking for ways to have fun and explore the potential of your child?**
- **Are you looking for ways to help your child to integrate socially?**
- **Are you looking for a way to improve your child's posture and coordination?**
- **Are you looking for ways to give your child confidence and a feeling of self-worth?**

If your answer to these questions is “Yes” then this manual is most definitely for you!

I really want to reassure you that you do NOT need to be a professionally trained dancer to be a successful Dance Movement Therapist. It is important though that you find enjoyment in dance. **What is essential is to be able to recognize and understand the power of dance movement.** To go from movement to dance is a smaller step than you might imagine. AND I intend to give you lots of tips as to how to do this.

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Nearly all of us, even the most profoundly disabled, are often capable of a level of dance. You can dance using only your fingers and/or toes. All of us have an inbuilt ability to dance though clearly some people have greater talent than others.

ONE WORD OF WARNING! DO NOT EVER MANIPULATE A CHILD INTO A POSITION. These are not physiotherapy sessions, nor gymnastic sessions , nor formal dance lessons. These sessions are about self-expression through Dance Movement.

Also please be clear that Dance Movement Therapy is not necessarily going to be a cure in the medical sense but it can bring about both physical and psychological improvement.

I implore you not to be frightened and put off by the idea of dance. You can move! I'll show you how to turn simple everyday movement into dance. Dance Movement Therapy is a wide ranging term and it can even lead into very physical games. Great emphasis is being laid on the fact that parents are capable of conducting Dance Movement sessions with their children who have special needs. This really is true in the main.

You will take to Dance Movement therapy like a duck to water if:-

- **You are open to new ideas**
- **You have confidence in yourself**
- **You are sociable and outgoing**
- **You are intuitive**
- **You enjoy music**
- **You enjoy physical activity**
- **You do not expect results overnight**

IF

- **You are very introverted**
- **Other peoples opinions are paramount in your life**
- **You are unable to be yourself**

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- **You have difficulty communicating your thoughts and feelings**
- **You are uncomfortable with physical contact**
- **You are very conservative in your outlook**
- **You have difficulty being spontaneous**

then you may find things a little more difficult at the beginning. Just because someone is not immediately brilliant at something does not mean that the person is not deriving benefit from what they are doing. – You will receive great personal benefit from the sessions.

STEP #2

DON'T PANIC! YOU CAN LEARN HOW TO CONDUCT DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY SESSIONS WITH YOUR CHILD.

It needs emphasizing that some of the children I taught had very severe learning and physical disabilities. They were all in Special Schools because their needs could not be met in a regular school even with extra support. They were never going to live independently even with massive support. Some of them were not expected to live beyond their teens. All the children in one of my groups were non-verbal and some were non-responsive.

There was never any point in talking about chronological age. There were 16 year old boys with a mental age of 4-5 years. I have never taught teenagers who need a totally different approach. At that stage boys are often reluctant to join in. They seem to respond best to a male teacher who provides very challenging movement activities. Several pupils were confined to wheelchairs without voluntary movement. Some pupils had severe behavioural problems.

I went to Special Needs Schools on a weekly basis for an hours session. There were sometimes not an adequate number of helpers which was a constraining factor. The teachers' attitudes to Dance Movement sessions varied greatly. One Headmistress was totally disinterested. Some teachers had worked in old-style children's homes and had very rigid views regarding what was worthwhile educationally. Such teachers joined in reluctantly. Other teachers feeling themselves underpaid, overworked and stressed-out regarded my sessions as an hour when they could switch off and leave the responsibility for the success or failure of the lesson in someone else's hands.

These teachers even if they didn't "suck energy" out of the class most certainly didn't contribute anything to it. But, I also had some wonderful teachers who

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experienced and acknowledged the difference the sessions made to the children and to them personally.

Some of the children were in a state where if they held eye-contact, smiled or showed any interest this was a breakthrough. With some children if they showed pleasure or initiated physical contact this was a mega-development. There were a few children who many people would describe as “vegetables”. A very cruel and I feel wholly inaccurate term. I felt that these children existed on a “different plane” to us. A plane that was inaccessible to us except perhaps in very high states of meditation. My feeling was that occasionally such children “touched base” with us but not very frequently. Other children in this state did seem distressed and I remember one boy who used to groan and whimper most of the time.

The sessions were one hour weekly and excluded the holidays so that it took a very long time for me to build a relationship with the apparently non-responsive and autistic children.

STEP#3

MY OWN PERSONAL METHOD OF DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY

My personal method of Dance Movement therapy will be much clearer very soon when I explain to you how I create steps and movements for a session. For the moment I would just like to quote from an introduction which I wrote for one of my courses.

“When we tune-in to the deepest well-springs of our Being we move with a grace, rhythm and beauty which is unique to each individual. Through this “tuning-in” process we learn new aspects of ourselves and others without the need for the spoken word. We can attain by dancing, calm, peace, spiritual upliftment, self-confidence and greater physical energy for ourselves and others.

Even if participants have a restricted range of movement or are wheelchair bound, it is still possible for them to dance because everyone moves within their own level of energy output.

I do not teach any specific dance or movement style, but guide sessions in a way which enables each participant to create his or her own dance. This is so even when the participants have emotional problems or mental ill-health. Age is irrelevant.

Where appropriate I use breathing exercises, visualisation, relaxation, storytelling, masks, poetry and visual stimulation through pictures and natural and man-made objects. No one is asked to do anything demeaning or embarrassing. Everyone is enabled to take part and have fun, exercise and relaxation at the same time.”

Perhaps you have already been asking yourself how on earth did I get children in wheelchairs with no voluntary movement to dance. The answer is that I did and I

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didn't! I would often dance for these children using a wide selection of music. I incorporated them into my dance by using such props as scarves which I could drape around us both. Or sometimes I would ring in their ear a tiny bell which gave a beautiful note. I would always look for some means to link myself physically with the child for whom I was dancing.

Wheelchair dancing was always a very great success. It did, however, depend entirely on each child being pushed by a helper who was ready, able, and willing to dance while pushing the wheelchair. This was not always easy as some of the wheelchairs were heavy and cumbersome. I used to give musical instruments, balloons, flags etc to the more able children to play or wave as we danced. I never had any children who were able to manoeuvre their wheelchairs independently.

Square dance type dances seemed to work best. It's essential to work out the choreography in advance. We did have some good freestyle fun as well.

During sessions:-

- I tried to remain calmly in control of the class**
- I tried to make the session something special**
- I tried to make the children feel secure**
- I tried to build the children's confidence**
- I tried to build the children's feeling of self-worth**

- I tried not to let misbehaviour become an issue.**
- I tried not to let the bad behaviour get to me.**

STEP#4

HOW TO CREATE DANCE MOVEMENT FOR YOUR SPECIAL CHILD.

Now here comes the “HOW TO” part. Earlier I said that I would show you how to create Dance Movement for your child with special needs. WHAT FOLLOWS CAN BE USED BY ANYONE TO CREATE ANY KIND OF DANCE.

We all instinctively recognize a dance no matter what part of the World it comes from. In some cultures all the important events of life are connected to dance – birth, puberty, marriage, death. Even today in many cultures it is impossible to worship in a reverent manner without dance. There was dance in Christian Churches, in some cases, such as the Shakers until quite recently. Dance is heightened movement with a personally expressive element.

Let’s begin by taking a very basic example of movement moving into dance. Let’s think about walking. Walk normally – then start to bend your knees and lower your weight over them. Do two normal steps and three with knees bent. Do this rhythmically and let the movement flow and you have crossed the boundary into dance.

You can do this simple sequence not just forwards but backwards and sideways too. It’s all starting to look more interesting! Experiment with a way to move your arms and head and it looks more interesting still. Building on the simple walking theme see how different things look when you turn your feet out like Charlie Chaplin. Try doing the above described walk with your legs far apart and hands on your thighs. Heh, we’ve got a Sumo wrestler on the premises!

Try doing the same thing on tip-toe holding both arms straight out to the side at shoulder height then lowering your arms to touch your outer thighs and repeating this movement. Isn’t there something birdlike about the movement now?

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Slide your feet along the floor with your hands clasped behind your back. As you slide your RIGHT FOOT forward turn your body from the waist to your left. Slide your LEFT FOOT forward and turn your body from the waist to the right.

YOU'RE SKATING!

Downwards movements can be used to express sorrow, depression, “heaviness” etc. When we are given bad news we crumple downwards. Downward movements and stamping connect us with the energies of the earth.

Let's build on what we have just been doing. Decide how you are going to do the two steps forward normally, three steps with knees bent sequence with some movement of your arms. Find a way to end up sitting on the floor. Your task is now to find a way back up onto your feet.

You will see that you are gradually building up a sequence of dance steps. You might like to have some music at this point. Chose something that you really enjoy and that acts for you as a “motor” to movement. You can try moving bent over forwards, backwards or to the side. Notice how each position feels for you.

Explore the many different ways you can move your arms. Both arms doing the same thing, the arms moving independently and at different speeds, smoothly or staccato fashion. “Tune in “ to your own body. IT IS YOUR OWN ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE INSTRUMENT.

Try moving and making definite shapes, squares, ovals, zigzags, chains and most importantly circles. I always teach as part of a circle because it is all embracing and all encompassing. I very often had the children dance in a circle holding hands because it keeps everyone together and no one gets left behind or left out.

We started our exploration with downward movements so now let's try some in an upward direction. Happiness, surprise, pleasure are upward movements. Think about this! Think about fear – this is first an upward and then a downward movement. Jump into the air from two feet, then from one foot. How do you feel

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when you land on both feet, on one foot? Leap and open your legs like scissors then alternate landing on both feet and landing on one foot. How do things feel when you transfer your weight rather than keeping it central. Does spinning clockwise feel different to spinning anti-clockwise?

Explore how moving your arms with open hands feels different to moving with clenched fists or with fingers stiffly spread out. Turn your hand from the wrist. Can your toes contribute to the dance?

Explore how it feels to move the body below the waist independently of the upper body. Moving this way gives Flamenco and Middle Eastern dance its' distinctive look. How easily can you rotate your wrists, waist, shoulders and knees. Try that for a bit.

You can dance and move lying on the floor on your stomach, on your back or on your side. You can crawl in various ways. You can dance seated using your feet and arms or even only your hands.

Do try these movements to more than one piece of music. You'll find that music will very deeply influence your movements both physically and emotionally. Try upbeat music, something slow and sad, New Age music which "flows" without a clearly defined rhythmic structure.

Some of you may by now be seeing a starting point to Dance Movement therapy here. Others of you won't. But please if you are still interested persevere. If you are experimenting alone perhaps having at least one person with you will help. If you are in a group and feeling inhibited by the presence of other people then perhaps trying the exercises in private may be the answer for you.

Consciously experiencing all movements is the key. But concentrate on the movement and do not even begin to think how you look.