

## Meeting an Adolescent with the Extra Lesson

By: Connie Helms, M.Ed.

Developed over thirty years ago by a Waldorf school educator from England named Audrey McAllen, the Extra Lesson is an assessment plus a series of movement, drawing, and painting exercises. The premise is that difficulties in reading, writing, and math could be due to inadequate spatial orientation, poor body geography and to sensory integration difficulties if a person has missed a stage in the first seven years of development. Afterwards, a program of specific movement exercises is recommended to help the person overcome hindrances so that learning may occur with greater ease, both physically, mentally and emotionally.

Joe came to my office accompanied by his mother shortly before his fourteenth birthday for an Extra Lesson assessment. Almost immediately after shaking my extended hand, he sighted a large green physioball and sat down on it. Rather than waiting for a cue on where to go, he zeroed in on the thing that unconsciously he knew he needed to address—his balance issues. My observations from the first half minute already told me volumes about Joe's needs, and I thought he would be well-suited to the Extra Lesson work.

My office is a large space with a soft wool carpet, simple wall adornments and many objects familiar to Extra Lesson practitioners: blue and red balls, bean bags, a balance beam, a basket of jump ropes, shells, kaleidoscopes, a table and chairs, books at various reading levels, and art supplies such as watercolor paints, wide brushes, soft lead colored pencils and beeswax crayons. In one corner are three different sized physioballs which are used to roll on or sit upon in order to strengthen balance. This is where I began my work with Joe, observing his inclination to sit on the ball.

When asked about his favorite thing in school, Joe answered "Social studies and 2:40," which is the dismissal time. Least favorite things were math and gym. The rest of the hour was spent engaging Joe in physical activities such as walking on a long rope, hopping on one and two feet, skipping, and tracking a pencil with his eyes. More observations about Joe became clear after he wrote a few sentences with misspelled words in disjointed print, tried unsuccessfully to copy some geometric forms, and drew some pictures that looked younger than typical seventh grade drawings. However, he read aloud very fast with few errors and excellent comprehension.

Joe's mother initially called me because her son was struggling with penmanship and coordination. These were obvious in the assessment, as well as his struggles with balance and spatial orientation, which means knowing where our body is in space and knowing what is around us. When I met with his mother and father a few days later we reviewed Joe's developmental history. He was born by caesarean, was a fussy baby and startled easily. He breastfed for a year, although latching on was initially difficult. At four to five months, he pulled himself to standing and was frustrated with the crawling process at six months. He crawled in an asymmetrical pattern at seven months. Verbal at an early age, Joe spoke in complex sentences by eighteen months. He sucked on his shirt sleeve in the early school years, and a current habit was fiddling with an object such as a small slinky he kept in his pocket. He also taught himself to read at a very early age—before his fourth birthday.

I explained to his parents that taking up the Extra Lesson work would serve him well. He would apply for his driver's learning permit in a year and they would want him to have a stronger sense of where he was in space before getting behind the wheel of a car. I added that it takes a year for the physical body to change in terms of releasing old habits and adopting new skills. I also recommended a few Craniosacral

sessions to help Joe's body be freer from restrictions in the central nervous system. Thus, Joe began the Extra Lesson sessions just before his birthday.

The picture that was confirmed for me as I began to work with Joe was that he did not successfully navigate through the developmental stages of the first seven years. While his speech and intellect were clearly superior, he did not appear to fit well in his body. He was clumsy and appeared to be disoriented in space. As we began our weekly sessions, I noted his entry into my room: he dropped his backpack on the floor in the path of the entry, slid off his shoes and left them scattered on the floor, and often went to sit on the large ball. I remember thinking to myself, "Wow! And he's going to be driving in a year?"

This quality of being disorganized and appearing to be lost in space is known as vestibular dysfunction. Found in the inner ear, the balance or vestibular system affects vision, hearing, and our relationship to gravity. It mediates all sensations traveling between the brain and the body, so that if we have a proper relationship to gravity, school learning is relatively successful. But in Joe's case, not being centered in his body was causing him challenges. Symptoms of vestibular dysfunction may include poor balance, dislike of crowds and theme parks, poor organizational skills, poor motor planning and clumsiness. These fit the description of Joe.

We started our hour with a handshake and a verse from Rudolf Steiner, founder of Waldorf education. The uprightness needed to stand and recite was in itself a significant aspect of our work together. Over the months, we spent every session using different ways to strengthen Joe's balance. He sat on the physioball, and fell off too, while we recited times tables and threw a ball back and forth. He rolled across the floor in a not so straight line at first. Week after week he persevered, and in our seventh session he rolled in a straight line. He stood on a balance board, trying to stay on and even toss a few beanbags at the same time. Here was a fourteen-year-old boy, slipping and falling and yet the inner drive was evident; he wanted to succeed in mastering control of his body, the task of every preschool child.

Most challenging was walking on a balance beam. In the first few weeks, Joe tried to run across the beam just to get to the other side. He fell off it repeatedly. His work was learning to trust, to walk slowly, and to put one foot assuredly in front of the other while looking straight ahead. With small increments of progress, I felt he was ready for a new challenge, adding speech to the balance beam walk. After taking a break from the beam for about a month, I began to have Joe walk across it saying a five to seven word sentence. He could walk and talk across the beam but not in the rhythm of one step, one word. Only after several months was he able to coordinate this. He also learned to walk backwards and repeat the words in the sentence backwards. As speech was already a strength for him, speaking a seven word sentence backwards was easy. The challenge lay in the synchronization of speech and steps. The added motivation for this teenager was that most of his sentences were comments about national politics and scandals; each week I looked forward to his wry comments!

As Joe's balance grew stronger, he continued to seek out the very activities that addressed his challenges, and as he practiced, his vestibular system grew stronger. What a great feeling of accomplishment for Joe when he was able to look back, a year later, and see how well he could execute the balance beam with confidence and compare this to his initial struggles.

Probably the most significant activity of the Extra Lesson is the copper ball exercise, which works very deeply on the breathing system, helping to connect the head (thinking) with the limbs and metabolic system (willing) via the heart area (feeling). Joe would lie on the floor and lift a heavy copper ball in each hand in a sequence of arm movements. The feet must also squeeze a soft ball to keep them actively engaged. While he did the movements, I played scales on a small glockenspiel in order to guide the sequence.

After almost five months, Joe became less erratic in his movements. It is easy to lose focus in this exercise and this happened many times. A full year later I began to have Joe use glasses of water instead of the copper balls. The glasses were heavy crystal and rounded at the bottom so they resembled holding a ball but had the added challenge of water which could easily spill. Luckily warm weather had arrived!

A week before his birthday, Joe spilled a lot of water. Then there was a three-week pause in our sessions, and when we resumed I asked him if he wanted the balls or the water—to my surprise he chose the glasses of water. He spilled some, but only if he went too fast or lost focus. The next week he did the exercise better than he had ever done. He switched back to the copper balls and steadily he continued to improve in most of the remaining sessions. What transpired was that Joe became more centered in his whole being. This exercise helped to integrate all the many coordination tasks we worked on, helping his lower body and upper body to function in visible harmony.

Other activities contributed to Joe's improved balance, coordination, and spatial orientation, including drawing geometric forms and painting the many watercolor exercises from the Extra Lesson. For example, the same painting was done at the beginning of each session, a viridian green and magenta wash from left to right across a large vertical surface. The task never varied, yet it took Joe a year to really do it well. When his spatial orientation improved so that he innately understood "left to right" and "top to bottom" and he learned to use less paint instead of creating puddles all over the surface, the result was a success.

Other paintings included series of geometric forms such as spirals and five-pointed stars. Joe's first paintings of a five-pointed star were blobs. I had to lay out yarn in a large star on the floor and have him walk the shape for many weeks in order for his body to develop a sense of the archetypal shape. His subsequent paintings were much better.

After each session I wrote notes; every small success was recorded. As I glanced through my notes over the months and thought about who walked in that door each week, a theme emerged:

Three months: he walked in upright and ready to begin

Five months: great humor and better eye contact, walked in with more uprightness, Joe's mom reports they're seeing improvements all the time

Six months: walked in with assurance and great eye contact

Seven months: feisty today, little antics, laughter, intrigued with form drawing

Eight months: learning to jump rope, perseverance, so much more in himself

Ten months: walked in so tall and upright

Eleven months: left his shoes by the table instead of spread out in the entry path (first time!)

It had become very clear to me that Joe was growing into his body in a healthier way. He seemed to be able to navigate space better, he seemed more in command of his body, and most of all, he seemed to be feeling good about his newly acquired skills.

One night as I drove home, it was dark when I stopped at an intersection with a stop sign. In front of my headlights flashed a person walking a dog across the street. My brain registered the archetype first: upright human being walking a dog. Then, my brain registered an amazing recognition: it was Joe,

walking his dog! That moment, at that stop sign, I saw the archetype of the upright human being, the archetype that separates us from the animal kingdom which lacks this vertical quality. Joe came to me as a teenage boy who had appeared unsure of the space around him because he was not quite fully settled in his body. He had to spend almost a year learning how to become more at home in his body until he reached a state of truly being a vertical human.

The first year anniversary passed and Joe turned 15. We continued to work weekly until July came when he went off to camp. When he returned in August we had only four sessions left before he was ready to start high school. Imagine the sense of pride I felt when Joe arrived one day with his driver's manual in his hand. Inwardly I smiled to think of how far he had come. His handwriting was still not great, although improved, but his sense of himself was clearly more assured. The next time Joe came, he said he had driven to the session, and his mother confirmed that Joe was a good driver! It is with deep gratitude that those of us trained to do the Extra Lesson have the privilege to work with persevering individuals who become more upright human beings, ready to meet their destiny.

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[www.centerforanthroposophy.org](http://www.centerforanthroposophy.org).