

# OptionsAutism

## An Introduction to Dance Movement Psychotherapy and its Unique Value for Young People with Autism

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### Introduction

Can the use of our bodies and movement reflect what goes on inside and how we relate to people and the world around us?

Can movement and sensory experience become a two way street of relating with young people with autism?

Dance Movement Psychotherapy is about creating a safe place for emotional expression, promoting body and self-awareness and social interaction exploring movement, dance, body image, space, props and play.

### What is Dance Movement Psychotherapy?

Movement is always relational. Movement is 'the unique universal language' and the first way of communication between the mother and the infant in the womb.

Dance Movement Psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy and one of the creative art therapies that recognises body movement as an inherent medium of communication, expression, integration and

change. One of the basic principles of Dance Movement Psychotherapy is the existence of body-mind interaction: change in bodily behaviour influences the total body-mind function.

Dance Movement Psychotherapy sessions are non-directive, client-centred and focus on the relational process and the non-verbal dialogue between a young person and therapist. It looks at the symbolic meaning of movement, dance, play, facial expression, improvisation and creative movement. This can help individuals in a less 'scary' and a more indirect way to gradually understand, reflect, cope and address their feelings, thoughts, behaviours and unconscious world. The use of props not only provides the young people with a physical connection without direct contact but also an alternative way of projecting their unconscious 'hidden' feelings and thoughts onto something external.

Dance Movement Psychotherapy works with individuals, small and large groups, couples, families and organisational teams. It is delivered in a range of settings including education, social care and mental health services.

For the purpose of this article, Dance Movement Psychotherapy is described within our specialist school for

young people on the autistic spectrum.

## Structure of a one to one session with a young person with autism

**CHECK IN:** This is the time for an individual to arrive in the therapy room both verbally or non-verbally, depending on the needs of the young person. For example, a non-verbal individual might sit directly in one corner of the room perhaps to offer a sense of safety. The therapist notices how they arrive and what they say and do.

**WARM UP:** This is the time for bringing the young person to the 'here and now' and in relation to the therapist and space. For example, the therapist might sit next to the young person in the corner and lead a warm up based on side by side movements and sensing our backs against the wall. This can further encourage the individual's sense of containment, safety, support and grounding.

**MAIN PROCESS:** This will be developed regarding the young person's needs through movement, dance, play and the use of space and props. For example, a simple pushing pattern can lead to a reaching exercise, this can result in reaching towards the therapist, eye contact and a duet improvisation, non-verbal dialogue and exploration of the space.

**ENDING:** This is the time for bringing the session to a close and includes reflecting back on what has taken place verbally and non-verbally. It allows young people to think about their experience in the session and get ready to make a shift back to the classroom. For example, the therapist acknowledges the ending both physically and verbally and may offer the young person a time to describe their thoughts and feelings in drawing or writing that they can actually see. These drawings and writings are kept by the therapist and are used in each session, so the young people can see a story developing over time.

## An illustrative case study of Dance Movement Psychotherapy with a young person with autism

Sally\* (name changed for confidentiality).

This case study will describe Dance Movement Psychotherapy sessions with Sally. The work took place over six months exploring the theme of personal and interpersonal space in movement and echoed in reflective drawing.

Sally, is a twelve year old who presented as playful and smiley. She is on the autistic spectrum with severe difficulties in verbal communication. She was referred by her teacher as she was always sitting very close to people and stroking her classmates and staff. Her teacher and her mother were very concerned about how she would manage this in future relationships as an adolescent.

From the beginning, an absence of personal boundaries was observed as well as difficulty in communicating without physical contact. Bearing this in mind, in the first session a space was set up with a small mat for her and a small mat for the therapist to define the personal space. The mats were placed not too far apart in order to explore the distance between Sally and the therapist.

As Sally entered the room, she instantly took the therapist's hand and wanted to sit together on one mat. The touch of a hand was her way of social communication. A warm up was created based on this palm to palm interaction. Gradually, she was invited both non-verbally and verbally to move her hand further away and then back again.

In the following session she was able to sit on her own mat and interact without the use of touch. The hand warm up became a ritual of the beginning of every session. As the sessions progressed the hand warm up developed into twisting gestures, making circles and moving upper bodies.

In subsequent sessions, Sally would stand up following the hand to hand warm up. This spontaneous standing up was the beginning of her moving around the space and initiating the use of props. This was 'the key- entry point' towards Sally's ability to hold connection regardless of the spatial distance.

As the sessions progressed the dancing transformed into play, full of imaginary stories from her favourite animation films. Sally embodied characters in movement, reflecting stories, scenes of nature and sunny beaches. During the play Sally found ways to interact expanding her movement patterns. She also begun to verbalise new words that she discovered through the embodiment of these stories.

Throughout the therapy Sally drew pictures as a way of reflection at the end of the sessions. Her pictures started reflecting the change regarding her use of personal space and verbal and non-verbal patterns. In the beginning, she repeatedly drew the same faces that were crowded together. Later, she began drawing pictures of different shapes similar to the shapes explored in the dancing sessions (circles, square, and triangles) and in the end her drawings depicted space, distance and images from the nature (sun, sea).

Her teacher reported that Sally was now more able to play with her classmates without needing to be too close to them and she also mentioned the visible increase in her self-esteem.

## Reflection

The change in Sally unfolded within the therapy gradually, with the therapist attuning to her sometimes tiny but 'unique cues' in movement. Her non-verbal cues revealed her own unique way of communicating. By following and valuing her movement and sensory cues, powerful developments occurred. The sense of being understood through her own movement language was 'the key - entry point' for her Dance Movement Psychotherapy journey.

The closer she became emotionally to the therapist in the sessions, the greater physical distance Sally could explore in the room, allowing her to feel a greater sense of space and independence from the therapist. According to her teacher, this led to changes in her social relationships outside the therapy room. It seemed that Sally managed to internalise the trust that had been built and was able to feel and hold emotional connection whilst maintaining her personal space.

## The unique value of Dance Movement Psychotherapy for young people with autism

The element that makes Dance Movement Psychotherapy unique for young people with autism is the fact that we can meet their own emotional and developmental needs, by attuning to their individual movement and sensory experience. This is extremely important due to the complexity of needs in young people on the autistic spectrum given that no 'one shoe' fits for everybody.

Thus, the main goal of a Dance Movement Psychotherapist is to build the therapeutic relationship through attuning kinesthetically. Similar to the mother-infant bodily intersubjective experience, the therapist's attunement to the young person's needs result in a two way street of relating. Eventually, this 'dancing relationship' can lead to potential new patterns of relating that can be helpful to the individuals daily relational patterns.

## References

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- For more information about Dance Movement Psychotherapy visit: Association for Dance Movement Psychotherapy, (ADMP, UK) <https://admp.org.uk>.

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