

Movement is the Language of the Brain or How Silent Sam Became a Chatterbox

By Judith Dack

My client Samantha is living (and loud) proof of what the *Feldenkrais*® Method can do for kids.

Her journey out of a world of silence and sensory confusion, guided by the *Feldenkrais* Method and Anat Baniel MethodSM, has been a joy for me.

When I first met Sam in June 2006, she was seven years old and cute as a button. However, as her parents explained to me, she had a history of developmental delay. She had a moderate hearing loss in her worst ear and she did not initiate nor respond to conversation except in the most rudimentary way. When she did speak, which was rarely, she was nearly impossible to understand. Worse, her sensory experience seemed diminished; she responded somewhat to heat and cold, less to pain. Her left foot turned inward. She had had tremendous difficulty teething with the slow emergence of each tooth coupled with drooling and chewing. Despite her age, she sucked her thumb compulsively. She seemed to exist alone in a separate world. All these things made integration into the school system impractical. Initially I thought, “How am I going to find the doorway into Samantha’s world?”

In my continued *Feldenkrais* education, I had seen and experienced extraordinary outcomes with Anat Baniel. In 2003, I attended Anat’s Mastery Training for Infants and Children in California and in New York City. Since then, I have continued to upgrade my skills by participating in her basic and mastery trainings as part of her assisting team. Baniel’s understanding, application, and evolution of Dr. Feldenkrais’ work has introduced me to a world of expanded possibilities in working with highly challenged children. I’ve discovered many more creative ways to find a point of entry for beginning a conversation with a child’s brain.

In the past 20 years, research on brain plasticity has captured public attention. It has become clear that the brain changes itself through kinesthetic experience. Feldenkrais said that up to 95% of the brain is involved in organizing movement at any given moment. Therefore, using movement as a medium of communication will involve almost all areas of the brain. This is why Feldenkrais chose movement as the most potent avenue for change and transformation.

To learn, we must be able to perceive differences. When a skill is learned and used regularly, the brain relegates that skill to an easily accessible habit mode, an autopilot setting. By doing movement slowly, decreasing effort, adding variation, and increasing complexity, we get the brain to shift from compulsive, habitual, or automatic actions to a state of increased attention, awareness, and curiosity. This opens a window of opportunity for experimenting with new possibilities of thinking, feeling, and action.

So the conversation began. Early in our work together, Sam responded with interest and attention, mimicking quite accurately when I would sing action words like “push” and “pull” to her at the same time as I was pushing and pulling through her skeleton. I played with the action of rolling in many different positions and contexts, sometimes using the rollers to amplify or clarify the sensation. Sam enjoyed this process immensely. In subsequent lessons when I re-introduced movements, Sam named them, spontaneously saying “push, push, pull, pull.” It was thrilling to see Sam demonstrate understanding of the meaning of words she experienced kinesthetically.

For instance, she could not pronounce ‘l’ in the middle of words. To overcome that, I combined the phrase “hello, how are you?” with a lot of inflections and various arm movements. Her mother tells me the results were dramatic. She now uses “l” at will.

Brain research has demonstrated that stimulation inside our mouths



**Judith Dack
And
Sam**

How Silent Sam Became a Chatterbox

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activates huge portions of the sensory and motor cortex as seen in the schematic diagram called the homunculus that we all received in our training. Because of Samantha's issues with teething, thumb-sucking, and hearing; I expected working inside her mouth would provide huge opportunities for learning and transformation. I adapted some of Alexander Yanai *Awareness Through Movement*® lessons involving mouth and jaw and translated them into *Functional Integration*® with Sam. She attended intensely, became calmer, and was more available for learning. I provided many distinctions and variations in how she used her tongue, lips and breath in producing sounds. After a few of these lessons, she arrived at my studio by announcing "Hi Juif." She demonstrated her readiness for more learning by immediately going to the table and handing me a new set of latex gloves for more mouth work. It was just 2 months after I started working in Sam's mouth that her hearing was tested. She had moved from a mild hearing loss in her right ear to almost normal and from a moderate loss in her left ear to a mild loss.

In other lessons, I used an exercise ball to introduce large-movement experiences that focused her attention on variations of balance, weight-bearing, and coordination. At the same time, I used qualities of sound and "action" words relevant to what she was experiencing. For instance: "Bounce, march" (marching with her feet at the same time as bouncing) then I added to the complexity of the organization by adding movements of the arms with directional words like "up" and "down" and "open ." I often took the sounds of words she was able to "get" and used the sound combinations in similar words, such as rhyming," but always with a physical component. I moved into phrases like "over there, over here, right there, right here," and she would point with her arms or look with her head and eyes. Sam began to show better organization and self-confidence in initiating large movements on her own such as climbing over obstacles and jumping from heights. During the same time period, Sam began to use more words and participate in conversations going on around her.

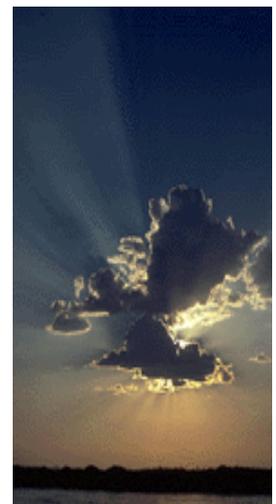
She was changing in many other ways. Her sense of humour grew. She cried when her feelings were hurt. She expresses her wants much more clearly, well beyond just her basic needs.

In November 2007, after I'd worked with Sam for 16 months, she entered my studio for her lesson and said with a big smile, "Hi Juif. Went skating. Wif class. Fell down. Ouch." Sam has become a chatterbox and her words are much easier to understand. She is now enrolled in a public school where she has lots of friends and her teachers report her speech is improving at a startling rate. When she falls, expresses pain more appropriately, though she still has a considerable way to go. When she walks or runs she no longer lifts her arms like an infant. She still sucks her thumb, but much less frequently. Her hearing tests show measurable improvement. Sam is participating more fully in her family and in social interactions with her peers. She has moved from her silent isolation to join us in our shared world.

Says her mom: "I'm finally getting to truly know my daughter."

Meanwhile, I am spreading the word about the *Feldenkrais* Method and the Anat Baniel in work with children. In October, I held my first workshop for parents and professionals in my studio in central Toronto.

Want to know more? For questions about my work, to book sessions or to ask about mentoring opportunities, please visit my website:
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"The possibilities are endless."