

Children With Special Needs: A Revolutionary Approach Gives New Hope

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Are you a parent to a child with special needs? Have you been trying to help your child do something he or she can't do, or corrected them over and over again to end up with little or no progress, both you and your child experiencing ample stress in the process?

One of the most important discoveries of the past 30 years of my work with children who have special needs — working with everything from autism to genetic disorders — is the amazingly positive results that become possible when we shift from trying to get the child to do what it can't do to helping that child's brain get the information it requires to be able to do new things. To clarify what I mean by this, think of your brain as the CEO of you. It manages all that you do — physically, emotionally and intellectually. For the healthy child, as well as the child with special challenges, the information his or her "CEO" brain needs in order to learn something new does not come from directly trying to perform what it doesn't yet have the information to perform. Instead, the necessary information comes from many small and varied movements and experiences that may seem completely unrelated to the final accomplishment. With the healthy child these movements are always within the range of what he or she can already do. The brain of the child with special challenges requires the same process to be able to learn and thrive!

Here's what we need to realize: for the brain to get all the information it requires for successfully organizing, moving, thinking and feeling depends on all of the child's functions and capabilities working well to begin with. So, for example, if the arm of an infant is not doing the typical random movements it normally would because of an injury to the nerves of that arm, the brain will not be able to get information it requires to learn to control that arm well, if at all.

What is everyone's natural and intuitive urge to do at such time? I'm sure you have the answer: to stretch, stimulate and exercise that arm with the hope that it will "learn" to do those movements on their own. Will moving her arm in that passive way, that is, by physically taking it in our hands and exercising it, result in her brain getting the information it requires to move that arm well on her own? Will trying to get her to do what she cannot do provide her brain with the missing information? As counter intuitive as it may appear, the answer in most cases is that it won't. It is way too limited! The healthy infant does thousands upon thousands of small, highly varied movements that are not the final skill, such as holding a toy in their hands, before they get there. It is this flood of seemingly irrelevant information that the child with special challenges also needs.

The Anat Baniel Method, which evolved from a lifetime of hands-on work with thousands of children with special needs, provides tools that parents and care-givers can employ to wake up the child's brain and flood it with information it has to have for that child to be able to successfully move from the impossible to the possible. This is not some kind of magic or esoteric system but is founded on scientific principles that have been demonstrated over and over again by leading researchers the world over. Science has shown how the brain possesses a remarkable ability to create alternative solutions to physical and mental disabilities when given the information to work with. Through the spontaneous process of differentiation (discerning increasingly finer differences), the brain creates billions upon billions of new neural connections; these are the very connections that every child's brain needs to figure out how to stand, walk, talk, think, and do everything he or she will ever learn to do.

The heart of the Anat Baniel Method is the Nine Essentials: This begins with movement. Movement is the language of the brain; it helps the brain grow and form. [1] But movement alone, that is, passive or automatic movement, is not enough. It's vital that the child pay attention to what he or she is feeling as they move. Movement without attention to the self only "grooves in" more deeply the already existing patterns, which often includes the patterns of the child's limitations. When the child brings attention to what they're doing and feeling as they move, something very different occurs: This is when their brain wakes up and begins forming new connections at a staggering rate: 1.8 million new connections per second! That is roughly 100 million new connections per minute. [2]

Whether you are the one moving your child, or your child is moving on her or his own, look for ways to have them attend to what they are feeling as they are moving. Make sure that your child moves slowly (I'll discuss the essential Slow in a future blog). This takes some practice but it is surprisingly simple. You'll be amazed at the spontaneous changes that will occur. We have seen this simple practice produce miraculous breakthroughs thousands and thousands of times with the children we work with. And once your child learns to attend in this way, the process of change and growth tends to become self-perpetuating, just as it does with healthy children.

You can [try this first Essential yourself](#). Learn more about the [Anat Baniel Method for Children with Special Needs](#). You may also want to [read](#) what Michael Merzenich, PhD, leading neuroscientist and Norman Doidge, MD, author of *The Brain That Changes Itself*, have [written](#) about the Anat Baniel Method for children. Don't miss my [upcoming book](#), *Kids Beyond Limits* (pub date March 27th 2012).

Scientific references:

[1] Recanzone, G.H., Merzenich, M.M., Jenkins, W.M., Grajski, K.A., Dinse, H.R. 1992b. Topographic reorganization of the hand representation in cortical area 3b of owl monkeys trained in a frequency discrimination task. *Journal of Neurophysiology* 67: 1031-1056.

[2] Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A.N., Kuhl, P.K. 1999. *The scientist in the crib: Minds, brains and how children learn*. New York: William Morrow. pp. 181-186; Eliot, L. 1999. *What's going on in there? How the brain and mind develop in the first five years of life*. New York: Bantam. pp. 27-32;

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