

An Interview with Anat Baniel

Anat Baniel is world-renowned for her *Feldenkrais*® work with children. In this interview, she clarifies many questions about the *Feldenkrais* work with children. Following the interview, Anat shows us through Adam's Story how children enjoy *Feldenkrais* work.

Anat, what is your unique, personal perspective on *Feldenkrais*® work?

Feldenkrais himself said that his work helped people translate intention into action. If I had to give one definition, I would say it gives you more means and options to achieve that which you intend to do. A lot of the work is training people to know what they feel and to know what to do with this knowledge, using feeling to organize perception and action.

I think it's important to emphasize that Feldenkrais has not developed a medical approach; he has developed a learning technique. If it so happens that someone has a disease, an incurable disease, I have no way of dealing with it directly. What I can do is look how having that disease has impacted the process of learning movement and intervene from that angle.

I am working with a girl from Chicago who came to me with a muscular atrophy disease at age five. She was wearing a brace, could not sit herself up from a lying position, and walking was difficult. By the fifth visit she had learned to sit up by herself. There remain limitations from that affliction, but she's doing things now that were out of her reach and even her imagination.

The *Feldenkrais Method*® really addressed this learning to act, although it doesn't pretend to replace medical therapy. Moshe tried to emphasize that he wasn't fixing a problem. There is something that the student is going to do to determine the outcome, and that's learning. It's not an easy transition for people to make.

What about improvement of self-esteem, especially with children who are aware that they are disabled?

What I've seen over time is the moment the children found they could move in new ways, they started feeling really good about themselves. It's not an external thing, like an adult making more money, but when the nervous system starts doing what it's supposed to do, and everything is working better, they have better self-esteem and their motivation improves.

Anat, what is the earliest age you work with children?

Five weeks. I saw a child with arthrogriposis whose elbow joints were not formed and whose biceps didn't exist. He couldn't get his hands to his mouth. Through the lessons he has learned to use his arms together, one moving the other, to feed himself.

Given that the *Feldenkrais Method* has a highly intellectual, theoretical basis, how do you deal with children who are non-verbal or have cognitive involvement?

First of all, when there is a physical limitation, the corresponding neurological system is also underdeveloped. Feldenkrais thought that intelligence was the whole information processing capability of the brain, verbal and non-verbal.

In working with a very young child, the touch gives a lot of information. When I see a change, initially very slight, in the way the child is moving, we are in a sense having a conversation. It tells me that what I gave the child is relevant. The practitioner has a non-verbal language of communication via the kinesthetic and movement aspect.

Also, children have less interference in terms of inhibition and things they learned to do wrong. *Feldenkrais* work, done well, accesses that level of intelligence in anyone. For adults, this level has been neglected and inhibited, and a lot of our suffering, a lot of our difficulties are due to that.

Adam's Story

Nine year old Adam Girard has cerebral palsy, a non-progressive condition in which voluntary movement is impaired, often as result of prenatal brain damage. He remembers well his first *Functional Integration*® lesson with Anat, even though he was 3 years old at the time.

“I used to drag one of my legs,” recalled the youngster. “After the lesson I didn’t have to drag it any more, and I could run.”

His mother remembers the moment, too. “After the lesson, he ran to the stairs. I started to help him because he’d never climbed stairs alone before, but the teacher held me back. He struggled but he made it. Then we went to a park and he just ran up and down a hill there shouting over and over, ‘This is fun, this is fun!’”

Now he will suggest to his mother that he’d like another lesson when there’s something he’d like to be able to do. “I want to learn to whistle and snap my fingers,” said Adam. He also wanted to improve his performance in a gymnastics class where he already does handstands, front rolls, and back flips.

In recent school placement tests, Adam was evaluated as intellectually gifted. His mother credits the *Feldenkrais Method*. “We all use such a small portion of our brains,” she pointed out. “Adam has needed to develop new parts of his brain to find alternative neural pathways to the ones that don’t function. I really believe it’s developed his intelligence as a secondary result.”