

Case Study: Working with a Young Child

By Lucia Schuette-Ginsburg

Clara was six years old when she came for lessons with me. She was a thin, pretty and a rather timid looking child, and for a six year old she moved awkwardly with her feet turned slightly inward. Her parents were worried because her second toes had grown over her big toes, a condition which runs in the family. Her grandmother had severe difficulties in walking, a trouble as a result of the same problem, and the parents wanted to help their child if possible. Later, I found out that she was a restless child until she learned to read. In reading she found a way to please herself, because she did not like to move.

(In the first part of the process an informal evaluation is carried out to assess the child's patterns of action, how she organizes herself in life.)

When we entered my working space, which has a lot of mats on the floor and a table, Flora walked to the table and put herself sitting there. She was clear that that was supposed to be her place. Her feet were dangling down. I placed supporting pads under her feet so that she could sit with her feet on a surface. I noticed that her feet turned inward, and that she was collapsed in her lower back, holding herself upright by straightening her upper chest. This allowed her to look forward. I asked her if she knew why she came to me and she said because of her toes. She was wearing socks so I asked her what was wrong with them. She pulled off her socks and showed me her feet, which were very big with long toes, the second one grown over the big toe and very sweaty and wet. I asked her if she has trouble with them and she said no, only that getting nice fashionable shoes is not so easy sometimes.

(The assessment continues bringing in the choices and desires of the child and the things she has accomplished. Curiosity is essential on the part of the practitioner. Note that the assessment does not involve a 'diagnosis' but a revealing of important aspects of the child in her life situation and in the family.)

This was kind of a problem for me because here I had worried parents and there I had a child who did not seem to have a problem with what her parents were worried about. I said: "What do you like to do?" She said that she loves to read more than anything else. I was surprised; she could read with 6? "Yes," she said proudly, but she did not like to wear her glasses. I found out that she was farsighted +5.5, but I could not believe that she could read without glasses. I fetched a children's book and sure enough, she could read. What was that? I am farsighted +3 and I cannot read a sentence without glasses. The mother said that they had consulted several eye doctors about the problem. They all prescribed eyeglasses but did not wonder about how she could read. I decided to leave this issue alone for the moment and asked her, what she wanted to do better. She said that she has sports now as a first grader and she cannot do a somersault; besides that she is bad at sports. I said that maybe we can do something about that. She agreed in a friendly way. I found her very easy to work with through all the lessons I gave her. She was curious and happy to have my full attention while moving. With growing trust and self-esteem, she asked for things or told me when she did not want to try something. In the beginning she was always patient.

(Starting the lesson the assessment continues while the first engaging the child begins. The pattern of her difficulties becomes more apparent.)

I asked her to lie on the back with the feet standing and hold her right knee with her right hand. She definitely knew her right from the left, but it was not quite easy for her to reach for the knee. Reaching for the left one was even more difficult. When she had her two knees in her hands I asked her to roll a little bit from side to side, but she could not easily open her knees and balance. We changed to the side-lying position. She chose the left side. In this position she could grasp her right knee much more easily, and we engaged in a little game bringing head towards knee, then

forehead, looking to the right and left of the knee. She enjoyed herself very much. Her upper chest softened; her neck got easier. Returning to lying on the back, I asked her to hold her knees again and it was much easier for her. I asked her to open the knees a little and she could do that. She rolled a little bit from side to side. Her upper chest got even softer, her face brightened up and she was much livelier. We invented all kinds of variations to reach for the knees and to roll, crossing arms over etc. When she came back to sitting her pelvis was under her and her head was carried differently. But most importantly, she was much more lively and wanted to come back the next day.

I told the mother I would call her because I did not want to talk about Clara in her presence. There was so much I was curious about. For example, was she born with the second toes over her big toes? I called the mother and was told that she was not born like that. She remembered to alert the paediatrician about the family problem when Clara was 5 or 6 months old, before there might be a problem with her feet. He told her not to worry but to make sure she should wear broad shoes when she would begin to walk. I asked her if Clara had rolled over to lie on her stomach when she was at that age. She responded that she was surprised to remember that around 8 months Clara had about 10 sessions of neuro-developmental therapy (Bobath) because she did not like to lie on her stomach. The therapist found out that she had a 'distorted' pelvis. Clara did not like to go to her because she still did not want to lie on her stomach. The therapist demanded that, so they stopped seeing her after a while.

I tried to match this information with what I found with her. On her right foot the second toe was not as far grown over the big one as on her left foot, and she could not roll over her left hip joint as easy as over her right. Had she never rolled over to lie on her stomach by herself? What did that mean for her development? If this important step of her development is missing, could that be the key to work with her?

I went back to what I knew about development, seeing in front of my eyes all the different things a baby does lying on the back, then rolling to the side, rolling back to the back, moving in a circle on the back already using the feet a bit on the ground till the moment comes when babies find themselves on the stomach holding their head up, which was not possible to do before. The world has a different perspective when this is accomplished. The extensors (long muscles of the back and neck) now work strongly. To get back on to the belly she would have to use her sides quite differently, pushing the ground or reaching out with her arms and legs elongating one side while folding the other. There are a lot of possible ways to go about such a function when I think about Feldenkrais different lessons, and my observations with different children. But one fact remains, the world has a different perspective when one is lying on the stomach and looking into the surroundings. Suddenly the head needs no support anymore from the mother. The extensors have to work and the flexors have to let go. Arms and legs can be used differently to use the ground to start to reach for what is desired. The eyes have to work differently to look up. Is the back supporting the movement of the eyes, or the eyes supporting the movement of the back? Intentions change the use of our selves and development.

I tried to make a working plan. I remembered Moshe saying to Karl Pribram in the discussion on the tapes from San Francisco (Feldenkrais, Pribram, 1975) that he tries to find the step of development, which is missing in a child to help her evolve. How is it that her feet developed like that? She learned walking although she never crawled or crept. For a person's foot to step off properly, the step off point is between the second and big toe functionally. Children do a lot of pushing with their feet while lying on the stomach creeping or crawling, getting up. Would it help to learn movements she never did to restore functions? And would that change something with her walking and her feet, getting her toes to separate? I believed that even so she would not use the movements anymore so extensively as she would have when she was 5 month old. But she would benefit. So my plan was to roll with her from back to belly and the other way around in different ways if possible and see what came out of it. But more important than anything else, she could develop a joy in moving again. That would be the groundwork for everything else, that is,

to enjoy doing what she does, to become curious and to be satisfied with her self.

(Notice that the interventions are in the form of investigations and are not just a question of movement. The child's affective experience is an essential element.)

In the second lesson she came with a smile and it was clear she wanted to come back. That was a good start. I decided to work with her on the floor, so that we could roll around with a lot of space and start with something she certainly must have done as a baby. She showed me how nice she could roll a bit from side to side still remembering her last lesson although her upper chest was stiff again. With her knees in her hands, her head was lying on the floor and moved with the rolling. I put a roller under her pelvis to support her upper back on the floor so that I could work with shoulders, head and upper chest. She realized her arms got longer and she grabbed her feet. What a wonderful moment when she was surprised that she could grab her feet. She took her socks off and looked into the soles of her feet. Then we gave names to all of the toes. She has big feet. I had thought of course of interlacing hands and toes but I did not want to challenge her too much. Instead I had her interlace her fingers and exploring the unusual way of interlacing. Maybe I could get her curious of interlacing hands and toes later.

I think a lot about how much I need to challenge to evoke learning and when not to, going slowly and without giving way to failure. With her something told me to go slowly.

Next time she came she was very tired from school, so I decided to work with her lying on the back bringing her feet to standing. Her left foot was still turned more inward; it was not only the foot, but the whole leg from the hip joint. Her right leg was now lying turned outward. I worked from both her feet starting with the right, differentiating* toes, which she enjoyed, going slowly towards outward rotation of the foot and the leg, till we could stand the foot in letting the structure move the knees inward. We played frog lying on the back. She remarked that a frog cannot stand his feet on the ground. I said, a frog cannot lie on his back, nor can he walk but you can. Both of her legs were lying with the feet outward and when she came the next time the right one was still outward more but the left was turned inside again. So this approach did not work as well as I thought.

(*Differentiation is an essential part of learning in which one learns to distinguish and move different parts independently from each other.)

I asked her to lie on her back. Her left foot was standing inward with the toes crossed over; the right one was standing straight. I asked her to lengthen the left foot and to push the floor lightly with the right one. I made her aware of her pelvis lifting and rolling to the left and her ribs moving and slowly I asked her to push from different parts of her foot, then to lift the heel and push more from the front of her foot. After a while she put the opposite arm above her head and I asked her to look towards her hand while simply pushing with her foot. "Can you see your little finger, all the others one after the other?" I followed her movements with my hands, exploring what she was doing with herself while moving, taking over and exaggerating, or going into a new direction slightly. After a while I asked her to turn her hand still following with the eyes and to our astonishment she could roll onto her left side. I asked her what would happen if she kept on turning her hand and arm and follow it with her eyes. She did so and was lying on her belly. We both started to laugh with joy. We went back and forth quickly and slowly. We did not have time to explore the more difficult side, but her left leg was lying more turned outside.

I called her mother and asked her what she observed with Clara. She reported that she always had a difficult relationship with her, because she was restless, did not like to move at the same time, but now she was much more open and accessible. "It has been much easier with her," she said. She could not believe that what we did had to do with the change in her daughters' attitude. Nevertheless she said that everything else was what it was before so it could only have to do with what we were doing. We both were astonished and happy. I asked her if we could still

go on with our lessons in a 4day time schedule, because I had to leave soon to work somewhere else. I knew that the family had another daughter and was not well off financially. I offered that she could pay me monthly a certain amount. That made it possible to go on.

When Clara came back she saw a big blue inflated plastic 'egg' lying on the floor and she threw herself on it. I watched her and saw that she did not dare to put her hands on the floor on the other side while lifting her feet from the floor. Here she was lying on her belly so why not take the opportunity? What if she made herself soft over the ball still with her feet on the floor? The moment she let her head and neck softened her legs got soft. I rolled her a little bit back and forth pushing a tiny bit with her feet. After a while we found out she could make herself like a stick rolling over a bit or like pudding cuddling around the ball. One moment she moved too fast and she had to use her hands on the floor on the other side to keep herself from falling but she used only with her right hand. She nearly fell and was scared. The firm floor was more secure for the moment. We went back to rolling over, I started pulling her arms, crossing them slightly to get her pelvis engaged to roll over. Then I asked her to push with her left foot. Her pelvis did not roll over or lift. We used the other side to see where she presses with the pelvis when she pushed with her foot and slowly something happened. I helped her with the movement of her left arm and then she could roll onto her right side. Her little two-year old sister at that point entering the room immediately imitated what she was doing. Her mother reported proudly that Sonya loved to move from the beginning. Claras face darkened while her mother said that on the playground Sonya climbs all sorts of climbing facilities but Clara does not dare to do it. I said Clara is cautious and does not want to do something she does not feel secure about. She liked that statement obviously.

When she came back the next time she walked strangely. Her left foot was strongly turned inside her right one was moving forward. What was going on? Her pelvis was twisted. She said her back was hurting a little. Lying on her back her whole back was far from the floor. I started to pull her left leg in the directions it was going easily till her pelvis let go and her lower back and the middle of her back was more on the floor, then I asked her to lie on her side and she chose the right one. "How would you roll onto your back?" I asked her and she started to do it with pushing her left foot to the ground. I thought of folding and unfolding, differentiating both sides and helping her to find a way to move from her center. We started with folding the left side and unfolding as she followed the left hand with the eyes while lengthening the leg. When she came back to folding the left side she continued following the hand with the eyes. We rolled from side to side in the middle, elbows and knees pointing to each other. Then she continued rolling to one side in unfolding and folding again. As in all the other lessons, I followed her movements with my hands finding out where she interfered with her self and helping her to find another way. After a while she could do this baby rolling smoothly and comfortably with enjoyment. She walked much better but still with her left foot turned inside a bit. She was out of pain.

Was it time to bring her on to her stomach? How would the use of her eyes in this position help to organize her self differently? In sitting she still stiffened her upper chest in order to look forward. Could this pattern change when she learned to use the extensors of her back in a different way?

In the next lesson I asked her to lie on her belly. She did not know what to do with her head. Her elbows and lower arms were glued to the floor next to her head; she was looking to the left. I expected that if I would lift her feet, her pelvis would lift also. I pushed through her feet lying on the floor to get the pelvis to move. Then I asked her to push her elbows to the floor using the ground forces to lift her shoulders and head. To my utter astonishment her hands and lower arms lifted and she rounded her back with the right side of her forehead on the floor. The right side of her upper back bulged out a little anyhow when she was lying on her belly. I decided to use this but to differentiate this function of looking downward. I worked with the left shoulder blade, arms and ribs to differentiate the shoulder from the ribcage, then with the right shoulder and chest. I asked her to push again with her left elbow and lower arm onto the floor. Gradually she experienced that with this push, different parts of her chest lifted from the floor. I told her, "Look the floor is your friend, when you press the force comes back to lift something else." She laughed,

and found that very funny. I asked her to look to her belly after she had her forehead on her hands, with her hands on top of each other, and she found out that she had to lift the middle of her back. The same moment somebody knocked at the door and she lifted her head beautifully to look at what was happening. It was so great that the environment helped that learning situation. I was not sure if she was ready to lift her head in this new way with all the extensors supporting this action with the pelvis on the floor, but she did the moment she was curious of something around her. There is an inbuilt pattern that is ready to work if it is not inhibited. I can trust this to work. This action showed that clearly, but I am always astonished when it happens. All humans learn to sit, stand and walk; it is something we inherited from our ancestors; we are standing on the shoulders of generations.

When I saw her again after a month her mother said it was time that I was back. Clara was her old self again, but now much more demanding and she obviously needed to see me. I was glad that her mother thought so, because often when children start to change their behaviour, parents have a hard time to cope. They want the physical part to change but not always the other levels of the child. When Clara came in, she showed me what she had done in school. She had earned the best ratings and she was proud of it.

I still had in mind her wish to learn the somersault but I thought she had to learn to use her arms to support her chest and head while standing on all fours. What about lying on your belly I asked and she agreed without hesitation. I helped her to discover how to find a place to stand her hand on the floor on both sides. With her elbows on the floor I asked her to look up and follow a little animal crawling along the floor moving up on the wall. Bending her knees so the feet were towards the ceiling she lifted one knee then the other with my help so that her pelvis could extend instead of being lifted. I had her close one eye and look up and lifting one knee with it and I found out that she used the opposite leg to the eye, which she left open. We tried with the eye open on the same side and it was more difficult. On her back again I saw that both of her legs were still turned with the feet outside.

In the following four to five sessions we played with creeping in different ways. She became much more playful, asked for things, uttered dislikes, and we involved her little sister whom she could teach how to move like a crocodile. She loved to play with the creeping and to involve her sister, because she understood something that her sister, although a "better" mover, could not do. It was great that this sisterly competition helped. This worked from now on very often, because the father or the mother had to bring her and the sister accompanied them. She used to play around sometimes outside but most of the time in the room. They liked each other a lot and played often together at home. When I came back after a two month period she told me that she learned to ride a bicycle and her mother told me that she was much more adventurous in the playground. But the most interesting thing for me that they did not tell me, was that her right second toe was now only a little bit over her big toe; it just touched the nail on the side and the left foot improved also, but not as well.

I thought she was ready to go on all fours. But in this configuration her problems showed up again. So we did a lot of lifting one arm, the other, one knee, the other, shifting weight, learning to balance. When I asked her to put the top of her head on the floor, she said it was too painful. I tried it with a big cushion under her head, which worked better. Then I decided to work with her feet on a roller on the back. If she could lift her pelvis with her knees going forward and had the experience of her pelvis and back extending it would help her. I first worked with her right foot on a firm roller rolling her foot on it extending and flexing her toes, working from the heel extending and flexing her ankle. Moving her foot over the roller her toes slightly separated. Then I used a roller lengthwise to differentiate the movements of the foot and the ankle, knee and hip joint. In the end she had both of her feet on two rollers and lifted her pelvis high in the air. To do that, she had to push down so that her pelvis extended and her back and the knees would come over her feet forward in a bridge.

She loved that, because she felt like an acrobat on the rollers. She was standing quite

differently. Both of her feet were pointing forward her head was in a different place, she did not know how to walk first, it must have felt very strange to her.

Back on all fours again, we started in the next session to bring one arm under and put one side of the face to the floor. This turned out to be difficult to the left side. She could not orient herself in this configuration and turning her pelvis to the right with her right shoulder on the floor was at first impossible. The lower ribs on the left and right did not know how to move. So we went back to all fours to a movement, which became easy to her, and had been difficult in the beginning. This was too come to sitting from all fours to one side, and then the other bringing one leg in front of the other, and crossing over. I rolled her head for a while to get her feel connected all through the spine. Then we went back to the difficult position. The easy side was easier now and the difficult was at least possible. Sonya jumped in every now and then and tried also.

In the next session the girls brought a box with all kinds of seashells with the wish for my admiration. We took one shell out after the other and looked at them. I was a little nervous about time, but then I decided to go with the flow and use our play with the shells for more learning. I asked them to take off their socks and put back the shells with their toes. I noticed that Sonya did not have the problem with her toes. We laughed a lot and both girls had fun. I told them the story about a student who I met in Heidelberg who did not have arms and did everything with her toes. So the theme of people who used their feet like hands brought us to exploring interlacing hands and toes. This was not easy for Clara, but possible on both sides. This theme accompanied us through many of the next lessons because they liked it so much and showed me what they could do. Meanwhile I came up with all kinds of different inter-lacings.

Next time we went back to the 'judo roll', a variation of the summersault in which one rolled with the head to the side. I did not tell Clara that was what it was. She still could bring her shoulders to the floor and the sides of her head. The lifting of her knees was difficult again because she moved backwards with her legs instead of rounding her back and turning her pelvis. So we spent some time in this position bringing the toes for running and back again and I helped her to feel what the pelvis was doing when she did that. Now pushing from different parts of her feet was important again. We investigated this with both feet with each shoulder on the floor. Then she started to lift the easy knee first and I told her that she could look from under her standing arm at the same time. This time the force from her foot was transmitted forward. With her easy side I asked her if she could think of lifting this foot completely from the floor and she did. She was so proud of herself and I was too.

I thought to myself, if we had not this experience of success, why would we go on learning? It is such a reassuring feeling that we are capable of doing something we could not do before. Scientists are thinking if human beings have an inbuilt capacity to want to improve themselves, I think Clara is a wonderful example how this boosts your self esteem. To have somebody who helps her to go on when she was stuck even without knowing, eventually changed her way of being in the world with her self and with others. She now learned to roll in the judo roll fashion in the following weeks.

I was again out of the country for a couple of months, but the parents come back to me when I came home. Clara is now 8 years old. I saw her last year 7 times. Her right foot has all toes next to each other and the left foot has the second toe touching the nail at the side. These changes happened without ever correcting her. She continues to come. I have no idea till now, how she manages with her eyes without the eyeglasses. She wears them in school but not regularly. This secret did not unfold. We are currently working standing on a roller and here her pattern shows again, she cannot roll the roller with her left foot, she has no balance. I brought her to the floor lying on the back pushing with her left foot to roll the pelvis and she was stuck again. She could not push with the outside of her foot; she could not lift her heel and push without cramping her toes. A little reminding helped her to let the triangle with her arms go the side in all variations and later she could do the pushing. Back to the roller she could roll the roller with her foot and stand

on it with her fingertips on the wall and balance.

For my self, working with Clara was a major learning path. Thinking of it reminds me that we all have capabilities which will unfold if we let it happen, that we can trust our system more than we often think, and when someone helps us to develop awareness about what we are doing we can change in directions we did not think of before. I do not know till today what happened with her feet, when she was around five months old. The question if there was an inherited weakness, or if it came about functionally because she did not do certain movements, or if it was a combination of both, still stands. What I know is, in walking with her through the path of filling in gaps of her development, she started to use new functions, and her body configurations started to change while growing. Even so the old patterns show up in different ways in challenging situations. She has learned that she can do something about it, which she did not know before. I think that experience will accompany through her life. Meanwhile her little sister now comes for lessons also, because she is started walking with her feet inwards. Is it a "family thing" and how is it connected? We still have further mysteries.

In this extended series of lessons we have included many movement activities in which Clara's active participation was essential. In this sense a developmental learning as created in the process, which was facilitated to match her stages of learning. Feldenkrais developed such facilitated processes out of his discoveries that we now call Awareness Through Movement.

