

Ian, Part I: Enhancing Attention Through Music and Movement

A Cognitive Eurhythmics Case Study

by Eric Barnhill

I first met Ian when he signed up for a Eurhythmics class within his age group of 6-9. He was 8 at the time. Though enthusiastic and with a fine sense of rhythm, Ian had a strongly wandering attention and could not absorb the material with the ease of the other students. I learned that Ian had a learning disability which was surely related if not responsible. I thought he was very sweet and enthusiastic with a tremendous imagination and gladly agreed to work with him privately using my Cognitive Eurhythmics curriculum.

Ian seems to be a very pure case of Attention Deficit Disorder. His attention snaps away from whatever he is doing onto something else, quickly enough that he rarely absorbs lengthy instructions. There was really nothing else wrong with him in our lessons: he loves responding to and making music, he moves with athleticism and natural rhythm, he likes to engage people, and he likes jokes and surprises. He can imitate adults and their behavior with amazing fidelity. What's interesting is that his imitations don't represent any lengthy conceptual representation of the people he imitates; he takes snapshots of the world, striking in their brightness and clarity, but they don't coalesce into longer lines.

Ian has learned many tricks to adapt to his short attention. He will always quickly nod his head and say "yes" if you ask him if he understands. If you contradict him he is quick to change and agree with whatever you are saying. If he wanders off, distracted by something, and he is chided to come back, he is always surprised that he was doing something wrong and genuinely sorry. These reactions are perhaps enough to get him through many of the demands of his childhood, but a foundation of deeper attention needs to be laid.

The main principle of Cognitive Eurhythmics is to address cognitive problems through bodily movement and rhythm. By creating games and challenges that require bodily attention, coordination, and expressivity, abstract brain issues become something the student can sense and feel, thus both becoming more real and often initiating unconscious self-correction simply through the act of awareness. Improving these problems in movement creates improvement in all areas.

An early game was one in which we passed the ball back and forth in extra slow motion while intoning "sloooooooooooooow moooooooooot". Ian would sustain the slow motion for a while and then suddenly jerk back to normal. When he lost the slowness I would point it out, and because he could feel his own kinesthetic change, it stuck. A similar game: on the word "go", Ian and I would hold eye contact. He would have to hold it until I said "stop" and then we would both look away. Again, he would be able to sense in bodily form when his attention dropped because he can sense where he is looking and notice his eyes have flickered away.

My main technique for working with Ian involved rhythmic patterns in the body: teaching Ian rhythmic patterns of varying length and intensity, and observing his levels of understanding, retention, and replication. These patterns were offered in a variety of modalities: Could he walk a pattern he heard? Can he drum a pattern I walked? What happens when pitch is mixed in? Can he imitate the piano in voice? Repeating rhythmic patterns back to me gave me a very direct measure of Ian's attention. Three notes on the drum, and he would repeat three back.. Four notes on the drum, and he would repeat four back. Five notes, and he would repeat either three or four, depending on what he had previously done. His attention simply didn't hold it.

Testing further I went in other directions. If we stuck to three or four notes in a small span of time, could he identify different dynamics, colors, alterations in the timing of the notes? He had no trouble. Just as his snapshots of the world were vibrant and accurate, so could he reproduce extremely subtle musical and rhythmic phenomena within an extremely short window. When we switched roles, his own examples to me had wonderful rhythmic and dynamic variety. He can execute movements and steps with athletic ease and clarity. His perception is clear, only his horizon is short.

As we worked over time Ian's attention window began to grow, in certain directions. Musical patterns could be stretched to a six or seven beat measure, effectively doubling the amount of time he could hold his attention, so long as there were landmarks: nine identical beats would lose him, but if a nine beat pattern had arc and symmetry, like a musical phrase, he would hold it.

What impact these musical and rhythmic developments have from a neurological standpoint is outside my purview – but increasing research is showing that rhythm, motor, and expressive capabilities are not isolated from, but rather undergird, the functioning of our more sophisticated conceptual capacities.