

Brain Gym™ in the Classroom

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“Movement is the door to learning.”

- Dr. Paul Dennison

For more than 50 years research has shown us that there is a significant link between movement and learning; that the mind and body are interconnected and are a part of the same system. According to neurophysiologist and educator, Dr. Carla Hannaford, *learning involves a series of skills, and skills of every manner are built through the movements of muscles – not just physical skills, but also the intellectual skills used in classrooms and workplaces.* Few educators today would dispute the fact that **movement is essential to learning.**

In the early 70's Dr. Paul Dennison developed the **Brain Gym™** programme, a series of movements which aim to enhance the experience of whole-brain learning. Brain Gym or Educational Kinesiology is the result of many years of research and is widely recognised as a safe and effective tool for education and self-development.

Originally, Brain Gym movements were put together to enable children with learning difficulties to access all parts of the brain and thereby increase their potential. Today, Brain Gym is being used in classrooms in over 40 countries all over the world, and the benefits are not confined to children with specific difficulties.

Brain Gym is based on the following premises: Learning is both natural and joyful and continues throughout our entire lives.

Learning blocks are the inability to move through the stress and uncertainty of a new task.

As learners we are all *learning blocked* in that we have learnt not to move.

Just as athletes need to warm up, and musical instruments need to be tuned, so we need to ensure that our learners are in an optimum

learning state in order to achieve their best. Children often arrive in school after a long bus journey; they may have watched a video, exposing them to external electro-magnetic fields and contributing to their state of dehydration, and in many cases they may have had an inadequate breakfast. By the time they reach the classroom, it is often quite a challenge for the teacher to energise the children and stimulate their brains. Some schools have found that starting the day with Brain Gym significantly increases the alertness of the children. A teacher in a primary school in Scotland, where each day starts with Brain Gym activities, says *I feel that my children's love of learning has increased enormously. They do their work more quickly, settle down to work better and can concentrate for longer periods. It really is remarkable.* Many other schools have had similar results, and, since adopting Brain Gym as part of the curriculum, have seen a huge improvement in their students' academic achievements.

All age groups can benefit from Brain Gym. The actions are elegant, quick and simple to perform, and the results are often surprising and immediate.

The movements can be divided into three categories:

Midline Movements: which focus on activating both the left and the right hemispheres so they can be used in harmony.

Lengthening Activities: which help to make connections between the back and the front of the brain, enabling the learner to retrieve stored information and to process and express it.

Energy Exercises and Postures for Deepening Attitudes: which help to re-establish the neural connections between the body and the brain and aid the flow of electro-

magnetic energy throughout the body, which is essential for learning.

Brain Gym exercises have different roles to play and are designed to help the children in all areas of learning, not only focusing on skills such as reading and writing but also thinking skills and self-awareness skills.

Many teachers start the day with **PACE**.

PACE is a 6-minute learning-readiness sequence which can be done at the beginning of each day or prior to any challenging activity where the children need to be totally integrated. Each activity can also be done separately whenever the need arises. It is often the children themselves who ask to do a certain exercise when they feel they are blocked or challenged by a task. Knowing they have the resource of Brain Gym activities to help them often gives children the self-confidence they need to go beyond their own expectations and break new boundaries to fulfil their potential.

The PACE Routine

- We start with a drink of **WATER**.

Water is a conductor of electrical energy and it is the electrical transmissions within the nervous system that are essential for the brain to function. Dehydration inhibits learning, and academic skills are improved by adequate hydration. Many schools are now making sure that the children always have a bottle of water on their desks.

- **Brain Buttons**

With the thumb and forefinger, the children massage the indentation under the collar bone (to the left and right of the sternum). Meanwhile the other hand is placed on the navel. This is done for about 20 seconds, before changing hands and repeating the activity. In this exercise the blood supply to the brain is increased and there is also an increase in the flow of electromagnetic energy. Messages are sent from the right brain hemisphere to the left side of the body and vice versa. Dr. Carla Hannaford tells how she uses this activity as a way of maintaining

alertness on long car journeys, and says that many of her students agree that it brings them back to focus when they are taking tests.

- **Cross-Crawl**

This consists of walking in place in slow motion, touching the left elbow with the right knee and then the right knee with the left elbow. Smaller children can use their hands and slowly “cross pat” as they walk. This has always been a favourite amongst young children who demand the “elbow-knee” exercise as part of their learning routine. Many teachers do the actions to music or add a story element, for example telling the children to imagine they are astronauts walking slowly on the face of the moon.

- **Cook’s Hook-Ups**

In either a standing or a sitting position (more advisable for smaller children), cross the left ankle over the right, put the backs of your hands together, cross hands, clasp and invert. Hold your hands in this position close to your chest, close your eyes, breathe deeply and relax. Then uncross your feet and join your hands at the level of your navel, gently allowing the tips of your fingers to touch. Place your tongue on the roof of your mouth, breathe in gently then drop your tongue. Relax. The results are immediate and profound. As well using the Hook-Up as part of the PACE sequence, it is invaluable as a tool for regaining control of the class after a lively activity when the children may have become overexcited. The Hook-Up helps them to focus and to centre themselves, and it re-establishes calm and harmony in preparation for the next task.

Starting the day with the PACE routine is beneficial on many levels. The children are engaged in activities that are totally stress-free and they work together in harmony, creating a class rapport that gives them all confidence.

Brain Gym exercises can easily be incorporated as part of the class routine, so the children know that before a certain type of activity they do a specific exercise to enhance their performance. Both the children and the

teachers are motivated by the results, and once Brain Gym has become an integral part of the learning day, it is not difficult to maintain the routine.

The **LAZY 8** exercise.

Reading and writing skills can dramatically improve with this exercise.

In this exercise the children imagine a huge blackboard in front of them and draw an infinity symbol (a figure 8 on its side), starting in the middle and going counter-clockwise first, up, over and around: then clockwise: up over and around and back to the midpoint. They follow the movement with their eyes, moving the head only very slightly and keeping the neck relaxed. This flowing, continuous movement can be repeated three times with each hand and then with both hands together. In this way the children cross the visual midline and integrate the two brain hemispheres. In addition, they enhance their

binocular and peripheral vision. In this smoothly relaxing exercise eye-muscle coordination and reading skills are improved.

In today's society we are always looking for sophisticated solutions to common problems. Brain Gym can often be a solution, one that is relatively simple, popular and enjoyable for the children and takes little time. Brain Gym is a wonderful tool for managing and controlling behavioural problems in the class. The activities help to give the children a sense of involvement in their learning process, so they become more confident and more successful. For those teachers who are still reluctant to try it, there is a story of a man who has a blunt axe and is chopping away, trying to cut down a large tree. A neighbour walks by and says, *"I have a machine to sharpen your axe."* The man replies, *"I haven't time to sharpen my axe, I need to chop down this tree."*

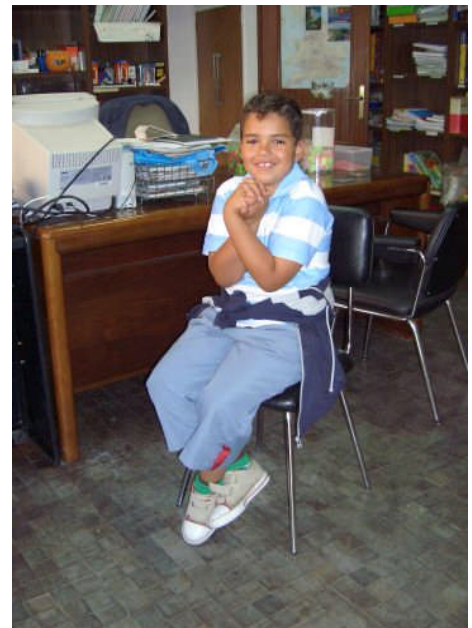


A young learner demonstrates a 'LAZY 8' exercise, drawing a figure of 8 on its side.

A Peruvian girl following movement with her eyes while keeping her head quite still.



A young boy doing 'Brain Buttons' which helps increase the blood supply to his brain.



Recommended Reading:

Brain Gym (Teacher's Edition), Paul. E. Dennison, Ph.D, Gail E Dennison.

Smart Moves, Carla Hannaford Ph.D

The Learning Brain, Eric Jensen

Website; www.braingym.org.uk

Izabella Hearn teaches at King's College, Madrid and for fifteen years she has been a teacher trainer. She has also served on the Executive Board of TESOL Spain and been a member of the ESL/Mother tongue Committee of the Council of International Schools. She is the director of SEAL-Spain and a representative for Spain for the International Council for Self –Esteem. She has written many primary EFL textbooks, including 'Fun English' and 'English Adventure' and also a methodology book for primary teachers, 'Didáctica del Inglés.