

Bring it to mind

(Filed: 29/04/2006)

Frances Childs reports on a controversial 'cure' for dyslexia

Can physical exercise, breathing and relaxation techniques really help children with dyslexia and dyspraxia?



Bruna Mole teaching the Raviv method at Hargrave Park Primary School in Archway, north London

Nili Raviv, founder of the Raviv learning method, says they can. She maintains that those who have followed her regime of repetitive exercises have seen huge improvements in their reading, writing and concentration skills.

Her method stimulates the brain to create hitherto missing connections, she says. Once these connections are formed, learning difficulties as diverse as dyslexia, AD/HD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) and short- and long-term memory loss can be overcome.

It may sound a bit far-fetched, but there are people who will testify that children do benefit from the Raviv exercises.

For example, since Bruna Mole, a practitioner in the method, began working with a small group of children at Hargrave Park Primary School in Archway, north London, last year, Nick Walker, their teacher, has noticed "considerable improvements in literacy, self-confidence and behaviour".

The method's relaxation techniques are based on common yoga practices. The children are taught to breathe more effectively, enabling more oxygen to reach and stimulate the brain.

The physical exercises centre on a specific way of walking. "It needs to be taught by a qualified Raviv practitioner," says Mole. "Done incorrectly, it could re-enforce existing learning difficulties."

Founded in Israel 10 years ago, the Raviv method now has centres in London and Dublin, with more than 200 practitioners across the UK, who have treated 2,500 clients with learning difficulties.

Among those who are sceptical of claims that dyslexia can be "cured" is the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). "There is no good research evidence proving that these methods work," a spokesman says.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Raviv method does help some youngsters. Mike Jones, a special needs teacher, says he always uses it with dyslexic children.

"I think the method works because it is multi-sensory," he says. "It is a very active way of learning, which stimulates children's senses by encouraging them to move around."

Twelve-year-old Kelly Yerrill, from Islington, north London noticed marked improvements in her schoolwork after several sessions with a Raviv practitioner.

"It was fun," she says. "We played thinking games and it got my mind working. I'm more able to concentrate in lessons now."

Dr John Richer, consultant clinical psychologist in the paediatrics department at the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, cautiously endorses the method.

"What I like about the Raviv method is that it looks at where children are developmentally, then works with them to take them forward. The idea is to rebuild the skills and understanding that a child has missed out on."

However, Dr Richer adds that he has not seen any properly-researched studies supporting the claims made for the method and he scoffs at some of the pseudo-scientific language used by its practitioners.

"Creating new pathways in the brain simply means learning new things," he says. "Every time we learn something new, we create a new pathway."

Those trained in the Raviv method charge £35-£60 an hour, and, according to Bruna Mole, most children with learning difficulties would need 20-24 one-hour sessions to reap the benefits.

A similar approach to "curing" dyslexia is offered by the DORE programme, which has developed exercises that, it claims, "stimulate the cerebellum".

However, the BDA emphasises that what is best for dyslexic children is being taught in mainstream classrooms by well-trained teachers delivering "dyslexia-friendly" - ie active, participatory - lessons.

Methods such as DORE and Raviv, it believes, should be seen as enjoyable extras, not as alternatives.

● Raviv Learning Society (0800 056 90 48; www.thelearning_society.com). DORE Programme (www.ddat.co.uk). British Dyslexia Association (0118 966 2677; www.bdadyslexia.org.uk).

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