

Excerpted from Chapter 3 of **The Dancing Dialogue: Using the Communicative Power of Movement with Young Children**, by Suzi Tortora, Ed.D., A.D.T.R., CMA

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"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. . . . The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. . . . The ways we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. . . . Yet this seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli. . . . We only see what we look at. To look is a choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought into our reach—though not necessarily within arm's reach."

J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1977, pp. 7–8)

This quote uses the image of a young child's early development to emphasize the role our visual sense plays in how we learn about and interact with the world. It also suggests how our vision is influenced by other elements. Berger specifically notes that what we already know may affect how we look, what we choose to look at, and how we process that information through thoughts and words. Most significantly, Berger asserts that seeing and knowing are constantly changing events based on how we interact and make sense of our experiences. In essence, opportunities to "see" are always presenting themselves but may not enter our experience if they are not part of our current perspective or belief system. Sometimes, we must be guided to see in a different way, to see something that may have been in our surroundings all along — to take note of it and explore it in a manner that will create a new experience and a new way of knowing, relating, and making sense of our personal world.

Berger's quote reflects several key components of the *Ways of Seeing* Approach — sensory experiences, experiential learning, perception, nonverbal observation, and the role relationships play in our development. These elements provide opportunities for growth on all developmental levels. Although these elements are always available, at times guidance may be needed to bring them into heightened awareness and to create a balance within a child's total functioning. The theoretical framework of the *Ways of Seeing* approach emphasizes the influential role that all multisensory, somatic, and nonverbal early childhood experiences play in a child's development. This framework is based on the belief that these experiences are held in the body and are revealed through an individual's physiology and nonverbal actions. This program investigates

how infants and young children use their bodies through multisensory- based exploration to learn, communicate, and develop meaningful relationships in the world around them. Elements of experience become the actual tools of intervention. Therapists, parents, and caregivers can use these embodied experiences to create sensory and movement-based dialogues that support a child's healthy growth and development. In essence, the *Ways of Seeingz* approach utilizes nonverbal movement observation, multisensory experience, dance, music, and play for the assessment, intervention, and education of children of all ages and their families.

To use nonverbal and multisensory movement-based experiences therapeutically may require a shift of perspective on the therapist's part. Becoming aware of the roles played by nonverbal experience and expression in all interactions might be a new way of looking at children's behaviors. Therapists must first become conscious of how to "look," assess, and read cues from children and families. Moreover, to discover this way of observing, interpreting, and interacting, therapists must first examine what influences their own perceptions. In this chapter, readers will be guided through this fresh awareness as the theoretical elements of the *Ways of Seeing* approach are described within the context of early childhood development.

The *Ways of Seeing* approach is helpful for a wide range of children, including those with ASD; Rett syndrome; PDD; sensory integration dysfunction; ADHD; communication and language delays; unspecified developmental delays; or issues associated with parent–child attachment, adoption, and trauma. Vignettes of children within this broad spectrum illustrate the *Ways of Seeing* concepts, both in this chapter and throughout the book. Finally, Chapter 8 describes the specific techniques employed to support the *Ways of Seeing* approach.

The following are the core principles of the *Ways of Seeing* approach:

- Our moving bodies tell stories, which speak of our experiences.
- All people, even children, create their own personal nonverbal movement styles composed of a unique combination of movement qualities.
- These movement qualities are their expressive communicative styles— regardless of how conventional or atypical these styles may be.
- Children's skills and developmental levels are best looked at within the context of the qualities of their nonverbal behaviors.
- Even severe movement limitations have a qualitative element—whether in the muscular tension level, the habitual body position, or the frequency or infrequency of eye contact.
- How these qualities are expressed creates a sensation, an attitude, or a response from the mover to those in the environment.

- In return, observers of these behaviors have reactions to these expressions based on their own personal experiences.
- It is this action–reaction that influences developing social-emotional relationships and affects therapeutic and educational interventions.
- Interventions are relationship-based, with the strength of emotional bonds being paramount and supporting all other areas of development.

## **SEEING WITH ALL THE SENSES**

*Ashley contracted spinal meningitis within the first 24 hours of her birth. Now 12 months old, she spends her days lying on her back. She cannot roll over onto her belly or transition to a vertical position. She cannot independently support herself to sit. She holds her body with extreme rigidity; sporadically flinging and swinging her arms out to her sides with intermittent bound and released muscular tension. In response to certain environmental stimuli, these actions of Ashley's often increase and are accompanied by her screeches. With this in mind, I choose to not touch her during our first few sessions. Instead, I let my presence be known by playing the same soft music from a portable CD player each time I sit next to her on the floor — at the edge of her arm-swinging reach. Watching closely and silently, I notice her arms swing more intently when she hears the music. It seems as if she is reaching out toward it. I place my arm in her swinging range — with my palm flat on the floor and my forearm perpendicular to it. This time, when Ashley flings her arm out she encounters my arm, a firm, warm, soft-skinned surface. She momentarily pauses. She swings her arm out again with the same result. She tries this over and over. After a while I change the position of my arm so that when she "reaches out" this time, she encounters my hand, and I give her a brief firm yet gentle squeeze that I soften before releasing her hand. This firmness matches the tension level of her musculature with a significant difference — the softening before the release adds a moment of relaxation from the tension before we disengage. She responds by increasing her contact, lingering longer in my grasp, turning her head toward me and calming her body down. Over the next few sessions, we slowly work this into an arm duet, gliding through the air with our hands clasped. This extended movement contact simultaneously increases the range of motion in her shoulder socket and creates a communicative social dance. Our dancing dialogue has begun.*

Ashley relies on several senses to "see" and experience her surroundings. The dance movement psychotherapist guides Ashley to expand her experience by using her senses. Through the kinesthetic sense she feels her body tense and release. This kinesthetic sense becomes used in the service of her stimulated auditory sense to increase her swinging arm movements in response to the music. Her tactile senses are stimulated as she responds to the therapist's arm and hand. In the midst of these multiple sensory messages, Ashley adds visual awareness as she turns her head to

gaze in the therapist's direction. Exploring each of her senses through this interactive experience enables Ashley to create new ways of seeing. Ashley and the therapist engage in shared dance-play.

This vignette also exemplifies a core concept in the *Ways of Seeing* approach. All of the senses are potential avenues to gain insight into how a child experiences the world, develops communicative bridges, and forms meaningful relationships. This perspective affects the implementation of the *Ways of Seeing* approach in two regards. It encourages a therapist to promote an emotional connection with a child by noticing seemingly incidental actions, gestures, and behaviors. Simultaneously, this perspective inspires the therapist to create an interactive relationship based on a child's existing style to encourage the child to explore the environment in a new way. As shown in Ashley's story, the therapist first perceives Ashley's reactions by watching them, taking particular note of which senses Ashley is utilizing to respond to her surroundings. The therapist then incorporates particular aspects of these actions to support Ashley's continued exploration of her environment.