

Intention and movement: the confluence between Dance Movement Therapy and psychotherapeutic treatment in autism¹

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Introduction

The inspiration for this study arose from the individual verbal approach limitations encountered in addressing the bodily dimension, and the need to enhance observation and accompaniment of the body in relationship.

We took into consideration recent contributions regarding autism as a sensorimotor alteration of the nuclear self (Delafield-Butt et al., 2023) and the construction of shared meanings based on their most primary intentional bodily actions.

Method

Both psychotherapeutic co-intervention and Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) were applied with two groups of 8-10 year-olds; a group of four boys, and another of three girls, diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Level 2 (DSM-5). All children attended weekly sessions at Carrilet Treatment Centre over three academic years. The sessions took place in the large group room. Prior to this, the children had undergone individual psychotherapy.

The observed characteristics of the patients in these groups include:

- difficulty in differentiation;
- preference for sensorimotor exploration;
- limited capacity for symbolic elaboration;
- language impairment that is not always communicative;
- experience of a fragmented body or one that does not respond to their impulses and desires;
- executive function difficulties hindering the organization and execution of ideas in interpersonal interactions.

Clinical experience and bibliographic research have enabled us to integrate psychotherapy and DMT in a clear and systematic manner for intervention purposes.

	Carrilet Model (Coromines, 1998 and Farrés, 2014, 2020)	DMT Model used in Carrilet (Chace, 1979; Tórtora, 2009 and Laban, 2006)
Nivel 0	Imitate	Attunement-mirroring
Nivel 1	Verbalize, describe the action	Empathic reflection
Nivel 2	Verbalize the sensation	Dialogue in movement
Nivel 3	Verbalize the emotion	Stimulate, explore and expand
Nivel 4	Stimulate memories	From non-verbal to symbolic/verbal
Nivel 5	Intersubject relationship	Intersubject relationship (intercorporeality)

Conclusions

The perspective of the body and the emotional world has enriched our understanding to continue addressing primary flaws and enhancing mental representation and symbolization through movement and speech.

The psychotherapist is attentive to the child's internal world, welcoming any verbalization or behaviour and helping to verbally shape the relationship. The DMT therapist fulfils this same supportive role, but integrates work through movement. She also intervenes as an *auxiliary ego*, bodily enacting the self-sensory experience to which the child has become anchored. Both psychotherapists' interpretive support helps in the integration between sensation, emotion, thought and expression.

¹ Poster from the article : Alejos, C. et al. «Intenció i moviment: la confluència de la Dansa Moviment Teràpia i el tractament psicoterapèutic a l'autisme». *Revista eipea*, 2024, núm. 17, p. 30-39.

Goals

- Offer a group space that facilitates mind-body integration through peer bonding, with the goal of transforming entrenched body patterns and promoting self-differentiation.
- Observe and understand the body and movement of the child with autism.
- Promote the process of differentiation and symbolization in a deeper way: through verbal and nonverbal codes.
- Advance from isolated movement to shared playing and social interaction thanks to the clinical space that accompanies, organizes, and gives meaning to bodily experience.
- Build a common intervention framework based on interdisciplinarity and an understanding of autistic mental functioning.

Results

Initially, the intervention allowed a differentiated relationship in which each member maintained their identity, expressing their ideas and desires through their bodies. They focused on their peers, but struggled to connect and share. It was important to build a potential space as a precursor to the organization of movement, helping to move beyond the avoidant release of self-sensory perception and perfect contingencies (Muratori, 2009).

Evolution began with imitation of the other as a possibility for relational experience (levels 0, 1), moving from adhesive to meaningful experience linked to self (levels 1, 2) and to affective attunement (level 2). All of this allowed for dynamic regulation (level 3) of the range of movements and an increase in intersubjective interaction (levels 4, 5).

Group intervention using this setting has helped the children become more capable of connecting with their own emotions and actions and progressively regulating their behaviour in contact with others. This capacity for self-regulation is linked to the development of higher cognitive processes that had been inhibited in their development, showing greater capacity for planning and organizing in shared play and, consequently, in relationships.



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