

Alexander Technique in Education: Why does it get harder to learn as we age? What is damaging us and what we can do about it.

Within the most important few years of their development, children have the capacity to learn, grow and develop into the complex human beings we are now. This delicate window of time has proved that children are efficient, intuitive learners but around the age they start attending school this capacity to learn changes and slows down whilst having a strong correlation to a deterioration in physical movement and flexibility. Is this purely down to age? In cultures and societies where the majority of people work in more practical or physical jobs, not stuck in desk jobs, their posture and range of movement seem to be less affected as they grow into old age. For example, people living in India or Africa in their 60s find squatting much easier and natural compared to the same generation of people in Western societies that start to have problems with everyday movements.

Kids are sponges

If you spend time with a 5 year old it'll make you laugh to hear all the things they come up with - they'll say whatever comes into their mind very honestly and won't hold back. They have an openness which comes from an environment which encourages them to explore and discover. Have a long conversation with someone in their adolescence and they've become a lot more closed and cautious.

As young children we pick up things incredibly fast and naturally with little to no instruction. When a toddler is starting to walk, they will go through hundreds of attempts taking little steps and falling down until they can run. They

don't get caught up with the negativity of 'failure' and seem very happy to keep trying. Along with the encouragement around them - every step is a new discovery. And when a child is learning their first language, do they think about all the grammar rules or worry about



how they pronounce each word? Of course not. Children don't question everything they hear or

say, they pick up the essentials of a language so that they can communicate and build up their knowledge from there. But why is it so difficult to learn a second language as an adult? We don't have the same fearless attitude as children do, instead we worry about every mistake we might make. If you're learning a new language, ask yourself this - will you wait to have your first conversation in a new language until you think you won't make mistakes? An effective learning process simply demands one to make mistakes to build faster connections in our brains, but we as adults are just too afraid of making them. Perhaps because we worry about how we'll look to other people? It applies to anything that we learn as adults, we are actually getting in the way of ourselves, limiting our potential. That's why the carefree attitude of Children and a non-judgmental environment is so important to allow them to experiment and learn without consequences.

Getting older or a poor environment?



It is easy to see that young children around the pre-school age, still enjoying the novelty of walking and talking, have such a bundle of energy and freedom that they express through their movements. As they're taking the first steps towards independence, they use their body with ease and agility to convey their moods; jumping and skipping, laughing and giggling - no longer having to cry as their only tool for communication. They carry no stress in their bodies and are usually curious, enthusiastic about the world and eager to learn anything. This is certainly not the case for most adults but what is even more worrying is that it is already apparent to see this disappearing in children not much older than 5 or 6.

Since when did our emotional responses become disconnected with our physical self? We just grow out of it with age, don't we?

More and more children as they progress through school start to develop problems with aches and pains like 'sore backs' or issues with poor concentration putting them in a lesser than optimal condition to learn. By the time most teenagers leave school, they have transformed from bright-eyed, willing-to-learn young children to stressed-out, mentally and physically tired young adults with slouched postures and lower self-confidence. Surely the human body isn't designed so poorly that it starts to degenerate even before we've finished growing?



In the eyes of many Alexander Technique teachers, the causes are found in many school classrooms. We as a society have decided to take away children's freedom of choice as soon as they start attending school, forcing them to sit long hours at a time and putting them through stressful situations such as exams and enforcing the idea that their work and learning is all graded bad to good. Sitting for long hours is already difficult but if you look at the chairs in a



classroom, you'll see that all the desks and chairs are of identical size and shape, just as if children would all come in one uniform size and shape. The short and tall children trying to adjust as they grow and change, leading to harmful sitting positions. Furthermore, the chairs, designed with stackability in mind, rather than comfort, are sloped backwards, forcing the child to bend their spine over their desk causing unnecessary strain on the vertebrae. Children are constantly growing, energetic and curious beings but they are told to sit still, not to swing on the chairs and 'sit up straight' even though these are the obvious signs that the chairs are causing them harm. Instructing a child to 'sit up straight and put your shoulders back', on these chairs, causes the child to arch their lumbar spine with even more tension - this is when children begin to think "this is how to sit properly" and it will stay with them causing

more problems down the line. British Alexander Technique teacher Elizabeth Langford in her book *Mind and Muscle - An Owner's Manual*:

"No amount of 'physical education' will undo the damage done to schoolchildren condemned to spend hours of every day sitting on such chairs. Good chairs can never guarantee good sitting, but it is scandalous that children, forced to use chairs on which it is impossible to sit properly, are thus molded for a future of poor coordination, back pain, and other health problems." ¹

Alternative learning

¹ Elizabeth Langford. *Mind and Muscle* (Garant Uitgevers N V; Revised edition, 2008), 202.

Alexander's approach to learning is psycho-physical. That the mind and body must work together, finding a happy balance so that you are in the best condition to learn. We know that children learn the best when it's fun and engaging. In school, the subjects we were the best at were probably ones we found the most interesting and were eager to engage with. It's also very likely that the teacher was one who would be enthusiastic in their lessons, not the teacher who was so boring that no-one cared to listen. For children starting school it is a big change from being free and open to explore and discover things that are interesting to them, to being told what they should do and must not do. Like putting a bird in a cage, the child might have an adverse reaction and protest, but over time the child begins to settle as they become institutionalised. Children usually become more withdrawn as they conform to this societal norm. By the time we leave school we've lost some of the openness and individualism we once had as young children as we've been conditioned to think and work in a certain way.

Understanding and awareness is key to recognising harmful situations and patterns that can develop. Once we realise we have free will to make conscious decisions in our use, we can develop ways to **inhibit** and **redirect** automatic responses. That's why integrating Alexander technique into the school curriculum would be hugely beneficial to raise children's awareness of their use. It helps them find the space to stop, breathe, and find resources within themselves to stay in touch with their well-being.

*"In this rapidly changing world of the twentieth century we require, more than ever before, a system that shall guide and direct the child during his earlier years."*²



In the Educare Small School located in Kingston, Alexander Technique Principles are at the heart of the school philosophy with trained Alexander teachers working with children aged 3-11. Their motto '*Perfect the means and the ends will look after themselves*' shows the individual approach to every child's needs in a classroom full of different levels and abilities. The Alexander principles are taught to the children to give them the tools to be aware of their

² F. M. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (Graz: Mouritz, 1996), 82.

freedom so they can make conscious choices for themselves. They use child friendly vocabulary such as “The head is a floaty balloon” or “The shoulders are like runny custard” so they start to develop an understanding of the Alexander Principles. A school environment such as Educare provides a safe, balanced education physically and intellectually to develop young individuals to have the skills and confidence to keep learning what they are passionate about.

Habit and fear in the learning process

In his book *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, Alexander talks about the harmful impacts of the education system on young children and in particular, the importance of the teacher’s influence on the children, good or bad. He points out that many children are being taught by teachers who themselves are also victims of faulty sensory appreciation and bad habits. Often when the children are given tasks that demand something of them that they can’t understand or are unsure of how to approach, the children will begin to **end-gain** - only trying to ‘get-it-right’. This dangerous, albeit rather popular approach to teaching provokes fear patterns in individuals making them afraid to fail and will stifle their natural tendency to be experimental and openminded.

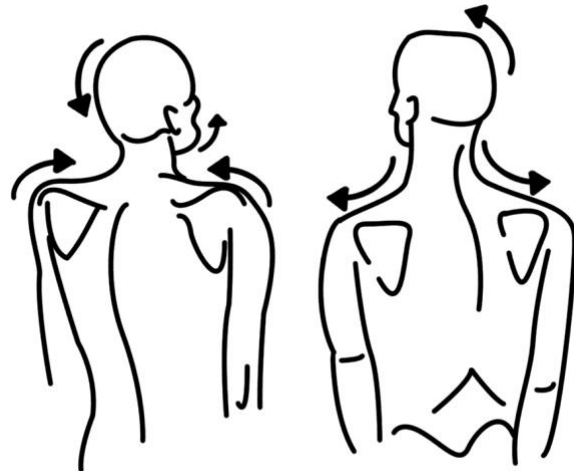
Take for example a class of a violin professor - someone who has many habits in their playing from the stress accumulated from many years in their profession but now in the power to influence young impressionable students in their playing. The teacher listens to the students every week and gives a critique of what went right and what went wrong. When the student only receives feedback focused on the mistakes and errors such as what was ‘out-of-tune’ or what was not as good as the previous week, the student will only go back into the practice room desperately trying to achieve a perfection that will always seem impossible. The dangers of end-gaining are unknown to the student as they have only been given limited freedom to try and fail in their lessons. This consequently builds fear reactions each time they receive a lesson from that teacher or perform the piece.

The fear of getting something wrong creates a physical response in the body - the **startle pattern** reaction or the ‘fight or flight’ response in which muscles in the neck contract, pulling the head forward in space but back in relation to the neck causing a knock on effect throughout the body. This limits the body’s ability to breathe, think and function properly - exactly not what we want, to learn and perform at our best. Just as if you would be given a fright, this human evolutionary fight or flight reaction can be necessary in short bursts but if not released can lead to chronic stress, pain or discomfort and will be very difficult to let go of. There can also be an automatic reaction to the stimuli of one’s environment. When we get stuck in a pattern of habits triggered by certain situations, we often resort to giving up any conscious control and simply say

“Well I always get a shaky bow in performances” or “I can never play this chord in tune”.
Accepting failure beforehand is a self-fulfilling prophecy which hinders confidence and growth.

The learning process should not be measured in success or failure but in the capacity to develop an openness and a safe space to experiment. The danger of end-gaining in teaching leads to competitiveness and frustration in students, comparing one’s work only to those who seem to handle the pressure slightly better. And how might the students sound? The class of a teacher who strives for ‘technical’

perfection might all sound in tune but they would all sound like they’ve all been instructed to play and sound in the same way. Compare this to a class of pupils who have been given the freedom to experiment and explore their own individual approaches to learning the violin and each pupil will have a clear idea of how they would like to sound. Pupils who are encouraged to stay curious and have the space to fail without fear usually have a better sense of self and are



more comfortable in their bodies, therefore handling stressful situations better than those in the previous class. Lowering one’s self-confidence only creates doubt around the ability to improve and completely loses sight of why we learn in the first place - remember how children learn for fun? Incorporating fear in one’s passion for their work may only work for a very small percentage of people but for others it creates trauma that could last a lifetime. Maintaining a healthy psycho-physical balance and enthusiasm for one’s livelihood is what can really make the difference between someone flourishing or quitting completely.

American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey shared many of the same ideas with Alexander about psychophysical unity in the learning process and was in huge favour of experiential learning or ‘learning by doing’ for young children. The idea that learning should be a process of experiment and assimilation - enjoying the journey and not solely focused on a goal.

Open minds and open hearts

Learning and building new skills is like having a collection of good habits, patterns that have been developed and repeated in the past and become part of the subconscious use of self,

mentally and physically. However, habits good or bad are ingrained in our behaviour and become very difficult to change. Habits are very comforting to us and most people will find a resistance to change them and they may not realise the harm they may be causing.

We rely on them because we don't need to think about them, they have become automatic responses. As mentioned earlier, accepting all our habits as an 'uncontrollable' part of character is like accepting defeat or denying yourself the chance of self-development - the danger being that our responses to situations become stuck in a predictable way, limiting our spontaneity and imagination. Alexander realised that physical habits are not exclusive from the emotional habits and that our attitudes are also getting stuck in the way of self-improvement. In order to work on his physical habits and limitations he also had to work on his attitude and mindset. This is what he means by **psycho-physical** unity.

Alexander talks about the 'method of psycho-physical re-education' which aims to redirect and alter these habits through a psycho-physical approach, freeing the mind and body to overcome any pain or tension and improve learning, performance and clarity of intention.

"Natural impulses and desires constitute in any case the starting point. But there is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves. This remaking involves inhibition of impulse in its first estate." ³

Recognising the **force of habit** is the first step to mentally allowing yourself to become flexible and open to change. The idea of change can be unsettling to anyone or even difficult to accept. Especially when it is something that feels so inherent and instinctive. This is the sensory feedback that may feel different to what we are actually doing and is therefore unreliable - this is called **Faulty Sensory Appreciation**. Alexander observed his use with a mirror to see what could be causing him problems from a different perspective. He discovered that he stiffened his neck and pulled his head back resulting in tension throughout his whole body.

It is an interesting experiment to try and view yourself as an outsider, just like when you hear your voice in a recording. Sometimes you have to take a moment to even realise it's you talking. Most of us have been trapped in a self-contained bubble to the point where we don't really know how we present ourselves to other people. If you record yourself, do you like what you hear? Is it how you imagined yourself to sound or how you wanted to come across? Many music

³ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938), 64.

students who make a video recording of their playing after a long time are very surprised upon watching back. It gives a completely new insight into your use of self and is a great tool for recognising and identifying habits that you want to change.

Once we have recognised our habits and the power of faulty sensory appreciation, we can think about **inhibition** and **direction** as a process of conscious choice-making, engaging all your senses to keep you aware of your use. Inhibition is the stopping and preventing of the unconscious habit. We have the choice to continue what we do habitually or to do something different. Direction is a conscious thought allowing muscular responses to release unnecessary tension by bringing awareness to the **Primary Control** - the relationship between the head, neck and back which forms the central axis to the human body and integrates human behaviour.



Alexander describes *'free the neck'* as inhibition and *'let the neck be free, to allow the head go forward and up, so that the back can lengthen and widen'* as direction. You can find habits when you lie in in **semi-supine** by noticing any tension held in the body, using the help of gravity and thinking directions to release. Coming out of semi-supine, notice if any negative patterns try to re-introduce themselves and see how and when they come back.

"By this process of re-education an effective installation is made of the reflex muscular systems involved through the creation of an intelligent directive power on the part of the individual . . ." ⁴

It is important to keep a clear and curious attitude towards this journey of change. The process of re-educating your use of self is a long journey which is completely different for every individual. 'Fixing your posture' so that all your problems are solved is not a realistic goal. This attitude of 'end-gaining' will not produce long term benefits, but focusing on the **Means whereby**, a clear intention of developing and expanding your 'use' in everyday activities will influence the way you use your body in any aspect of your work - this is the power of good habitual changes.

⁴ F. M. Alexander, "Re-Education of the Kinæsthetic Systems" (1908) in *Articles and Lectures* (Graz: Mouritz, 1995), 79.

Remember how children don't always learn with a goal in mind but because they find it fun and interesting? We should always be finding different ways to improve and stimulate our senses. Working on our 'use of self' should be a journey of self-discovery where there is no right or wrong, only curiosity and motivation. The Alexander Technique allows for freedom in choice, there is no right way to perform in an 'Alexander way'. It simply allows the mind and body to work together to influence the subconscious mind.

"There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such thing as a right direction." ⁵

If we are constantly focusing on our weaknesses and not trusting our own abilities, our room to grow is limited by our own expectations. Non-judgemental approaches to our work are essential to encourage ourselves to be the best we can be, just as children are encouraged by their parents. Allowing ourselves to get things wrong in a safe environment is the path to rapid learning just as a child begins to walk or talk - if they fall down, they pick up straight away and (normally) without a tear in sight! Letting go of the pressure to 'get everything right' builds up our resistance to trauma. Making a mistake doesn't suddenly seem to set us back but gives us resilience to learn faster from them.

Children are the greatest copycats

Should you ever have children, remember this: children unconsciously imitate adults and adapt to their surroundings, that's what makes them such effective learners yet susceptible to adopting bad habits if they have bad examples set around them. Can you identify which family member is coming up the stairs just by the sound of their footsteps? Recognise a friend by the way they hold themselves? These physical idiosyncrasies are very likely to be picked up by their children, following in the same footsteps of their parents. No different to how a child picks up language, they tend to use and express language very similar to their parents.

The biggest problem in the way of our potential to learn is a lack of awareness of these issues and not having the tools such as the Alexander Principles to redirect our habits. When we understand the detrimental effects of the emotional pressures at school or recognise our own bad habits in our children, we can help guide them to build intelligent co-ordination of the mind, body and emotions.

⁵ F. M. Alexander, "Teaching Aphorisms" in *Articles and Lectures* (Graz: Mouritz, 1995), 194.

“And these directions must be based on a principle that will help the child to employ his various mechanisms to the best advantage in his daily activities. These directions involve no interference with what the child has to express; they represent merely a cultivation and development of the means whereby he may find adequate and satisfying release for his potentialities.” ⁶

When we are in tune with our mind-body coordination, our overall learning improves. As working or studying adults we are faced with so many challenges to function, constantly expand our knowledge and perform the best we can under pressure and even sometimes with the weight of trauma and anxiety on our shoulders. By finding space to unlock the limitations put on ourselves we can become more confident, resilient and able to handle stressful situations with ease, and to continue learning just like we all did when we were younger.

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⁶ F. M. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (Graz: Mouritz, 1996), 83.

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