

**Partners** is a creative and structured approach designed to help the child with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to communicate and develop imaginatively and socially. Formulated in collaboration with Nick Hodge, a specialist teacher and lecturer, and based on Isabel Jones's extensive work as a performer, educator and director, it involves the facilitator and the child together in a process of play and discovery, using the tools of movement and music. Here **Isabel Jones** talks about their

# a sense of Self

P.A.R.T.N.E.R.S. is also an acronym, a useful tool for remembering the eight steps of this approach: Preparing - Assessing - Responding - Timing - New directions - Empathy and equal exchange - Releasing - Settling back. We use the term 'children' here as this is our area of focus at present. **Partners** can, however, be used just as successfully with adults and can be applied in any space once the adult is familiar with the eight steps. It provides a structure for working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which aims to be non-alienating for teachers, dancers, parents, carers and musicians alike.

**Partners**, as a concept, came into being in the early 1980s when I began researching the use of music to help facilitate interactions with young children with ASD. Encouraged by the principal of Sutherland House School, Phil Christie, I was given the space to experiment, and over a four and a half year period laid down the foundations for this approach. Nick Hodge was one of a number of staff and parents at the school who worked with me on its development.

A variety of experiences influenced my early work at Sutherland House and subsequent activity with people elsewhere. The influence of my father has been crucial. who happens to be visually and hearing impaired. All of my life I have needed to observe how life and the environment impacts on my father. Growing up with him taught me about empathy and about communication. I learnt as a child how to convert fears into experience; how to make a chaotic world or alienating environment into something experiential and understandable, something you can touch, taste or

smell - a factor which is so important for children with ASD. My work as a performer and dance maker is about visual, sound and movement worlds meeting. Through the collaborative dance work my father and I have done for the last ten years, I have learnt that we need to be able to speak to audiences through all the senses - auditory, visual and kinaesthetic, and how important a sensory way of thinking is when working with people with autism.

**Partners** relies too on motivation. Through working with people who are terminally ill, I have learnt to appreciate the beauty in small movements, and to value whatever action a person is able to make. Children with ASD have a greatly impaired sense of self and possibly no ability to view themselves objectively at all. Through my work I offer them a mirror so that they might see themselves often following their movements exactly. It's very much like dancing with any new partner, it's a process of learning about each other as well moving into the unknown.

In order to want to communicate we need to know that someone is listening and that a reaction will happen in consequence. In my first session with Tim, an eight year old boy with ASD, I wanted to show him that he can 'make things happen' in his environment. To do this, we needed to establish a shared understandable language of movement and sound. Initially, it is important for me to establish myself as fun to be with - lots of movements to do with imitation, repetition, hiding and seeking, creeping up close and running away. These kinds of structures also give him space when he needs it. I don't expect long durations of contact in our dancing together. This is unmanageable for Tim, just as it would be in any first meeting with someone.

As I experience the movements, the direction and the pace of the child, I also capture the essence of what it might feel like to be them. How it might feel to be governed by rapid, jerky movements or to approach new tasks when your body responds in a slow, laboured fashion. A connection is made. Experiences shared. Each learns a little of the language of the other.

The approach also incorporates my work with voice. For children like Tim, who find it difficult to identify with the rhythms of conversation, music provides a structure. Possessing a classical music and dance background I went on to explore the extended voice through: improvisation, inventing vocal music for dance performance, and a six year collaboration with singer Vivien Ellis. In the early days my music work with children in this context was based around lap play, nursery rhyme structures and conventional singing. Through my work as a creative performer, I have realised that I want to be able to sing the child's sounds to really hear them. Only from there can the child and I invent something together. In my choreographic and vocal work I am interested in drawing out the individual spirit in peoples' sounds and movements and in myself; I am excited by peoples' differences and individual qualities. My work with children with ASD is very much to do with these artistic processes.

I attempt to match in tone and timbre the sounds offered by the child, magnifying or minimising these, as with the movements. The child's sounds and movements are acknowledged, validated and made into a form of communication, a method of relating - I become the most exciting of toys. Together, the child and I exchange experiences and ideas. At the same time the child experiences the comfort of being contained and supported by another body and voice.

**Partners** recognises the importance of touch. For many young children with ASD their predominant experience of touch is being moved from A to B or taken from a desired activity. They are passive recipients of the touch of others and if they resist, then the touch, in all probability, becomes more intrusive, more insistent. I turn this around. Here the child controls with touch. They are encouraged to find their strength, to assert themselves physically. A prod or a nudge ensures a desired movement or sound. Even the child who is often too physical or too aggressive with others needs to experience this. By learning how strong we can be we also learn how to be gentle.

This approach is a way of working that can be accessed by all facilitators not just experienced dancers or musicians. Hodge has worked with myself at Sutherland

House and also with Wendy Prevezer, a speech therapist, who has developed musical interaction further. He has also studied with Veronica Sherborne, one of the great teachers of movement. However, although he would not describe himself either as a dancer or musician, he has used the model effectively at Woodlands School in Nottingham. With the support of the acting Head Teacher, Pat Dubas, who is keen to develop a sense of self in young children with autism, Woodlands has been encouraged by the positive response of pupils to this way of working. More staff are becoming involved. The work is living. It adapts to the individuals concerned. Each child and each facilitator takes the work in new directions (the **O in Partners**). The pros, which is required to do this, remains the same but the content differs. Each child and each facilitator is an individual and the approach reflects this.

Hodge and I have developed **Partners** as a course designed to enable facilitators to achieve their full potential as powerful, motivating beings. We have come together, artist and educator, to ensure that this approach has a strong theoretical background based on good educational practice.

It is working on two essential building blocks of learning. Without the ability to communicate your needs or to make relationships with others it is very difficult to remain open to learning. These are fundamental areas to develop if access to the National Curriculum is to be achieved. This approach recognises that schools are hard pressed to provide one to one staffing or rooms designed for movement. The principles involved can be employed in a variety of settings and for short periods of time. Hodge and I both work in real environments and are aware of both the positives and the practical limitations of this.

**Partners** is a work in progress. We continue to experiment and develop our approach. We both feel passionately about the need to place movement back on the agenda for schools. The work is a collaboration between facilitator and child with ASD between dance and education, between practice and theory, artist and teacher.

When different disciplines or life viewpoints come together the mix can be explosive. Energies unite, sparking fresh reactions.

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