

Case study 3 – Lara

Lara, a ten-year old girl, was referred to me by Dr. Mina Gurevich, a pediatrician and early child development researcher. Dr. Gurevich was aware of my work with other children and thought that I may be able to help Lara continue developing her motor skills.

Lara's mom, Iris, filled out the health statement form that I require from all students prior to our first lesson. She wrote that that Lara had dislocated her elbow twice, once when she was two-years old and again at the age of three. She also noted that Lara suffers from hypermobility in her large joints. In our initial conversation, the mother said, "Lara doesn't do anything with her body", "She always has her nose in a screen", "She's lazy", and "She is gaining weight". I also discovered that Lara has been seeing a child psychologist and has tried animal-assisted therapy (which was abandoned after a short time) because Lara suffers from what her mother termed "numerous fears": fear of animals, fear of walking unaccompanied even for short distances (for example, from the car to the door of the clinic), fear of the dark, and more. According to Iris, both therapists recommended body work for Lara and one of them even specifically recommended the Feldenkrais Method.

Even before meeting Lara, I felt the need to explain the method to her mother because it seemed to me that Iris expected me to serve as a fitness trainer. To answer her question, "What will be gained by this?" I answered that I hope our lessons will teach Lara to "enjoy movement". From the beginning of the process until almost the end, the mother's skepticism continued unabated.

Lara came to the first lesson full of energy. She touched many objects: she picked up the rollers, the pillows, and the different balls scattered around the room. She climbed onto the table and jumped off it. She said, “I have attention deficiency disorder” and “I’m a crazy girl”. From her mother’s description, I had expected to meet a passive and frightened little girl. The exact opposite of this girl who took a lot of liberties and never stopped moving for a minute.

I understood that I had to allow Lara to express this mood. I suggested that she choose five props that arouse her curiosity and that we take them into the large studio adjacent to my room in the clinic. Lara’s mother was, at this time, sitting in the studio. Once we were in the big space, I asked Lara to arrange the props that she had chosen into stations and to assign herself a task at each station. Here began a lesson where Lara jumped, rolled, crawled, stood balancing, fell, walked in every possible manner, ran. I structured this game so that at first Lara gave herself a task for each of the five stations, then she decided on the task for four of the stations and I assigned the task for one of the stations, then she chose tasks at three stations and I chose at two stations, etc. We continued like this until I was assigning five tasks – one for each station. This was all done under the watchful eye of her mother. I hoped that Lara’s mother would see how much her image of Lara as “lazy” was not reflected in this lesson.

Towards the end of the lesson, Lara proclaimed that she was tired. I suggested that we return to the clinic, so she could “rest on the table”. She agreed, but only on the condition that she could bring “my smichi” (a diminutive for blanket, like “blankie” in English), her soft, pink security blanket. She spread the blanket on the table and lay sprawled on it, exhausted.

Without thinking, I spontaneously gathered all four corners of the blanket in my hands, making a kind of “cocoon” with Lara lying inside in a fetal position. I gently rocked her from side to side. Lara found this very amusing and pleasurable. From this moment on, being cradled in “smichi” became our ritual ending for each lesson. As I escorted Lara out of the clinic, she stopped at the door, turned, and hugged me and said, “I want to keep coming to this.”

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The day before our next lesson, Lara's mother called me and again wanted to know if Lara would "get stronger" from our lessons. I intentionally gave her a vague answer. At this point I thought that it would be a good idea to have Iris take a more active role in one or more of Lara's lessons. If Iris could experience in herself some change in her body image, she might possibly better understand the process that Lara is going through. Moving together, sharing movement tasks that I hopefully choose wisely, may have a positive impact on their relationship. It was not difficult to guess that the source of some of Lara's difficulties were rooted in her relationship with her mother. In fact, during one of our subsequent lessons, Lara shared that she and her brother were both conceived through donor sperm and that they are growing up without a father.

At our next lesson, Lara entered the clinic full of self-confidence, chose five props, and began to arrange a new course in the studio's large space. She began showing me the tasks that she had allocated for each station and made it clear that I was allowed to make suggestions for two stations only. I agreed to this, under the condition that I get to choose the music. Intending to influence the dynamics of Lara's movement, I chose different styles and rhythms and sure enough Lara responded to the music by changing her dynamics, rhythm, dramatic expression, and action.

I suggested to Lara that we change the game and use "imaginary stations"; the station's prop could be used as an instrument. For instance, I asked her to relate to the floor as if it was quicksand or to part of the space as a jar of honey and she is moving inside the jar or to the whole space as if it was suddenly flooded with water, strong winds, or flames. I matched appropriate music to accompany each "task". Lara allowed herself to dive completely into the game. She moved in varied and creative ways, full of textures, rhythms, drive and energy, and performed in varying planes. It seemed that her imagination had no limits and her physical abilities were impressive. Her mother, who had been watching from the sidelines, began to understand what was going on but she still radiated ambivalence.

When Lara tired, we (together with "smichi") moved over to the table. Lara asked to be cradled in the blanket, but I made it clear to her that was only at the end of the lesson. I could now offer Lara, who was replete with movement, her first Functional Integration

with touch; I consider everything we did before as an FI lesson and the addition here was touch.

It seemed to me that the range of movement in Lara's joints was unusually large. I guessed that this was commensurate with the diagnosis of hypermobility. From a functional standpoint, I observed that this large range of movement made her limbs seem disconnected with the proximal parts of the spine and pelvis. Interestingly, my image of Lara's head and neck were as a distal part, like an additional limb, and not as a continuation of the spine's axis. The marked flexibility of her neck in all planes of movement contributed to this image. I wondered whether this resonated with Lara's internal image of her head and made a note to myself that I must investigate.

A clear example of this "disconnect" appeared when Lara was lying on her back with her legs spread. Her flexibility permitted her to lie with both feet turned out, the outer edges both touching the table, without having to roll her pelvis from side to side in order to have one foot touch and then the other. In fact, rolling her pelvis in this situation was impossible for her. Lifting her arms above required no proximal movement due to the freedom of movement in her shoulder joints. She showed me how she could bring her arms above and behind her while standing. She also demonstrated how, standing, she could bend forward and bring the circle of her arms over her head and to the floor. This can also be seen in hip joint extension when lying prone. When flexing the thigh and knee towards the chest she has no need to shift weight to the opposite side to accommodate flexing the leg. As expected, she flattened out a bit on either side (also both sides simultaneously) on the medial facet of the thigh, knee, and calf. The route her spine took showed a clear preference for lumbar extension. In spontaneous movements Lara also preferred states of extreme spinal extension as in a "bridge".

These "disconnects" appeared to me as an "absence of connection/communication" between the limbs and the proximal parts. Thus, I provided myself with an explanation for the mother's statement, which Lara had confirmed, "Lara doesn't like sport. "

As someone who personally is dealing with hypermobility, I could identify with the tremendous effort involved when faced with these long and heavy levers in conjunction with the tendency to "collapse" into the too flexible and unstable joints. So, it was not a

surprise that Lara, when faced with athletic tasks that require speed, muscle strength, and stamina, did not like sport. I assumed that Lara was unaware of the tremendous effort she invests, as was her mother in whom I detected some signs of hypermobility.

During our first lesson and a half in the studio, Lara chose tasks that were commensurate with her abilities. Here I saw her versatile musicality, creativity, her self-expression, and her acrobatic skills (in the sense of flexibility). She did not take on tasks, neither physically nor psychologically, that required strength, stamina, or rapid, explosive movement. In my eyes, Lara was very far from being a lazy girl or someone who avoids movement. Just the opposite, I tended to see the dancer in her, a creator in the making. I made sure to present her with this image again and again, each time she was confronted with a new movement. Lara confided her secret to me; she wants to be an “actress-dancer-singer” when she grows up. From this point on, she gave herself permission to move while singing.

These perceptions corroborated my first intuition to “cradle” Lara. As a starting point, I looked to create an environment that encouraged an organized, generalized flexion. At the same time, I sought engage her in renewing communication between the proximal and distal parts. I wanted to interest her in a reduced range of movement. To be more specific: moving the proximal towards the distal in a range that allows this movement. For instance, rolling the pelvis with the legs spread. And, yes, I reminded myself to explore the idea of the head as a part of the skeletal axis. The developmental paradigm seemed relevant in this context.

In ensuing lessons, I worked with Lara on lifting the head in prone. At the time I was a Dr. Chava Shelhav’s student and the work with Lara was directly influenced by the Child’Space method. Basing myself on the Feldenkraisian idea of using the antagonists to improve the function of agonists, I assumed that when the habitual extension of the spine would become less centralized then flexion would become much easier. We worked on lifting the head using many variations. I also posited that lifting the head would create an image of the head as a continuation of the spine. My line of thinking was validated when Lara, who was lying supine, lifted her legs and brought them over her head. At this point, Lara asked to move to the studio so I could teach her to do a backwards somersault,

something that she found difficult and was frustrating her to no end. Within the environment of our “routine”, she had improved at the “stations” (with and without props), lifting the head when prone, rolling from prone to sitting while holding her feet, bringing a foot to her mouth, creeping, “bear crawling”. Our routine included, of course, being cradled in “smichi” at the end of the lesson and now we added practicing backwards somersaults.

It is important to note that from our second lesson I began to give Lara “homework” to do before our next session, that is, if she chose to do it. At first, I chose tasks from among the things we did in the lesson and she seemed to enjoy. For example, I asked her to continue to “solve” the “movement riddle” that we had worked on: how to move from lying on the belly to lying on the back and the opposite, all the while balancing a beanbag on her foot (an idea I took from Chava Shelhav’s course). The day after the lesson, Lara sent me (on her own initiative) a film that her mother shot of her doing the movement easily and efficiently. Subsequently, Lara began to choose her own homework.

Sometimes these were TikTok dances that she was interested in improving and showing me or often she chose backward somersaults. At any rate, it seemed like Lara was beginning to find a connection between movement and pleasure. And more importantly, in my eyes, a new found “ownership” over her body and her movement.

By now, Lara agreed to her mother waiting at the end of the path that led to the studio and watching as she mounted the stairs until I greeted her in the doorway.

When Lara felt that her backwards somersault was beautiful, she asked that her mother come and see. I saw this as an opportunity to make good on my idea to have Lara’s mother participate in our lesson. So, this time, I asked both Lara and her mother to work jointly on some homework before the next time the three of us meet. Their mission was to walk quietly side by side with their eyes closed and try to sense how each other is walking so their pace remains constant. They both agreed to try this. A surprise awaited me at our next lesson. Apparently, Lara and her mom began to do this at home, but Lara quickly found this task “boring”. She decided that the task should be “walking in a straight line without falling”, one foot after the other – first she would take a step and then her mother would take a step. Not only did they practice this before coming to the

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lesson, but Lara even went a step farther and made a one and a half meter loop of little rubber bands, which was what they had to walk along without losing their balance. So, during the lesson, Lara and her mother walked one following the other on this path. And then, another surprise! Iris, the mother, suggested making a loop like the one used in a game from her childhood. The game needed three participants; two participants stood inside the loop facing each other and then walked backwards until the elastic loop stretched to the desired tension. Then the third participant jumped in and out of the loop using many variations. There are infinite variations to this game and the level of difficulty changes by adjusting the height of the elastic loop, which can be around the ankles or higher, all the way up to the head. Lara was slightly familiar with the game, but joined in enthusiastically (as did her mother, Iris) both as a jumper and a “holder”. At the end of the lesson, Lara asked to skip the “smichi” ritual and “go home with mom”.

At the next lesson, Lara behaved violently towards me. She hit me lightly, as if in jest, with one of the rollers. I was offended and understood that this an expression of Lara’s internal feeling. Lara spoke throughout the entire lesson, as I worked with her on bringing a leg to stand while lying supine (a developmental movement that precedes pushing with both feet and “crawling” towards the head). Lara’s endless monologue revealed a violent relationship between her and her mother. At the end of the lesson, Lara cried and said, “Can you tell that I’m depressed?”

That was my last meeting with Lara. Under some pretext, her mother cancelled our next lesson. Soon afterwards, the Covid19 pandemic broke out and Lara was not interested in meeting over Zoom. I received a text message thanking me for our lesson and sending me her love. I was left with the pain of the sudden separation and the uneasy feeling that the last lesson “burst the dam” in a way that Lara (and possibly even her mother) felt threatened. However, I was hopeful that at least something of the Lara’s developments would remain.