

PlaySense



ARNOLD is a child with Down syndrome. He's 3 years old but is very small for his age and has those loose joints that are often seen in children with Down syndrome. As a former dancer, I can't help but envy Arnold's ability to effortlessly do the splits.

Arnold has another skill that Gandhi would admire. Arnold is the master of passive resistance. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and other proponents of peace would advise protesters to not fight or add to the violence that was being perpetrated on them. Instead, they would advise resisters to show their resistance by going limp. A limp body is difficult to move.

Every day, Arnold's mom would bring him to the Head Start Centers for school, and every day he would be invited to join his classmates in doing the "morning circle." His response was to go to another part of the room, turn his back to the circle, and play quietly with a toy. Participating in the morning circle is usually not optional at this Head Start Center, so several times, the teacher attempted to pick Arnold up and carry him over to the circle. That's when we found out that Arnold could turn his body into a limp deadweight, so he could slither away. He would return to his spot, with his back to the group.

by Barbara Sher, MA, OTR,
The Gameslady

Arnold had the same passive-resistance response to games. Trying to guide him along the balance beam in an obstacle course activity or jump from square to square was like trying to get mercury to hold its shape. Everybody was having fun, but Arnold would not join in.

We gave up. Then, slowly, Arnold's behavior began to change. He stopped turning his back and began watching the group from a distance. Little by little he got closer, until one day he actually joined the group for good. We were singing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," and Arnold watched everyone as if they were friendly aliens. It didn't occur to him yet that he too could imitate what the others were doing.

However, we were floored by the fact that Arnold actually sat in the circle! We took a video that morning, and when we showed it at a workshop later on, someone commented that the child with Down syndrome wasn't joining in. We said, "You have no idea what it took to get

him into that circle—that was Arnold really joining in."

As the year progressed, Arnold got braver and braver and eventually joined in all the activities. He laughed and smiled and enjoyed being a part of the group.

At the end of the school year, the "graduating" class went over to visit the kindergarten program at the elementary school next door. We wondered how Arnold would do in the new setting. We walked into the classroom, and the children were all sitting on the carpet in a circle. Arnold was the first to walk over and sit right down, as if he'd been comfortable doing it all his life.

Arnold taught me an important lesson: Everyone has their own pace, and their own timing. My job is to honor their choices and trust their process. ♦

Barbara Sher, an occupational therapist and author of 10 books, believes in using children's natural love of play to promote key skills.

Her books include *Early Intervention Games*, *Self-Esteem Games*, *Attention Games*, and *Spirit Games*. To receive a free game designed for your child's needs, visit her Web site at www.gameslady.com.



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