

Elevator Rides Help Children Learn Focusing - Part 1

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In 1989, as a teacher of first, second and third grades, I surprised myself in an unexpected way one day. It happened at the end of a school day, story time, my favourite way to bridge the transition for children about to return from me to waiting parents. As the class was tidying up, I noticed my voice was straining and my anger was rising. The children were not co-operating, and I needed to "take control" of the situation.

By the time the reprimands and lectures were completed, our story time and its quality had been compromised. I was not happy. While the children were sitting on the floor, waiting for the story book clutched to my chest to be opened, I decided I could not read it just then. I told the children they would have to be very quiet for a moment. I explained there was a story inside my body that wanted me to come and hear it. I needed to take a little elevator ride inside myself and find the story. Afterwards I would read them the story inside the book I was holding.

My voice and demeanor were different from the previous moments when I had been experiencing so much anger and frustration. A lovely hush settled on the group as they somehow gave me the "caring feeling presence" I needed to go inside. In front of twenty four eight year olds, I closed my eyes, placed my hand over an aching chest and was immediately brought home to the anguish of the evening before. There had been a huge argument over dinner, and I had not been available to my own three children at their transition time, i.e., bedtime. The sadness for that turbulence in my home life and its effects on my children had been triggered by a turbulent classroom. It took less than two minutes to be acknowledged with some compassionate holding and attending, and for calmness to take me over. Somehow these children observed my shift as they sat quietly with awe and curiosity.

The storybook no longer interested them, but Elevator Rides sure did! What a moment! With the book set aside, the school day ended with all the children taking an elevator ride and discovering for themselves that they had stories inside waiting to be found.

From then on we took Elevator Rides whenever children saw the need. They enjoyed them. They still remember Dr. Gendlin's reminder to adults,

"inside ourselves we know how it should have been." The children saw a need whenever they were tired of "thinking," when they felt blocked at creative writing time, or when one of their classmates was sad, or hyper or closed. They exhibited growing empathy to each other's needs. Sometimes a child would ask to stay in with me over recess to do an Elevator Ride. It was often evident a very hurtful place was being addressed.

On one occasion I had a parent approach me. Her little seven year old had told her that she couldn't come down for dinner when called, because she was up in her room doing an elevator ride. With a puzzled face the mother was asking me for an explanation. She became the first of many parents to attend the Focusing Workshops I offered.

Whenever I attend Grade 8 graduations, children affirm that they value this process which Ed McMahon calls "gifting our children with themselves." For many years it continues to be my privilege to hear these children speak of how "Mrs. Bowers taught us Elevator Rides." After five or six years these children include in their speeches how something in doing Elevator Rides gave meaning to their lives and helped them move forward. Each year I am deeply touched and moved further in my commitment to continue teaching children how to Focus.

Preparation for Focusing Elevator Rides with Primary Children

Boys and girls, this morning I want to introduce you to an activity Mrs. B. does every day which helps my day run smoothly. It is called taking an Elevator Ride.

- 1) Have you ever been on an elevator? (Let the children relate some of their stories about elevators.)
- 2) Let's pretend that each of us has an elevator inside our bodies that can take us for an interesting ride to visit ourselves in a new way (pause). We will get to know ourselves from an inside place, not just from how we saw ourselves in the mirror this morning. Why did we look in the mirror anyway?... (allow some discussion about seeing themselves in the mirror from the outside)
- 3) Your elevator is your very own. You get to design it, and it will be a way of getting to know ourselves in a different way from using the mirror. Let's get comfortable and be very still and quiet. You might close your eyes and see how it feels inside yourself. Where and how can you imagine an elevator to be? You must decide how big it will be and what shape it will have. Will it be big enough for you alone? or to have someone special

accompany you? ... (pause) Will you stand or sit?... (pause) What do you need to be comfortable when you take a ride inside your body? Will you want windows? lights? What kind of door will you have? ...

4) Once you have it the way you like it please install your very important button panel. Be sure everything is just the right size for you. You are the only one in charge of your elevator and no one else will ever be allowed to push your buttons. This button panel needs a lot of buttons. One to open the door and one to close it. One to turn on the lights and one to shut them off. Please have buttons for going Up ,Down, Left and Right and be sure to put in a stop button. You may need that for when I tell you it is time to end the ride and stop the activity. Please leave an empty spot for a very important button. I will tell you about it another time when we do this activity again. (A moment of silence)

5) Children when you feel ready to try your elevator, please notice how it feels to be in there. Let anyone who is with you know that you are making all the decisions. They are only keeping you company. Are the lights on or did you decide you didn't want the lights on? Maybe you have windows in your elevator. I am inviting you to push the DOWN button to visit way down to your feet and to say hello to your toes. How are they feeling right now? tired? happy? sad? wiggly? What is a good word for those feet when you come to have a little visit? Do those feet let you get out of your elevator, or do they want you to stay inside ? Will they even let you open the door?

6) After you have had a friendly visit with your feet, push the button to visit another place inside you and have little visits everywhere. Boys and girls, it is important to be very gentle and loving everywhere you go because these places may not have had any visitors before, and we don't want them to be frightened. Before you get out of the elevator, please ask if it is OK for you to be there? See how those places make you feel and how they tell you things. What is happening in each of them? (after observing the group closely you will know when it is time to end the activity)

7) Boys and girls, now I am asking you to say goodbye to where you are visiting. Let the places know that you will come again another time. When you are ready, get back into your elevator and gently come back to the floor where you got in so that you can come back to our discussion group. Please stay very still until each and every one of us has finished. We will know that we are finished when we see our eyes open. Quietly look around the circle with me, and you will know when we can begin sharing. There is to be no sound until we are all ready and everyone has their eyes open again. The next time we do elevator rides we will put the most important button of all on your button panel. You will have to wait for that because I want this button to be a surprise for you.

8) Who wishes to tell us a little bit about what it was like to do an elevator ride? (Be sure you have allowed a lot of time for this sharing or even some opportunities to symbolize using Mandalas, journaling, painting) or colouring. This follow up work is where the real value lies.