

Dear Editor

It was interesting to read Chris Dobson's article on Brain Gym in the summer edition of *ACT Now*. I have been a keen advocate of Brain Gym and other accelerated learning techniques for some time. I have spent most of my Christian life in churches that acknowledge the reality of spiritual activity, so I would say that I am certainly not ignorant of the devices of the Enemy of Souls. However, I have never had the kind of violent reaction to Brain Gym that Chris describes in his introduction.

I get the impression from reading the article that the author's first encounter with Brain Gym was coloured by the person introducing the concept. He certainly seems to have been faced with concepts and ideas that I have never met in reading the material in *Brain Gym* (Paul Dennison and Gail Dennison, 1996, Rourke Publishing). I do not deny that Brain Gym concepts and exercises can easily be shaped to fit a 'New Age' philosophy, but I would suggest it is the practitioner who does this shaping rather than the material itself being of that ilk.

Having read the article I will be no less willing to use the kind of physical activities that Brain Gym advocates. Not because I am gullible enough to believe all the claims made for it, but because I do believe that physical activity adds an extra dimension to my teaching that enhances children's learning experiences. Scripture teaches us that whilst some physical activities (eg adultery and other sexual sin) have a direct spiritual impact, others (eg eating and drinking) have no direct spiritual impact. I would firmly place the Brain Gym activities in the latter category, especially where they are being used with children – stating that the danger (if there be any) is not in introducing pupils to exercises that may or may not improve cognitive processes, but rather where practitioners desire to indoctrinate children into any spirituality. Spirituality is not a requisite of the Brain Gym programme.

The authors of the books do not claim a spiritual provenance for their ideas. They are convinced that physical activity affects cognitive processing and that use of their exercises has helped learners to accelerate their progress. Inasmuch as we are integrated humans (ie body, mind, soul and spirit affect each other) I have no problem with the concept that physical movements can aid memory and learning. In their introductory message the Dennisons speak of 'the energy of these movements' but I understand that to be their way of describing the drawing out of learning potential. The language points to realising human

potential, not tapping into some 'magical' or 'occultish' force. I understand the underlying theory to be about the very nature of how we function as humans. As far as 'scientific proof' is concerned, the jury is out, but it would be difficult for there to be any other position since so many different factors affect different pupils' learning.

The crux of Mr Dobson's argument is that Brain Gym exercises have to be followed to the letter. This is not an accurate understanding of what the authors say. They are clear in the introduction to the book: 'No-one should ever be required to move in a way which is unnatural or uncomfortable for him. The student should work within his own limitations and be encouraged, yet never forced to do any of these activities' (*Brain Gym*, Introduction page).

Another claim he makes about the need to empty one's mind is also an addition that is not present in the programme. In the book the 'brain buttons' activity is introduced by a granddad character who describes what he imagines as he does the exercise (*Brain Gym*, page 25).

Skilful practitioners can and should be able to focus the minds of students on the purpose of doing the activity, namely, the learning task that is about to begin or is underway. Turning them into some form of collective spiritual act is to move way beyond what the book advocates. I'm sure that a fully committed practitioner of the techniques would undoubtedly call me a heretic because I willingly wander from the 'set text' to shape the activities according to what my pupils and I are comfortable with, but I believe the book gives me permission to do this.

The 'brain break' is a useful pause in the lesson for most learners and teachers, giving each the chance to regroup and refocus on the purpose of the lesson. I use the exercises (and others) as a diversion to give permission for this 'brain break'. The effect being that when faced with excessive 'off-task' behaviour the brain break can secure a quick return to 'on-task' behaviour even by resistant or struggling learners. I have no doubt that Brain Gym and other accelerated techniques which I have used have contributed to pupils' success in both my RE and Maths lessons.

I would urge all Christian teachers to use the Scriptures as their measuring rod when engaging with education programmes or philosophies. It is not always necessary to cast aside things in their entirety, however. I believe that I have used Brain Gym exercises with no compromise to my own Christian values. I believe that for some pupils it is beneficial, giving them permission to be physical

beings and reassuring them that their difficulties with sitting still and concentrating for countless hours are not altogether unusual. I am sure for others such exercises are a cringe-making embarrassment and they'd rather do anything than draw a 'lazy eight' in front of their friends. In that case they can opt out and no damage is done. So long as the teacher is confident in who they are and what they believe, and so long as the teacher is 'safe' then I see that no harm can come from these simple exercises.

Dalwyn R Attwell

'The student should work within his own limitations and be encouraged'

Dear Editor

I am concerned about the effect that the 'Brain Gym: a Christian response' article (*ACT Now*, Summer 2008) may have had on young and inexperienced teachers. They will surely worry that they are unwittingly engaging in 'spiritual abuse' of the children they teach. Furthermore, I am concerned that if – like the author of the article – *ACT Now* readers decide to boycott school activities or resign their post and move elsewhere, they will simply be denying vulnerable groups of young people the care of a committed Christian educator.

Personally, I would have been much more comfortable with Chris Dobson's article if it had challenged Brain Gym on the basis of fact and critical thinking as well as religious belief.

I spent an hour or so looking for material about Brain Gym on the Web. My research did not reveal any references to Hinduism. It did, though, yield plenty of references to the weak scientific basis of Brain Gym. According to Bad Science (www.badscience.net), Brain Gym is based on a scientific fallacy. Apparently, in order to stimulate the carotid artery in the prescribed way, pupils would need to dissect their own chests! In fact, much of what is peddled in education as Brain Based Learning is operating from a weak scientific base.

The sad fact is that in the pressurised world of education, teachers are drawn to the quick, easy, low cost fix. At this point truth is sacrificed for expediency. That is something a Christian must never do even when the truth is uncomfortable.

But, does Brain Gym improve learning? Probably. Take away the title, call it 'exercise, drink water and focus on the task', convince teachers they are

doing something special and it will work. Science has a name for this: the Hawthorne Effect – 'any observed system always changes in the direction of the required change.' When I trained as a teacher we called it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Getting pupils to eat apples before a maths lesson would, in the same circumstances, raise standards.

Those of us who have been in teaching for some time and feel secure enough to mount a challenge to things we believe to be wrong have to remember how difficult it is for those starting out. I think there is another lesson from Daniel that can be applied: DO SOMETHING BETTER. When Daniel was required to eat food that offended God he was able to show that the diet he adopted because of his beliefs produced a healthier body. Believe me, nothing focuses a headteacher's mind more than brilliant results! If you are challenging a school policy you must make sure your pupils are exceeding their targets. Your head will then have to look at what you are doing and may even wish to spread it across the school. How about starting each lesson with prayer?!

I cannot see any wisdom in a good teacher, who believes their pupils are in spiritual danger, leaving a school. How about ...

- Being such a good colleague that you are voted onto the governing body as a school governor.
- Encouraging local Christians to stand for the governing body.
- Setting up a prayer support group for the school between local churches.
- Taking on extra-curricular activities and building even better links with parents and pupils so that they see the difference in you and ask questions.
- Tracking down Christians in the Advisory and Inspection Service – they may wish to support your position.
- Talk to more experienced members of the profession: there will be few battles they have not fought.

Sadly, the article seems to be written from a position of fear and inexperience. Plenty of Christian teachers will be starting lessons each day with Brain Gym without compromising their faith. Using Brain Gym doesn't make you Hindu and it may not even change your brain, but it will wake you up and it is fun! This is the wrong battle badly fought. Christians in every profession must recognise that the way to change the organisation they serve is simply by being the best.

Mark Deacon