

Pressure, Pain, and Parenting

by Eve Bernfeld

I recall an incident some years ago when I was training to become an Alexander Technique teacher. My husband and I were walking back to our car after a glorious day on the beach when I saw a mother talking to her small child of two or three. The mother was lovely—athletic, tan—but in her bearing, she looked like a very old woman. She seemed stuck in a hunch, bending over to tend to her child—obviously, something she had been doing frequently for several years. And it had aged her. I also suspected that her bearing was causing her pain and that no amount of exercise, massage, chiropractic, or acupuncture could get to the root of it.

“She needs Alexander Technique lessons,” I said to my husband, rather smugly.

Several years later, I received the ultimate blessing and the definitive test: I became pregnant with triplets. And now, as a mother of three small children, I feel a little less smug. I have caught sight of my reflection in a shop window, holding onto two small hands, and have been shocked to observe . . . not a poised teacher of the Alexander Technique, but a hunched and harried mother. Parenthood has tested and continues to test me and everything I thought I understood of the Alexander Technique.

I understand now that yes, that mother I saw at the beach would have likely benefitted significantly from the Alexander Technique. But I also perceive the constant pressure that parents face—unfathomable before I experienced it. The Alexander Technique is not easy to practice while parenting small children. It takes tremendous determination and creativity to continue to practice the principles and procedures in order to not lose one’s head completely.

At what point does your afternoon with three sick, cranky toddlers become a farce?

Is it when you decide to make them finger paints—which you’ve meant to do for a long time—and they fight so viciously over the blue paint that you have to make two more bowls of it?

This essay represents my current thinking on the Alexander Technique and parenting. Through the last three years of working with myself and my students who are parents, I have, through trial and error, worked out the following principles: Emphasize thinking processes, Do the Work, Start with the Low-Hanging Fruit, and Process Again.

I Teach Thinking Processes

I hope as a teacher of the Alexander Technique to give my students a peaceful and grounding experience during the lesson. I hope that they float out the door experiencing a new sense of freedom and awareness of themselves and the world around them, as I did in my first lessons. I hope that they begin to incorporate *monkey* when they pick up their children, empty the dishwasher,

or open a file drawer. But I consider it even more important that I teach them active thinking processes that they can use every day. Those processes are *inhibition* and *direction*.

I ask my students to think to themselves, many times per day: “No”—or “Stop,” or “Pause,” or “I have time.”

I invent little games for them: How many times can you stop while you are brushing your teeth? What do you notice you are doing to yourself when you stop? Can you not do it?

When your children are driving you nuts, try saying to yourself: “Can I not respond to this stimulus? Can I not stiffen my neck?”

I ask them to practice these things over and over again.

Or is it when you go to get them paintbrushes, and you can’t find the paintbrushes, so you decide to text your husband: “WHERE ARE THE PAINTBRUSHES???. THEY ARE NOT IN THE ART DRAWER!!! BUT YOU CAN’T find your phone, and while you are frantically searching the house for it, the children eat half the paint and use the other half to paint the refrigerator?”

Then I add the directions or guiding orders (in the slightly expanded form taught to me by my teacher, Rebecca Robbins) and ask that they memorize them:

No.

*Let the neck be free,
To let the head go forward and up,
To let the back lengthen and widen,
To let the knees go forward and away,
To let the ankles release
The heels into the floor.*

Then I impart or invent as many ways as possible to compress these directions so that they (and I) can realistically think them many, many times throughout the day.

I teach them Missy Vineyard’s variation: “Up, Wide, and Forward.”¹

I suggest thinking merely “Up.”

We practice non-verbal directing where they imagine what they want as an arrow in themselves that is going that-a-way ↗.

I suggest they think “Lighten Up.” I also give them a tour of Dr. Rajal Cohen’s study of people living with Parkinson’s disease² and how she contrasted “lighten up” directions with “pull up” directions. She found the Alexander Technique-based directions helped the subjects achieve demonstrably better uprightness.³

I ask them to practice these things over and over again.

Or maybe it’s when you pick up your screaming daughter, her hands and face covered in paint, and you start to weep yourself, and then your sons laugh at you.



Eve Bernfeld

Do the Work

The other homework I give my students is asking them to find the time each day to do a lie-down. I do my best to impress upon them that even though it may feel unproductive, lazy, or impossible with a busy schedule, it will benefit them immensely. But I confess that, in the early days—months—with three babies, I myself let lying down slide. I sometimes did a brief lie-down before falling into bed at night, but I was operating under the very strong belief (like that of so many of my students) that I did not have time for a proper lie-down.

Not sleeping for more than three or four hours at a stretch for 20 months began to take its toll. I recall a day when I found myself especially undone. My daughter wouldn't go down for her nap, and I completely lost it. Fortunately for everyone involved, my husband was there to take over. I hid in the office to call my mother and cry. But my dad answered instead and said: "Tell me all about it. I just finished my breathing." (My father, a pretty reactive guy himself, had surprised everyone by taking up biofeedback, and religiously undertook his breathing homework every day.)

As I poured out my angst over the phone, only to be met by remarkable calm, it occurred to me: Of course he's calm. *He's doing the work.*

So I found the time for a lie-down. And it wasn't very hard. I decided that after I put the children down for a nap and before I did anything else, I would grab a book to put under my head and lie down, kicking the toys out of the way if need be. I did the same thing at bedtime. That first day I needed *four* lie-downs to get through the day.

This new routine helped tremendously, and I found, as if by magic, that I was less reactive. Now I share this story with my parent-pupils (and others, as needed), and I help them block out a time to do their lie-downs, realizing how hard it can be to change, and how strong our beliefs remain.

It is not the beautiful, lyrical interlude when you notice your children spontaneously dancing with ribbons in the dining room while you clean up paint in the kitchen.

Start with the Low-Hanging Fruit

We study the Alexander Technique, and our teachers encourage us to apply it in all of our daily activities, which is perhaps too big an assignment. If I have one stressful afternoon with my kids or one bureaucratic snafu at the college where I teach, I feel like I totally lose my cool and my *up*, and then wonder, *What's the point?*

Perhaps the moments of most pressure are not the best place to start making changes. I suggest to my students to start with the easy stuff, the low-hanging fruit. The following is an example of how it works for me:

At the end of each day, I am faced with the unappealing job of cleaning up the various toys and messes left behind from a whirlwind of activity. Over time, after having bent over to pick up what seemed like 500 toys each night, I was starting to hurt. When

I stopped for a moment and was honest with myself, I realized that I was *end-gaining* like crazy, approaching the job with a grit-my-teeth-and-get-it-done-so-I-can-relax mentality. But when I rushed through the chore, misusing myself entirely, I put myself in an even more disorganized state than before I had started. And that extra eight minutes of Netflix was not going to undo it.



Eve Bernfeld and one of her triplets

Wait, where did they get those ribbons? Ack! Out of the drawer that also has the cat's flea poison.

So dusting off my sense of curiosity, I made toy-cleanup-time something of a laboratory. What if I took the time to stop and bring myself back into order as I picked up each toy? Suddenly, each toy was a long way down *there*, and I had to stop myself multiple times to avoid compressing my joints as I squatted to collect it.

Time stretched out, and how I was using myself became more important than completing the task. When I did finally finish, I found myself feeling fantastic—tall, light, energized—not the way one expects to feel at the end of a long day!

These moments, the low-hanging fruit, are my training—for when the children wake up and the work (inhibiting my desire to end-gain and not interfering with the head-neck-trunk relationship) becomes immeasurably harder.

Maybe it's the moment when your oven starts beeping and flashing "Error 43," and the door won't open. You've got fish fillets and broccoli roasting in there at 400° F. So, you yank the door open, possibly breaking your oven.

And Process Again

I define *end-gaining* to my students as striving to meet our goals (or ends) without any consideration for the most efficient means of getting there. End-gaining is entirely product-focused, without any thought of process. It's an attachment to results that cripple us if things don't go just as we'd envisioned. Most of us end-gain all the time.

Or perhaps it's when you realize that your fish fillets are not filleted at all and you have approximately 4,059 fish bones in front of you. And you fillet the fish, and you go over it with your fingers (which you hope you've just washed) five times as you put it on your kids' plates and your own. And you serve it to three starving, cranky children and give them each a huge dollop of tartar sauce.

My end-gaining pattern during high-pressure parenting moments goes something like this: I've been attending to my use. I've been diligent with my inhibition and direction, my lie-downs, and addressing my low-hanging fruit. So now I'll be the parent I want to be, right? I'll be calm, patient, and have an amazing sense of humor and wisdom pouring out my ears. Right? . . . Right?!

Then you bite on a bone in your fish, which admittedly you didn't examine closely enough, but still . . . and you realize that you can't call 911 if someone chokes on a hidden fish bone—you still haven't found your phone—so you scoop the fish off their plates and give them deli turkey from the fridge. Also good with tartar sauce.

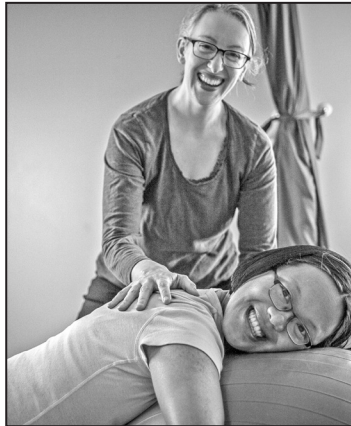
How wildly disappointing when I find it all falling apart. My son has locked me out of the house and here I am banging on the door and yelling (fortunately, my other son eventually lets me back in). And I realize two things: First, no amount of Alexander Technique will change the fact that this is a lousy afternoon. F.M. Alexander put it this way: "You can't change the course of nature by coordinating yourself."⁴ And second, I don't *have* to be calm. I don't have to be patient. I don't have to get it right. Those are the irrational demands of end-gaining. *All I need to do is to think these words:*

No.
 Let the neck be free,
 To let the head go forward and up,
 To let the back lengthen and widen,
 To let the knees go forward and away,
 To let the ankles release
 The heels into the floor.
 or
 Up, Wide, and Forward.
 or
 Lighten Up.
 or
 Up.
 or
 ↑.

—to put myself into a different state.

And then your husband walks through the door . . . with your phone, which he didn't even realize he had. He helps you finish the mishegas (craziness) that is dinner and bathe the kids. Then he has to leave for rehearsal. You put the children to bed. And you can't find your phone. . . .

Hopefully this process keeps me in good enough condition to enjoy and be deeply present on a different afternoon, when the spring sun is bright but not hot, and two of my children entertain each other by making and frosting a pretend cake, while I get to sing show tunes and build a giant block tower with the third.



"I teach them active thinking processes."

Endnotes

1. Missy Vineyard, *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 2007), 222.
2. Rajal G. Cohen, et. al, "Lighten Up: Specific Postural Instructions Affect Axial Rigidity and Step Initiation in Patients with Parkinson's Disease," *Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair* 20, no. 9 (October 2015): 878–888, doi.org/10.1177/1545968315570323
3. The "lighten up" (Alexander Technique-based) directions were as follows:
 "Notice that you are pulling yourself down and give yourself permission to stop doing it; let your head balance easily at the top of your spine; allow your spine to be uncompressed and your torso to open effortlessly; let your shoulders and chest be open and light." The "pull up" directions were: "Use your core muscles to pull yourself up to your fullest height; engage the muscles in your abdomen and lower back; feel your neck and trunk muscles working to pull you up; pull your stomach in, your head and chest up, and your shoulders back."
4. F. Matthias Alexander, "Teaching Aphorisms" in *Articles and Lectures* (London: Mouritz, 2011), 187.

Eve Bernfeld (Oregon Center for the Alexander Technique [OCAT], 2011) lives in Portland, Oregon, and teaches privately, at Lewis & Clark College, at Mittleman Jewish Community Center, and through regional talks and workshops. She holds a master's degree in theatre education and has taught drama for many years. Eve studied Eutokia (Alexander Technique for pregnancy and birth) with Ilana Machover. An earlier version of this essay won second prize in the 2017 Mouritz Award for Writing on the Alexander Technique.

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 Photograph of Eve and a triplet on page 30 by Serra Hadsell.
 Photograph of Eve with her pregnant student on page 31 by Andrea Leoncavallo.*