

The Power of Movement

Katy Held's quest to help her son inspired her to teach body and brain integration programs that reduce stress while enhancing brain function.



Photo by Dwight Cendrowski

By Karen Foulke Larson
Photography by Dwight Cendrowski and Doug Russell

Katy Held loves life. Katy and her husband Woody have a gregarious 14-year-old son, Oscar, and Katy works as a consultant, teaching people of all ages about the benefits of movement. She is devoted to her family and passionate about learning and teaching.

Katy is a Licensed Brain Gym Instructor/Consultant and a Sanctioned Bal-A-Vis-X Instructor/Consultant. Her business is called Learning from the Heart, which seems appropriate for a mom who has spent the last fourteen years finding information to benefit her son Oscar, and, in the process, has helped children, parents, teachers, and health care professionals.

Inspiration

Oscar was born in 1997, and, although the Helds actively sought answers and help for their baby boy, it took eight months of doctor appointments and tests before it was confirmed that Oscar had experienced a significant stroke as a newborn that affected his right side.

Katy says the news of the stroke was “pretty devastating” but it “started me on my quest” for helping Oscar. Online support groups provided valuable information. Katy first learned about Brain Gym from a posting by another mother.

Brain Gym is a system of movements that reduce stress naturally and quickly enhance brain function. It is suitable for all ages. The program has existed for more than 30 years and it's estimated to be used by well over 10,000 schools in 88 countries around the world.

In 2001, Katy signed up for her first Brain Gym class. It was a four-day Brain Gym 101 for Special Education in Farmington Hills. She says that class was “one of the most life changing experiences I ever had.”

The class was taught by Cecilia Koester, who has become both a friend and mentor to Katy. Ten years later, Katy can still describe in great detail the immediate benefits of Brain Gym for the kids who participated in the class. One boy, who initially had trouble even holding his pencil, wrote clearly after his Brain Gym exercises, and then proudly showed his work to the group. Katy says, “I still get goose bumps every time I tell that story.”

Katy’s response to the Brain Gym class was, “That’s what I’m meant to do!” That feeling was reinforced when she saw how these exercises benefitted Oscar.

During that class, Cecilia also provided Katy’s introduction to Bal-A-Vis-X (BAVX), a brain integration program that integrates the senses of **BAL**ance, **AUD**itory and **VIS**ion using rhythmic eXercises done with beanbags or racquetballs. Katy laughs as she recalls being “so bad” at her first attempts at BAVX. She says she was over-focused and bouncing the balls at her partners’ feet.

Three years later, in 2004, Bill Hubert, the man who developed BAVX, taught a workshop in Westland, Michigan. Since many of the exercises require two hands, Katy wasn’t sure how well they would work for Oscar, whose right hand still wasn’t very functional. After reading Bill’s book, she decided to sign up for the class and asked Bill if he would be willing to work one-on-one with Oscar.

Oscar was a happy seven year old, but he did have some physical issues, attention issues, and difficulty holding his head still and tracking with his eyes. After ten to fifteen minutes of bouncing balls and Oscar rocking on a balance board, there was a dramatic difference in Oscar’s ability to track with his eyes!

The Teacher

It only takes a few minutes of talking to Katy to understand why she teaches. She is passionate about what she does and she loves helping people.

“As the parent of a child with physical and learning challenges, I know the stress that other parents feel, and how that transfers to their children.”

– Katy Held



Photo by Dwight Cendrowski

Using a combination of approaches including BAVX, Brain Gym, and Rhythm Movement Therapy, Katy has helped improve their attention, motor planning, and visual tracking. Sue says, “As a parent, I can’t ask for anything more.”

Sue adds that last summer Lauren and Ella did BAVX before their tennis lessons and their grandma, Eleanor Bresky, was amazed at the improvement in their rhythm, hand-eye coordination, and fluidity in their overall movements. Eleanor now uses some of the same exercises before she goes golfing.

Sue works as an Occupational Therapist in a K-8 school and in an outpatient office treating adults with acquired mild traumatic brain injuries. She has seen BAVX help both groups. Sue says, “The students show improved focus and better behavior... and my patients with brain injuries also benefit from improved attention and awareness of timing.” Sue adds, “Both groups also demonstrate improved ocular motor skills for tracking/reading, etc. Better yet – both kids and adults enjoy BAVX.”

Pat Hansel teaches in a cross-categorical classroom in Canton that includes students with emotional impairments and cognitive impairments. She uses BAVX with her

students daily. Pat says, “Katy is my hero because she has changed the way I evaluate my students’ needs and then the way I approach teaching. She has shown me how important movement is in a child’s ability to learn, especially the struggling learner. I have seen wonderful results now that I look at children’s foundational skills first — their auditory, visual, motor, and sensory skills. Katy has shown me techniques to use to improve those foundational skills so that I can see improvement in their formal learning: reading, writing, and math.”

Pat describes Katy as “selfless” because of her positive, caring teaching style. She says Katy is a “great teacher” because of “Katy’s knowledge of the brain and the body and the importance of them to be fully integrated and her passion to share it in understandable terms.” Katy has taught these programs at Detroit Country Day, Oakland County ISD, Children’s Hospital, University of Michigan Hospital, as well as in the Chelsea, Dexter, Whitmore Lake, Ann Arbor, Brighton, Livonia, Novi, Farmington Hills, Rochester and Northville school districts. Her sessions usually include occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, teachers, and parents.

Karen Koets, a first grade teacher in Gull Lake, Michigan, heard about BAVX and Katy Held from a colleague. When she saw that Katy was teaching BAVX as part of an early childhood seminar in the fall of 2010, she signed up just to take Katy’s session. She says the training was interesting and informative and adds, “Katy has a way of bringing what you need to make it easy to take back to our classrooms.”

Koets includes Bal-A-Vis-X as part of a “Read and Ride” summer camp, which includes children reading to therapy dogs and therapeutic horseback riding. She says, after only one week of camp, there is a dramatic increase in their reading scores, which she attributes to BAVX.

Life in Balance

Katy finds that helping parents also benefits their kids. She knows that when parents are doing BAVX and Brain Gym and reducing their stress, their kids benefit. After a child has taken a few sessions, she offers a free session to either parent.

Katy says, “I don’t charge much. I’d rather be accessible.” She speaks from the experience of a mom who tried so many types of therapy (some at great cost) to help Oscar. Even her website includes a list of mainstream and alternative therapies that she is “glad to share any information about to interested parents.”

As a student in one of Katy Held’s classes, it is hard to picture the stressed, over-focused mom that Katy describes herself to have been back when Oscar was little. She has positive energy, a friendly manner, and a sense of humor that puts everyone at ease. Koets says Katy’s sessions are “relaxed and comfortable.”



Photo by Dwight Cendrowski

Katy has logged over 1,300 hours of coursework. She says, “The more I learn, the more I want to learn. I never get bored.”

Melissa Gallagher’s son Carson does Rhythmic Movement Therapy with Katy. Melissa says, “Katy is wonderful! She explains things very clearly and has always been very friendly, patient, and easily approachable.”

Sue Bresky describes Katy as “really incredible” and says her daughters, Lauren and Ella, love Katy and ask to do BAVX.

Katy attributes the delay in finding out that Oscar had a stroke to the fact that, “So many doctors don’t know that kids can have strokes.” According to the Children’s Hemiplegia and Stroke Association, strokes occur in infants who are younger than 1 month old in approximately 1 in 4,000 live births. For children 1 to 18 years old, strokes occur in 11 out of 100,000 children.

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It is easy to see how much she loves what she does. Katy says, "I feel grateful. I can't imagine anything I can do [that would be] more fulfilling. It is complete satisfaction and joy to see kids say, 'I can do this now,' and parents say, 'look what they can do.'"

After years of learning BAVX and Brain Gym, Oscar assists his mom with Bal-A-Vis-X trainings. He is very proud of being "whole-brained" and like his mom constantly has a smile on his face and a friendly, helpful attitude.

Katy Held's journey to help others began with her own son Oscar, but what she has learned has now benefitted so many other people. She says, "My intention for working with children and adults is to create a safe place for them, where they come to feel honored just as they are. Through our movement sessions, be it Brain Gym, Bal-A-Vis-X, reflex integration movements, or some combination of these, we create a space for higher functioning to occur naturally. As the parent of a child with physical and learning challenges, I know the stress that other parents feel, and how that transfers to their children. I come to this practice from my heart, to help children and their parents lower their stress levels, grow closer and be the best they can be."

Find out more about Bal-A-Vis-X®, Brain Gym®, and other services provided by Katy Held at the Learning from the Heart website: www.learningheart.com.

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**– Canton Teacher
Pat Hensel**



Photo by Doug Russell

"One boy, who initially had trouble even holding his pencil, wrote clearly after his Brain Gym exercises, and then proudly showed his work to the group."

– Katy Held describing the first Brain Gym class she attended



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"Through our movement sessions, be it Brain Gym, Bal-A-Vis-X, reflex integration movements, or some combination of these, we create a space for higher functioning to occur naturally."

– Katy Held

Katy Held's Tips to Maximize Brain Function

By Katy Held

- 1. Hydrate.** Our brain is 75-85% water. Water is an element of our body. One of the best things you can do for your brain is to sip water constantly throughout the day. Encourage your children to sip water often. Get them their own "brain juice" bottle. Drink extra water when you are under stress. For every cup of coffee, which is a diuretic, drink an extra glass of water. For every glass of alcohol, drink two extra glasses of water.
- 2. Limit flat screen time.** Flat screens include TV, computers, Gameboys or Nintendo DS, cell phones, and so on. Flat screens are two-dimensional, but our eyes are made for looking at three-dimensional objects. Too much flat screen time weakens eye muscles and tracking issues can result. For every 30 minutes of flat screen time, balance it with playing outside whenever possible or just take a flat screen break. Look away from the computer screen every 10-15 minutes to give your eyes a chance to refocus in 3D.
- 3. Do some cross-lateral movement every day.** Walking is great for the brain, especially when your arms swing. Moving your left arm activates your brain's right hemisphere and moving your right leg activates your brain's left hemisphere. So, when you swing your arms as you walk, you activate both hemispheres simultaneously, which makes it easier to think. If you walk and don't swing your arms, you are only activating one hemisphere at a time.
- 4. Practice Cross Crawls.** If you're a parent of a child at least 5-years-old, see if they can do this movement pattern easily: Touch one hand to their opposite knee, then touch their other hand to the opposite knee. The child can start out seated, but ideally they should be able to do this standing. If they have trouble reaching across to their opposite knee, or naturally touch the knee on the same side, you can put a sticker on the R hand and L knee (or vice versa) and have them match the stickers. When your child can effortlessly cross the midline — which in Brain Gym is called the Cross Crawl — for about a minute every day, life will be easier, as they will now be able to access both hemispheres at the same time. Just before it's time to do homework, put on some fun music and do some Cross Crawls for at least a minute. Homework should be easier afterwards.
- 5. Get up, stand up.** Nature designed us to be moving, not sitting still at desks or on couches. After we sit for 15 minutes, the blood starts pooling in our legs and our brains get sluggish. So a good rule of thumb is to get up and move every 15 minutes, even if it's only to do a big stretch. It will keep our brains more active if we move our bodies.
- 6. Exercise your eye muscles.** Eye tracking is critical for reading. If your child struggles with reading, check their eye tracking. Simple things like playing catch or bouncing a ball back and forth are excellent for exercising eye muscles, which will help with eye tracking. If a child can't track an object through space easily, reading will likely be a challenge. It may also be difficult to pay attention in school if eye tracking is poor. To quote Bill Hubert: "Where the eyes go, attention follows."



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