The Movement Alphabet A-Z
Movement can’t come together without all the letters.

[I wrote this article 2 years ago; today we are gearing up for second grade and are getting much more adept at reading and spelling— you’ll understand after you read this.]

I have a five year old who is in kindergarten. Like many kindergarten parents, we are in the middle learning to read and write the ‘correct’ way. Last night we found as many things in our house that started with an “F” as we could find, and he practiced writing “f” and “F” ten times each. The night before, was “E”. Tonight - you got it - “G”. We are learning the entire sequence of the alphabet, learning how to write the capital letters, lower case letters, and the sound that each letter makes. A thru Z. All with equal importance. My son’s favorite letter happens to be the “K”. Why? Because his first name starts with a “K”. This means, no matter where we are, what we are doing, or what we are supposed to be working on, if he sees or hears a “K” that gets his attention.

He’s also beginning to work on reading skill by learning sight words which are short, simple, common words that the kids should be able to recognize, like: at, be, and, I, or the. Guess which site words he picks up the quickest? So far, all the ones with a “k” in them (each week they get a list of 5 to practice). He loves trying to spell things: “Dad, what does ‘K’ O’ K’ A’ spell?” He has figured out how spelling should take place, but doesn’t understand the rules behind it so that when I tell him KOKA doesn’t really spell a real word he has trouble understanding why. Last night the question was “What does “K” “K” “K” spell?” Uh-Oh. I asked him why he just wanted to use the letter “K” to spell words. His response was simple but very resounding— “K is my favorite letter, its in my name.”
All of the letters in the alphabet, A-Z, lead to 1,025,109.8 words that can be used to create sentences, then paragraphs, then books, novels, poems, screen plays, and amazing works of literature. The possibilities are almost endless because in each of those examples, the entire alphabet is used to create a finished product. The only way to accomplish all of this is by having the ability to use all of the alphabet. Since my son likes the letter “k”, what would happen if we stopped working on the rest of the alphabet but started to learn how to make several different variations of the “k”? B.Hetzler
He learns a lot of variety, but have I given him a useful tool in his ability to spell or write words? No, he can just make a lot of different “k’s” that don’t add up to anything. Let’s say he can use every letter up to “K”, since he has learned those but then since he loves the letter “K” we stop progressing. How many words can be spelled with just the letters A-K? Well, Google couldn’t answer that question but we can assume it will be only a fraction of the 1 million words we have access to with the entire alphabet. Why as a father would I limit his future abilities to read and write? I have only set him up for struggle, disappointment, and failure. He could never experience the joy of reading the literary masterpiece, “The Pokey Little Puppy” - all he would understand was “_he _ _ke_ _i_ _ e _ _ _ _” . But, he totally read that “K” in there.

What does this have to do with anything other than learning to read and write? Well, developing the skills of reading and writing are a lot like developing the skills of movement. The alphabet is a sequence, and movement is a continuum (“a coherent whole characterized as a collection, sequence, or progression of values or elements varying by minute degrees”). Remove one letter from the alphabet, and what you can spell with the remaining letters is limited; remove one component of the movement continuum, and how someone moves will be limited. The building blocks of the alphabet are letters. The building blocks of movement is the Neurodevelopmental Continuum:

Every daily movement, functional movement, and athletic movement are built off of this foundation. Let’s look at gait, putting one foot in front of the other to get from ‘point A’ to ‘point B’. How many gait training drills are there our there to fix gait? Here is my question, are those just fancy ways of writing the letter “K”? What is gait? Some people will say gait is reeeeeeaaaallly complex and we need to do a full biomechanics evaluation
to find the problem. I’m not discounting that, but before we go complicated, let’s look at it from a simplified viewpoint. Gait occurs in the standing posture and is specifically single leg stance, asymmetrical stance, and single leg stance on the other side. When you break it down it is pretty simple - gait involves the patterns of breathing, head movement, pushing down, weight shifting, perturbations (reaching), and disassociating the pelvis from the shoulders - essentially, it is the final summation of the entire NDC. Before we try to read the whole story of gait, why don’t we make sure we wrote all the letters correctly first? Then let’s make sure the letters are in the correct order? Can the person breathe across the postures? Do they have full cervical ROM, and full control of the head (no threat to the brain) across all postures? Can they maintain a stable and safe trunk (no threat to the spinal chord) across all postures? Can they disassociate the pelvis from the shoulders in all postures? (I used to call this rolling, but have expanded my viewpoint. When I say “roll” I will bet the mental picture you form is of someone laying down to roll - that’s not the crux of what we are trying to achieve. The goal of rolling is pelvic/shoulder stability while disassociating; this MUST occur in all postures - crawling is rolling that is occurring in quadruped, walking is vertical rolling. Think disassociation, not rolling). Can they press down to initiate stability with their upper extremities? Can they press down with their lower extremities to initiate stability (pelvic floor)? If the answer to any of those is ‘no’, then we don’t have a biomechanics problem we have a fundamental movement problem in the NDC - they have left out some important letters.

Why is this important? People love exercises. If exercises fixed everything, low back pain would be history, the poor little glute meds would fire all the time, knees would never hit when girls jumped (or landed), and the rotary cup would keep the shoulder stable all the time. Unfortunately, we deal with those issues everyday which means either the exercises to fix them suck or our approach needs to be re-targeted. Right now, if you believe everything you read on the internet between crawling and the turkish get up we should be able to solve all the worlds movement problems. Here are 2 exercises that have taken 2 different paths since they became popular. Once you can do a turkish get up, do it better and do it heavier. Once you learn to crawl, learn 5 other variations to crawl and crawl more. One approach honors the NDC, one doesn’t. Variety has its perks, but doesn’t mean you are progressing. There are 102 different ways to make a “K”, but you still can’t spell a word with “K” alone. If we are talking about the get up, all of the typical “tweaks” to make the get up better involve the fundamental patterns from the NDS. The first workshop I went to that had a focus of the TGU was taught by Jeff O’Conner and was way back in 2009. The “amazing” variations he taught that made the get up better and more effective:

- Slow controlled breaths at each stage of the TGU [breath]
- head movement (nods, turns, rotations, side bend) at each stage of the get up [head control].
- Small Arm circles at each stage of the get up [perturbations].
- Small Leg circles at each stage of the TGU - as able to based on position [more perturbations].
• Thoracic waves at each stage of the TGU [disassociation and weight shifting].

The cold hard truth - Jeff didn’t ‘create’ amazing variations to the TGU, he just tapped into the basic NDC patterns for his brilliance (whether he realized it or not at the time). Crawling is an example of an exercise that has taken a different route. If you Google “youtube crawling variations” the first hit is ‘38 crawl and walk variations’, the second is ‘crawling exercises-21 different crawling variations’. Just stopping there we have potentially 59 varieties of crawling. Different ≠ Better.

The beauty of the TGU is that it is one exercise that progresses through the entire NDC process of going from the ground to standing. It IS the entire alphabet in one drill. There are very few - actually none that come to mind while writing this - that can make the same claim. If, IFF, someone wanted to make an argument that doing a perfectly executed burpee took advantage of several of the NDC postures and patterns, I would discuss that with them, however, I can count on one hand the number of ‘acceptable’ burpee’s I’ve seen performed.

Anytime anyone proclaims that one exercise or focussing on one exercise are doing the opposite, and are just adding variety. Yes, rolling is awesome. Yes, crawling is awesome. Yes, half kneeling is awesome. One arm kettlebell swings are awesome. Yes, running can be awesome. But they only live up to their full level of awesomeness if and only if they are integrated into a full progression/sequence. If you don’t include them in a full progression, you are left just writing and re-writing the letter “K”. (If you go back and read those exercises, in that sequence, you are much closer to having a full alphabet than if you just swing kettlebells or just crawl.)
The above pictures are all the same expression of hip and shoulder disassociation (or, rolling), just expressed within the context of the posture and movement that the disassociation occur in. If we don't progress movement across the entire sequence of the NDS, we aren’t progressing movement. If we don’t have a full sequence of movement, all we are left with is a variety of “K’s” that people get really good at.