

## *iPosture: A Closer Look at the Lifestyle Practices of Schoolchildren*

by Tami Bulmash

In Western cultures, children and adults spend at least 55% of their waking hours (7.7 hours a day) in sedentary behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Children between the ages of 5 and 16 are likely to spend about 15,000 hours sitting down,<sup>2</sup> and children between the ages of 6 and 11 spend an average of 26 hours a week watching TV, which is as much time as they attend school.<sup>3</sup>

This is a great cause for concern, as this sedentary lifestyle has contributed to major health problems in children—aside from obesity—such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension, and coronary disease.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, finger and wrist pain (caused by too much texting on phones) can lead to soreness and cramping in the fingers and is known unofficially as “text claw.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, neck or back soreness and vision and hearing impairment are all on the rise.<sup>6</sup> To make matters worse, even bedtime has been hindered by Western technology-saturated lifestyles. A 2010 Pew study found that more than four in five teens with cell phones sleep with the phone on or near the bed,<sup>7</sup> and according to researchers from JFK Medical Center, teens send an average of 34 texts a night after going to bed. The latter study found that half of the youth kept awake by electronic media suffered from a host of mood and cognitive problems, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression, and learning difficulties.<sup>8</sup>

Techno-savvy lifestyles—which are primarily sedentary and endemic to Western societies—have seriously aggravated our musculoskeletal systems. In a recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom, some 84% of young adults said that during the past year they’ve suffered back pain, which is believed to be caused by poor posture from using mobile devices. This phenomenon has been dubbed “iPosture.”<sup>9</sup>

How does iPosture develop? The average human head weighs 10 pounds in a neutral position when your ears are over your shoulders. For every inch you tilt your head forward, the pressure on your spine doubles. So if you are moving your head to look at a smartphone in your lap, your neck is holding up what feels like 20 or 30 pounds.<sup>10</sup> Continued misuse results in pulled-down postures, even when not using a device.

In contrast, in less technologically centered lifestyle practices, such as those found in cultures from developing regions, the physical labor required to complete daily tasks demands much more movement and an upright posture, without the triggers that disorient the body. In urban and rural Africa, wherever transport services are deficient or unaffordable for households, people “head-load”<sup>11</sup>—walk for a substantial time while carrying heavy vases on their heads.

It has been suggested that load-carrying may have beneficial impacts on bone quality/density (though this will also be dependent on mineral uptake and bone turnover). Recent research on a small cohort of women in South Africa suggests that head-loading “may offer osteogenic benefits to the spine.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the native African’s capacity for engaging in demanding physical activity while remaining upright greatly surpasses that of those in Western cultures.<sup>13</sup>

It seems logical that one might search for solutions for improving postural health in the medical literature, as the notion of “bad posture” often evokes images of back problems and pain. Thus, the medical field is preoccupied with literature on spine surgery and back-related injury, since back pain is one of the most frequent reasons for visits to the physician and causes for surgical procedures.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, there is a lack of socio-cultural studies that address the social and cross-cultural influences of postural health. Therefore, I spent several years devising a socio-anthropological study that would examine and assess postural health among our youth, as they hold the key to the future.



Tami Bulmash

### **Premise for Research**

My study explores the detriments of poor posture—or poor musculoskeletal health—through the various lifestyle practices exhibited by two distinct populations of Jewish Israeli schoolchildren: the working class and upper-middle class. The principles of the Alexander Technique were the foundation

for this research and provided the guidelines used in this study for observing and assessing posture.

I described *good use* of the body as the desired posture through these guidelines. The Alexander Technique explains this as having a free neck (one that is not constrained or stiff), a head that moves forward and up (as opposed to falling back and down, thus shrinking the spine), and having a lengthened and widened back with natural curves (as opposed to one that is overly arched or rounded). A visual way to begin to understand desired posture is by imagining the head sitting on top of the body like a helium balloon, pulling the spine up as it would the string.

I conducted the research in Israel several years after I had become a certified Alexander Technique teacher. Additionally, I had already worked as an educator in the United States, England, and Israel for well over a decade and was familiar with the many idiosyncrasies of teaching school-aged children.

Because of my time spent working in the educational field, I was drawn to examining the relationship of children’s postures with lifestyle practices of exercise, technology usage, and diet, having seen the influences firsthand. Furthermore, there is a strong sociological and anthropological component to my research because this study explored the role of lifestyle practices among different populations.

### **Socio-Anthropological Structure**

This research relied heavily on the work of French philosopher and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). Bourdieu introduced the concept of *cultural capital*. The term represents social assets of a person that promote social mobility in a stratified society.<sup>15</sup> By introducing the term, Bourdieu underscored structur-

al inequality. An example of cultural capital would be education. Bourdieu believed that the cultural experiences in the home facilitated children's adjustment to school and academic achievement, thereby transforming cultural resources into cultural capital.<sup>16</sup>

Another one of Bourdieu's well-known terms is his concept of *habitus* as the embodiment of cultural representations in human habits and routines.<sup>17</sup> Schooling, in particular, acts to provide a general disposition, a turn towards what Bourdieu terms "a cultured habitus."<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu believed that our habits made us who we are and used his concept of habitus to explain social structures and inequality.

Prior to Bourdieu's discoveries, and perhaps not coincidentally, F.M. Alexander introduced his notion of *habits* as a means to explain misuse of the body. As Alexander explained it, "You translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension."<sup>19</sup> Alexander's belief was that undesired subconscious and conscious habits could be recognized, inhibited, and then directed to make better choices, thus re-educating the body and "detaching" the habits from the body's natural or desired state.

Taking both Bourdieu and Alexander's concepts into account, I have introduced the term *postural habitus* to mean the body's physical manifestation of the habits that we acquire through life. In other words, our habits shape and mold the way we hold our bodies.

I apply the principle of cultural capital as Bourdieu did, but use it to introduce a new concept termed *cultural postural capital*. While postural habitus is the *physical manifestation* resulting from habits, cultural postural capital is the *degree* to which it interferes with our use. To further clarify, having less cultural postural capital promotes (i.e., contributes to better use of the body), while having more cultural postural capital demotes (i.e., causes physical mobility to decline).

How does one acquire this cultural postural capital? Through various lifestyle practices, such as exercise levels, technology usage, and eating habits. Overindulging in any one of these practices—even exercise—can have a detrimental effect on posture. For example, a person who is overweight, wears a knee brace from having run excessively over the years, and walks hunched over after spending hours in front of a screen daily has more cultural postural capital than someone who is of average weight, has no injury from exercise, and walks upright, exhibiting fluidity and balance. Having more cultural postural capital, which is acquired through excessive exposure to stimuli and then the body's reactions to them, works inversely with good postural health. The less cultural postural capital one accumulates through life, the more mobile one can remain, and the freer the body is from stress and tension.

My hypothesis was—and the research illustrates—that having more cultural postural capital is inversely related to good posture. Moreover, the results of the study suggest that children from higher socio-economic status, such as those from the upper-middle class group, have more access to technology and will therefore have more cultural postural capital than those from lower socio-economic status groups, like the working-class group.

## The Study:

### A Comparison of Lifestyle Practices and Children's Posture

This study, approved by the Ministry of Education in Israel, compared the lifestyle practices between working-class and upper-middle class Jewish Israeli schoolchildren. The three lifestyle practices examined in this research of these two distinct populations in Israel were (a) exercise; (b) usage of electronic devices such as TV, computer, phone, and tablet; and (c) diet. This study introduced to the participants the guidelines for what is considered good posture based on the principles of the Alexander Technique, and these criteria were used to interpret children's postures and explain them by investigating the lifestyle practices that are most prominent among working-class and affluent populations.

### Participants

The participants were comprised of two groups of children between the ages of 10 and 11.5 years (fifth through sixth grade). The first group represented a working-class group and consisted of nine students from a classroom in one public school. The school was visibly run-down and in a low-income area in a city located in the center of Israel. The predominant ethnicities of the students in the class were Ethiopian and Russian.

The second group of children represented an upper-middle class group and consisted of seven students that were former private students of mine to whom I had taught English lessons in the past. They all lived within five kilometers (three miles) of each other in an affluent neighborhood in a city also located in the center of Israel. Six of the seven participants were of full Ashkenazi (eastern European Jewish) descent, mostly Polish; one was of mixed ethnicity (Iraqi/Czech).

Both groups of students were asked to bring parental consent forms to participate in the study, complete questionnaires, participate in interviews, and engage in postural exercise while being photographed. The working-class participants were studied at their school and the upper-middle class participants at their homes.

### Research Design

Over a two-month period, I visited and observed at the school of the working-class group 12 times. Each visit lasted approximately two hours. Sometimes I was in the students' classroom during various lessons. Other times I observed their physical education lessons at the gymnasium. I also watched the children at different activities throughout the campus, such as during recess, in the office, in the hallway, or while a performance was being held in the gymnasium. One time I observed during school dismissal, just outside of the school property as children were interacting with each other and their parents before going home.

The observations at the homes of the children from the upper-middle class group varied from student to student. Some visits lasted for 30 minutes while others lasted 2 hours. The three female participants were close friends and wanted to be researched together. This provided a wide spectrum of data in addition to



Upper-Middle Class Girls

the other components of the study, as I was able to observe them interact as they ate together, socialized, played with electronic devices, and sat on chairs, couches, and the floor.

### Data Collection Methods

- **Observation:** During each of my visits to the school and the students' homes, I wrote down everything that I observed that pertained to my study, from the design of the furniture to my observation of the children's behaviors.
- **Questionnaire:** The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions that were designed to gather information relating to activity levels at home as well as to the form of transportation used to get to school. Additionally, children were asked about the different types of electronic devices (TV, computer, phone, and tablet) that were accessible to them, the length of time spent on each, and the amount of time spent in physical and sedentary activities.
- **Interviews:** The interviews were conducted to discuss more thoroughly the responses to the questionnaires and included additional discussion about other lifestyle practices such as the children's eating habits.
- **Postural Exercise:** The postural exercise in the study was the squat as derived from my own training and teaching experience of the Alexander Technique. The participants were asked to go from a standing position to a full squat on the floor. The guidelines I used for postural assessments were formulated from the principles of the Alexander Technique.
- **Photographs:** The photographs of the children were taken during the postural exercise, and, along with my notes from the field, were compared with models of good posture as explained by the principles of the Alexander Technique.

### Findings

**Exercise:** The working-class group was overall more physically active than the upper-middle class group, spending an average of three hours more per week doing physical activities. The working-class group also spent more time in activities with easy access such as walking, running, and basketball. While the upper-middle class group also engaged in some activities with easy access, they spent a significant amount of time in activities that depended on instruction such as gymnastics and karate or equipment at a gym. Both groups spent about the same amount of time engaging in sedentary activities—sitting in a chair at school at

least 26.5 hours per week plus an additional 40 hours per week at home. At the public school during recess for the working-class group, I saw all of the children on the playground playing at all times. They could be seen running around, playing hopscotch or circle games. In contrast, the upper-middle class group described sitting and talking with their friends during recess at their schools in addition to engaging in some active play.

**Devices:** The working-class group spent 4 hours less in front of the TV and 3.5 hours less in front of the computer than the upper-middle class group. However, the working-class group spent an average of six hours more a week using the phone. Both groups watched TV more hours than they used any other device.

The study's findings also indicated more access to and usage of electronic devices by the upper-middle class group, whose members owned every electronic device measured in the study—namely TV, computer, phone, and tablet. In contrast, there was limited access to and usage of electronic devices by the working-class group, where nearly half of the group didn't have access to three out of the four devices.

Both groups illustrated further incongruity in their access to technology at the schools. The upper-middle class group described having frequent access to iPads and computers provided by the school. Their computer lab hours alternated between five hours one week and three hours the following week and continued in this manner throughout the school year. This was in complete contrast to the working-class group, whose access to the computer lab was few and far between and based on the availability of the lab.

I never saw a single child using a phone during school hours throughout my visits at the public school. The students had their phones collected by the classroom teacher at the beginning of the day and returned at the end of the day. The upper-middle class group spoke of other students in their class who used their phones during lessons.

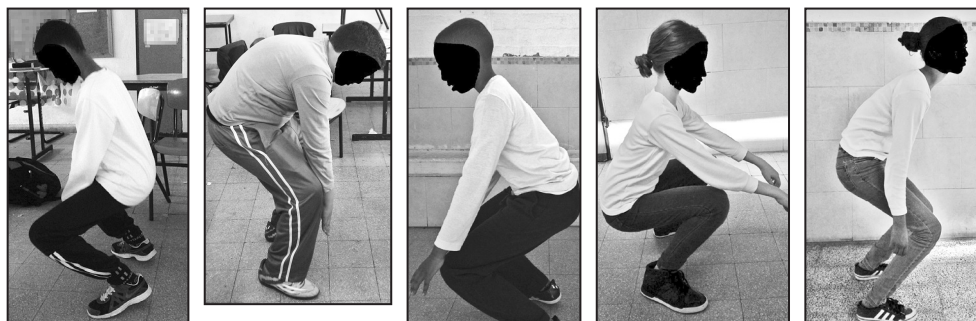
**Exercise-to-Device Relationship:** The working-class group had an overall lower ratio of sedentary activity to physical activity time with 2.96:1 hours per week while the upper-middle class group had a ratio of 4.54:1 hours per week.

**Diet:** Most of the participants from the upper-middle class group indicated that the majority of their outside dining was at (luxury) fast-food restaurants, with only one participant stating that she never ate fast food. In contrast, the working-class group had a low fast-food intake with five out of the eight participants stating that they never ate fast food and only one stating that he ate fast food more than once a week. All of the working-class



*Upper-Middle Class Group from left to right: P11, P11, P12, P14  
No participants in the upper-middle class group exhibited excellent posture.*





*Working Class Group from left to right: C2, C3, C4, C6, C9*

*Participants C2, C4, and C6 exemplified excellent posture, while C3 and C9 had markers for poor posture.*

participants described eating home-cooked meals.

**Posture:** Most notably, there were three participants from the working-class group, C2, C4, and C6, who exemplified excellent posture. They also exhibited low cultural postural capital, high physical activity levels, low ratios of sedentary behaviors to physical activity, and little to no fast-food intake.

In contrast, two participants from that same group, C3 and C9, stood out for the opposite reason. They exemplified markers for poor posture with high cultural postural capital, low physical activity levels, and moderate to high fast-food intake. Additionally, their high phone usage and consequent high cultural postural capital suggest a strong relationship between excessive technology usage and poor posture, as was evident in the fact that both of them exhibited markers for iPosture.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, there were no participants in the upper-middle class group who illustrated excellent posture. Three participants from that group depicted average posture, exhibiting some undesired use and increased cultural postural capital. Three participants from that same group had poor posture and exhibited undesired use and high cultural postural capital. Only one participant from the upper-middle class group had moderately good posture and exhibited good use and moderate cultural postural capital. Thus the vast majority of upper-middle class group students exhibited undesired use and, hence, average to poor posture.

### Discussion

Not surprisingly, the findings in the study indicated that the working-class group depicted traits of lifestyle practices that were more indicative of rural than urban lifestyles: On average they walked more every day and played outside more. Moreover, while both groups spent about the same amount of time engaging in sedentary activities, the working-class group spent much less time in front of the TV and computer than the upper-middle class group. Yet surprisingly, the working-class group's overall phone usage far exceeded that of the upper-middle class group. However, despite the high level of phone usage, the working-class group still maintained a much lower ratio of sedentary activity time to physical activity time than the upper-middle class group.

Why were certain devices used longer by each group—more computer time for the upper-middle class group and more phone time for the working-class group? One explanation is that each participant in the upper-middle class group had every device list-

ed in the study, but although all eight of the working-class group who answered questions about devices had a phone, four of the eight didn't have one or more of the other three devices (computer, TV, or tablet). This discrepancy correlates to the average and poor posture of the majority of the upper-middle class group and the excellent or moderately good posture of the majority of the working-class group and clearly underscores Bourdieu's cultural approach to structural inequality.<sup>21</sup>

Could it be that phones were used among the working-class group as an impetus to gain cultural capital? Or is it indicative of the emergence of Western lifestyle practices that are infiltrating otherwise seemingly isolated populations?<sup>22</sup> These questions are worth exploring further, and a follow-up study with a larger sample pool could provide more insight as to how the widespread use of phones would negatively impact the health and posture of future generations.

Interestingly, most of the average and poor postures came from the upper-middle class group. This group had many opportunities to engage in behaviors leading to desired posture, with

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**"The overindulgence in sedentary behaviors . . . depicts the strong influence that extended use of technology has on posture."**

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lots of extracurricular activities and access to healthy foods. Why were they not illustrating excellent posture? Perhaps their higher class (characterized by their affluence) enabled them to eat out more frequently than the working-class group. The

foods found in fast-food restaurants are famously less healthy than home-cooked meals. Furthermore, some of the exercises performed by the upper-middle class group, such as acrobatics and gymnastics, can be detrimental to posture by often forcing bodies to shrink or tighten throughout training and performance. These bodily constraints not only restrict movement but can also lead to reduction in growth.<sup>23</sup>

The differences in socio-economic statuses between both groups also suggest that other lifestyle practices, such as level of access to different activities, could also influence the amount and quality of their physical activities. It is significant that some of the upper-middle class group's physical activity levels were contingent upon scheduling and instructor availability, as opposed to those in the working-class group, who were able to perform their physical activities at their own discretion. Perhaps this difference accounts for the working-class group spending an average of three hours more per week engaging in physical activities than the upper-middle class group.

Clearly, the overindulgence in sedentary behaviors resulting

from the plethora of hours spent behind screens (TV, computer, tablet, and phone) depicts the strong influence that extended use of technology has on posture.

### Conclusion

We see that certain lifestyle practices such as technology usage, exercise habits, and eating habits are important factors that are all somewhat connected to body posture. Yet, we also see that some factors are more important than others. The study provides insight into the likelihood that the amount of one's phone usage is critical in relationship to posture—more so than diet or exercise—and is, in fact, a major contributor to changes in posture. This is evident in Mientka's<sup>24</sup> article describing iPosture and is also evident in my own study. For example, two students, both from the working-class group, had the highest phone usage in the study. The detriments of excessive phone usage were evident by the high cultural postural capital illustrated in their postures. These findings may suggest that excessive phone usage could override the postural health benefits of nutritious diets and moderate exercise that were illustrated in the lifestyle practices of the majority of the working-class group participants.

The vast differences in lifestyle practices studied, between and even within each group, provided insight as to how influential all of them—namely technology usage, exercise, and diet—were on posture. Since the desired lifestyle practices of three students from the working-class group who had ideal posture included eating home-cooked meals, extensive exercise, and low usage of the phone and other technologies, and in contrast, only one student from the upper-middle class group had moderately good posture (that showed signs of rapid decline by engaging in harmful habits), this research could be the basis of an important message to parents and teachers.

Introducing the guidelines for what is desired and undesired posture based on the principles of the Alexander Technique enabled me to assess and explain children's postures in an unprecedented way in academic literature.

Finally, this study provided insight as to how individuals, even those with current desired posture, are at risk for increased cultural postural capital if they continue to engage in unhealthy lifestyle practices. For disparate reasons, the relationship of all of these participants' postures with their lifestyle practices falls in line with sociologist Chris Shilling's claim that human biology is formed by social factors, where the environment is "written on the body."<sup>25</sup> A study with a larger sample pool would provide more insight as to whether these results are an anomaly or archetypical of individuals whose healthy lifestyle practices are manifested in their postures.

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## The Alexander Technique: My First 30 Years

by George I. Lister

During my more than 30 years' experience as a student, teacher, training course director, and colleague of other teachers of the Alexander Technique, my understanding of Alexander's work and how it fits into my life has gained simplicity and clarity. His principles help form a foundation for everything—working with students, building a practice, working with colleagues, and living life.

I have received help and guidance from many practitioners of the Alexander Technique. However, my purpose in writing this article is to introduce the wisdom of people who had nothing to do with Alexander or his Technique, and yet who have arrived at similar conclusions. To anyone who has studied Alexander's Technique, these principles—as articulated by Joe Hyams, Deepak Chopra, Robert F. Kennedy, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.—are likely to sound familiar.

### The Means-Whereby

Some time ago, I read a book by former Hollywood columnist Joe Hyams, a student of Bruce Lee. In Hyams' book *Zen in the Martial Arts*, there is a remarkable passage relating to taking time and not being attached to results—so much a part of Alexander's dedication to living within the *means-whereby* and *non-end-gaining* principles:

#### Try Softer

*A young boy traveled across Japan to the school of a famous martial artist. When he arrived at the dojo, he was given an audience by the sensei.*

*"What do you wish from me?" the master asked.*

*"I wish to be your student and become the finest karateka in the land," the boy replied. "How long must I study?"*

*"Ten years at least," the master answered.*

*"Ten years is a long time," said the boy. "What if I studied twice as hard as all your other students?"*

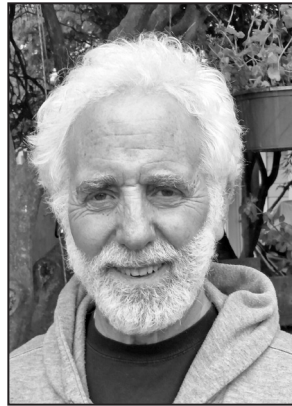
*"Twenty years," replied the master.*

*"Twenty years! What if I practice day and night with all my effort?"*

*"Thirty years," was the master's reply.*

*"How is it that each time I say I will work harder, you tell me that it will take longer?" the boy asked.*

*"The answer is clear. When one eye is fixed upon your destination, there is only one eye left with which to find the Way."<sup>1</sup>*



George I. Lister

### The Art of Non-Doing

Early in my studies of the Technique, I was introduced to the concept of *non-doing*. It sounded like a good idea, so I went about practicing diligently to make sure I embraced the notion and made it a part of my life. I probably worked harder at non-doing than I would have if I had actually done "doing." Now, that doesn't make a lot of sense! But in my thinking at the time, I wasn't able to come up with another way of going about it.

In Deepak Chopra's book *Buddha: The Story of Enlightenment*, there is an entire section called "The Art of Non-Doing," which seems to closely relate to the principles of the Alexander Technique. In this section, Chopra says:

*You take to heart the message of non-self. You do everything possible to break the bonds of attachment that keep you trapped in the illusion that you are a separate self. Here your aim is to tiptoe out of the material world even as your body remains in it. Ordinary people are doing things all day, but in your heart you've turned your at-*

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**iPosture**, continued from previous page.

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[HERM], 2009) trained with Shaikhe and Linda Hermelin in Tel Aviv, Israel. Her undergraduate and graduate degrees are rooted in the behavioral sciences, which have helped inform her understanding of human behavior. She has devoted the past 16 years to the study, research, and teaching of the Alexander Technique. Tami is a member of both AmSAT and STAT. She teaches the Technique in Tampa, Florida. Visit her website and read her blogs at [www.bodyandposture.com](http://www.bodyandposture.com).

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