

Therapies like yoga, massage and acupuncture help children with special needs; Healing hands: [RUN OF PAPER Edition]

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Abstract (summary)

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For The Patriot Ledger

Anthony Puleo's life improved dramatically just one month after a doctor performed acupuncture on him. Puleo of Taunton, who was 16 at the time of his first treatment, suffered from attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, migraines and dyslexia. Earlier in his life he developed severe allergies and gastric reflux disorder.

Traditional drugs and treatments only offered temporary relief. That's when Dr. Rosalie Tassone at Children's Hospital Boston suggested acupuncture. The result: "I could fully understand a lesson and pay attention more easily," Anthony said, referring to his schoolwork. "My migraines came less often and eventually I stopped having them. I went from a B- to an A+." A growing number of children like Anthony are turning toward alternative practices - like acupuncture, **yoga** and massage - to treat learning disabilities and other **developmental challenges**. "We frequently see children with medical issues that achieve a less-than-desirable outcome with conventional Western medical treatment," said Tassone, an anesthesiologist and medical acupuncturist at Children's Hospital. "With acupuncture, we add a new approach - an Eastern medical perspective to achieve maximum benefit for the patient." Anthony now sees Sue Harris at Whole Person Health in Stoughton for regular treatments. He said the acupuncture keeps him calm and focused. Harris said no disease in Asian medicine compares to what Western cultures call ADD or ADHD. "Oriental medicine looks at problems from a totally different perspective than Western medicine and is patient-specific," said Harris. "A Western physician looks at a child who has difficulty concentrating and who has problems in their relationships with their peers and problems in the structured setting of a classroom and makes the diagnosis attention deficit disorder." The acupuncturist would not separate the mind and the body, she said. "Imbalances in one child that might lead to problems with lungs or digestion can in another child lead to problems with the mind, with the mood and behavior," Harris said. "Our goal is to identify and treat the imbalances, and then the symptoms disappear." Now a freshman at Bridgewater State College, Anthony reports his grades are great, his migraines are gone and he might switch majors, from computer science to special education. "I know how hard it was for me to learn from having ADHD," he said. "I've gone through several programs to help my learning disabilities - some worked, some didn't. I don't want other kids to get discouraged. I want them to hang in there - and not give up."

Muscular therapist Erin Barry of Abington teaches massage to parents of children with special needs. Massage for children with autism and other special needs is a different technique than traditional hands-on body work, she said. Barry uses no physical contact between therapist and child. "I'm there to teach the parents how to massage their children," said Barry, who often demonstrates with a doll. "The bond that happens through touch can be immense and lifelong," she said, adding that the connection should be between parent and child. "Having someone else touch and massage your child can put a wedge between you and your child," Barry said.

Few autistic children can tolerate a stranger's touch or have a stranger in the home - and a broken routine can have a huge impact on a child with autism, said Barry. She remembers one session she had with an autistic child who walked around a circle she formed on the floor. Each time he passed her, he would run his fingers across her back or through her hair - or somehow just bump her. Anything just to make contact. "The fact he was tolerating me being there and making an effort to reach out for personal contact made me feel I was welcomed, not only by his family, but by him - and that's a very hard thing for children with autism to do." Barry taught 5-year-old C.J. Chapman's mom, Allison Chapman, how to massage her son. C.J., who has autism spectrum disorder, fell right to sleep the first night Chapman massaged him. "Unfortunately, every night is not like that," she said. "Sometimes my son is too overly stimulated and can't handle the massage. But on the nights he allows the massage, sleep is easier to come by." Chapman says massage has been a welcome addition to C.J.'s nightly routine. "It's a great bonding experience for us. I can just see it in his eyes - and although he can't verbalize it, I can almost hear him say that feels good mom." Barry, who also works at inTouch Therapeutic Massage in Norwood, said she feels she is making a difference in the lives of these children, including her two daughters, Isabelle, 5, who suffers from Asperger syndrome and Adrienne, 3, who has multiple sensory delays. "What this work brings to families is profound," she said. "Every family I see has something to teach - and I learn as much from them as they do from me." Mindful movements

After a few [yoga](#) lessons, Judi Sacco-Coleman saw a positive difference in her 4-year-old daughter's behavior. And Sacco-Coleman said Kayla, her daughter who has Down syndrome, gets excited every week about the [yoga](#) class the child endearingly calls "exercise with Lin," referring to [yoga](#) instructor Linda Roberts.

Roberts said her first approach is "fun" and making a connection with that child. "I like to initiate and guide the process that is innately therapeutic without tension and expectation," she said. "Even if the poses attained can't be through the children's own efforts, their bodies can be guided and supported in the [yoga](#) movements," she said. "Either way, they are still creating pathways and activating neurons in the brain." Before [yoga](#), Kayla couldn't look her mother in the eye without being told. Now, she does it on her own. Kayla has made a shift in attitude in pre-school, said her mother, and her posture has even improved. "She's always happy," Sacco-Coleman said. "But now that she's learning a little about [yoga](#), she seems comfortable and more confident." Results like Kayla's are typical of [yoga](#), Roberts said. "It improves flexibility and strength. They have a deeper sense of awareness of their physical body," she said. "They listen better and concentrate longer. They start to remember movements, feel relaxed in the postures and have a better sense of balance." Roberts says [yoga](#) can also promote independence. "It's a big accomplishment to them to want to put their own shoes and coat on." About the disorders

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - A behavioral syndrome characterized by inattention, distractibility, restlessness, inability to sit still and difficulty concentrating on one thing for any period of time. Autism - A developmental disorder that appears by age 3. It is variable in expression but is recognized and diagnosed by impairment of the ability to form normal social relationships, to communicate with others and by stereotyped behavior patterns, such as a preoccupation with repetitive activities of restricted focus. Asperger syndrome - A form of autism. Youngsters typically have severe problems with peer relationships, lack of social skills and have odd mannerisms related to their facial expression, body posture, gestures or eye contact. Repetitive or stereotypic patterns of behavior and the development rituals or patterns are characteristics. Down syndrome - A genetic, chromosomal disorder first reported in 1866 by Dr. J. Langdon Down. It is characterized by moderate to severe mental retardation, slanting eyes, a broad short skull and broad hands with short fingers. Source: MedlinePlus, a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. For more information:

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