



Get touchy

Problems with touch are universal in children with autism. New research shows that treating touch issues with Qigong Sensory Treatment massage can be a key to making overall progress. Dr Louisa Silva, who led the research, reports



Dr Louisa Silva is a researcher at the Research Institute, Western Oregon University. Her background includes specialties in preventive medicine, Chinese medicine and public health. She has written books and research studies and developed training for parents and professionals.

The list of difficulties with touch and texture can be long. Haircuts may be a nightmare. It takes two of us to cut his nails. She will only eat five foods. He won't wear shoes or socks.

And there's more: he doesn't want to be kissed, she doesn't like to snuggle, holding and rocking doesn't calm him.

What's going on? Problems with touch are among the earliest and most universal signs of autism. Yet, until recently, we have not known what causes them. Now we are starting to find out.

New research describes a class of tiny sensory nerves, called C-tactile fibres, that mediate the pleasurable and soothing effects of touch. These make up 75 per cent of touch fibres and are important for bonding. Without

them, close, affectionate contact doesn't feel good, the ability to feel pain and temperature is off, and child-to-parent bonding suffers.

Recently, the first skin biopsies were carried out to investigate what is going on with these tiny touch fibres. The report showed that children with autism had a 50 per cent loss. (The research, 'First skin biopsy reports in children with autism', is under review for publication in a scientific journal.)

Explaining symptoms

Touch is the most important sense for early childhood development. Almost every autism symptom can be traced to a problem with touch.

Lack of eye contact: Normally touch on the face triggers the child's brain to look, listen and pay attention to the other person's

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face. But when touch isn't normal on the face, the child looks away instead, and an opportunity to connect and learn is lost.

Frequent meltdowns: Children learn to self-soothe each time they are upset and are picked up and soothed. With loss of touch the parent's touch isn't soothing, and children don't learn to self-soothe. Tantrums and meltdowns are frequent, so is anxiety.

No sleep: Parents help children

get into regular nap and sleep patterns by holding and rocking them when it's time to go to sleep. When parental touch doesn't relax the child, children don't learn to put themselves to sleep and sleep patterns are disturbed.

Aggression: Every time children get upset, their nervous systems move into 'fight or flight' mode. Touch is the most effective way to calm children down. Without it, children remain stressed and can easily move into aggression.

Self-injury: Numbness and discomfort on the skin interfere with normal sensation. The result is that children may repeatedly injure themselves in the same place without getting the feedback they need in order to stop.

Lack of interest in social connections: When touch doesn't

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Qigong at work: Louisa Silva works on one child's head and stomach (left) and another child's hand (above)

feel good, there is no real incentive for children to get close to other family members, and children tend to keep apart.

Bringing back touch

We've carried out 15 studies over the past 15 years, culminating in a two-year study with 103 children. The research shows that the sense of touch can return 100 per cent to normal after 1-2 years of a daily 15-minute tactile stimulation protocol. The protocol is based on Chinese medicine and called Qigong Sensory Treatment (QST) massage for autism. It draws from qigong and Western massage techniques to increase circulation to the skin, and stimulate the growth of touch fibres.

In our studies, we give parents a formal programme of training and regular support. Parents naturally avoid areas of discomfort; however, with the support of therapists they learn to work with the programme. They modify the technique so their child stays comfortable, and watch problem areas return to normal.

As touch normalizes, children start to improve. They make eye contact and start to listen. Touch begins to feel good, and they seek out affection and closeness with

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siblings and parents. Touch comes back into their relationships in a natural way – sleep and self-soothing improve. Children are calmer, more focused, and social/language skills improve.

Steady improvement

Everyone who received the massage every day improved steadily. By two years, the average severity of autism had decreased by 44 per cent, and 26 per cent of children were off the spectrum. The more severe children had almost caught up to where the less severe children began. We see no reason why, if given the massage for longer, the more severe children would not duplicate the path of the less severe children

Parenting stress – the difficulty of managing children's behavior effectively – decreased by nearly half (44 per cent). Parents said it >>