



Kids and acupuncture

By Abby Luby • For Living & Being • September 18, 2009

Treating kids with acupuncture is tricky — kids just don't like needles. But a growing number of parents are finding their way to pediatric acupuncture as an alternative to traditional medical treatment.

For many acupuncturists, taming the beast of needlephobia is an essential part of a child's treatment.

Acupuncture, an ancient form of Chinese medicine, has been practiced more than 2,500 years in China and other Asian countries. It works by stimulating pathways of energy in the body known as "qi" (pronounced "chee") with hair-thin, sterilized, disposable needles. Inserting needles at specific spots along energy channels, or meridians, the qi becomes unblocked, which in turn, balances the energy flow, enabling patients to maintain health and heal themselves while fighting off illness.

Typical treatments for adults require needles to stay in for about 20 minutes.

Fears must be overcome first

Children are known to have an abundance of qi, which means they respond positively to very quick treatments — but only if you can get them to relax about the needles. A youngster's fear can heighten the expectation of pain and many acupuncturists in this country are hesitant to treat children for fear of trauma. Many practitioners believe a baby's meridians and immune system is not yet formed and will opt instead to treat small babies and toddlers with Chinese herbs.

Because the needling treatment of children is rarely practiced, there was little or no training offered in this country. However, Julian Scott, known as a guru of pediatric acupuncture, started changing that trend.

Scott, now based at the Bath Practice Clinic in Bath, England, has been practicing Chinese medicine for more than 30 years. He studied in China in the 1980s, where he learned to treat children. He formally started training people more than 20 years ago and occasionally trains in this country.

"Scott has a mission to spread the word about pediatric acupuncture," acupuncturist Ron Hershey of the East Mountain Center in Cold Spring said. Hershey has been practicing for 12 years and studied with Scott 10 years ago in Boston; he's been working with children ever since. Scott taught the practice of pediatric acupuncture worldwide by temporarily moving into communities, starting up clinics and then moving on. His successes are seen in Haifa, Israel, Seattle, Washington and England.

Scott was able to demystify the belief that babies were too delicate and vulnerable for needles.

"But that doesn't stop doctors from giving vaccinations," Hershey said. "People's perception was that the required shots for babies were essential, but acupuncture was questionable."

The belief that you could successfully treat children with acupuncture began to grow and be practiced. A National Health Statistics Reports released in December 2008 by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine showed that in 2007, 150,000 children used acupuncture to treat such illnesses and disorders such as chronic ear infections, chronic cough, sleep disorders, fatigue, asthma, bed-wetting, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, constipation, diarrhea and frequent colds.

Good bedside manner a must

Scott's approach to elementary school-age children was to spend time with them and get them relaxed.

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He also came up with “The Gentle Needle,” an approach used by acupuncturist Therese Balagna of Millbrook, who studied with Scott about 10 years ago.

“Since children don’t like strong stimulation, the Gentle Needle technique is to insert the needle and pull it out quickly and it’s done. Children are extremely receptive — that’s the beauty of it,” said Balagna, who has been practicing acupuncture for 16 years.

The approach works particularly well with children, who find it hard to lie still for more than a few minutes with the needles inserted.

Generally, only four to six points are chosen on a baby or young child’s body for treatment (adults are treated with as many as 10 or 20 needles, if not more). In children younger than 8 or 9, the thin needle is inserted for a few seconds and sometimes gently moved around, then removed. A typical treatment might last anywhere from 20 seconds to three minutes, and children younger than 7 usually sit on their parent’s lap.

Hershey treats some infants and children and says a successful treatment has a lot to do with the acupuncturist’s manner. He finds that joking and playing around with kids before and during the treatment seems to minimize any fear or discomfort until they get to know him.

“I make funny faces and pretend the needle is a plane coming through the air. Sometimes I say ‘oh it hurts so much!’ and it steals the kid’s thunder. By the time I’m done pretending to cry, they’ve forgotten to cry. A little humor goes a long way.”

Acupuncturist Stephanie Ellis at the Rosendale Family Practice has kid-proofed her office so youngsters can wander around while she follows and plays with them, waiting for the right moment to quickly insert and remove a needle.

“It’s using the element of surprise,” said Ellis, who has been practicing acupuncture for 10 years. “For the older kids, there’s a way of pinching the skin, telling them to take a breath and count. They don’t feel very much that way.”

Acupuncturist Detlef Wolf in Poughkeepsie has been practicing for 19 years. One of his patients is 5-year-old Troy Hoffman, who has asthma.

“The treatment I use includes needles and herbs. It can take 10 to 15 visits, but children with asthma react much faster and heal much faster and their recovery is permanent,” Wolf said.

Troy’s mother, Denise Hoffmann, said her son has been receiving acupuncture and herb treatments for about two months. “It looks promising,” she said. “About four weeks ago, my son was having an asthma attack, but right in the middle of a wheezing and coughing spell he just stopped. Since then he’s coughed only once or twice. He even looks better.”

Acupuncture is also used in treating behavioral disorders. Balagna, who works with about 100 children, has had varying degrees of success treating children with autism and related conditions. “I treated a 3-year-old autistic boy who was very uncoordinated. He’s now 14 and in a normal school with learning supports. He’s doing very well.”

Parents frustrated with repeated courses of antibiotics for ear infections or other illnesses are finding help with acupuncture. Balagna treated an 8-month-old baby with an ear infection who already had two courses of antibiotics.

“The parents were tired of having their baby sick all the time,” she said. “It took two treatments using about three or four points on the baby’s body.”

Herbal medicine for ear infections

Wolf, who is reluctant to treat babies, said he has success treating ear infections with herbal ear drops. In fact, Chinese herbs and tonics, even

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acupressure massage, are an integral part of acupuncture treatments because they can be continued at home by parents. Herbs also further the healing process in absence of acupuncture.

Local acupuncturists generally charge anywhere from \$50 to \$85 for an initial visit and less for follow-ups or herbal consultations. Some acupuncturists use a sliding scale based on a family's income. Although a growing number of insurance companies cover acupuncture costs, many still haven't added it to their plans.

Successfully treating children with acupuncture has a lot to do with a child's open acceptance and lack of skepticism, Balagna said.

"My work with children is so gratifying. A child senses that it will work, they feel it organically."



Acupuncturist Detlef Wolf treats Troy Hoffman, 5, for asthma in his LaGrange office. (Darryl Bautista/Poughkeepsie Journal)

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