Scalp Acupuncture May Help Children With Autism

By Editorial Staff

With the growing concern over a possible link between childhood vaccinations and autism, any good news for practitioners and parents regarding this mysterious disorder certainly is welcome. A group of Egyptian researchers published findings in the March 2008 issue of The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine that suggest the use of scalp acupuncture might help boost language skills - an area in which children with autism generally are delayed.

In the study, 20 children ages 4 to 7 with autism and language delay were divided into two groups: one receiving scalp acupuncture twice weekly in addition to language therapy and the other receiving only language therapy.

The points used were Du 20, 26, GV 17, three temple needles and two Yamamoto YSNA points (cerebrum and aphasia). The needles were inserted to a depth of ½ to 1 cun until qi was achieved. Electrical stimulation was not used. Needles were retained for 20 minutes. Treatment was given for two months, followed by two weeks of rest for the nine-month duration of the study.

Patients were tested in the following areas:

- overall attention;
- ability to recognize different semantic groups as body parts, animals, food utensils, colors, etc., in addition to the ability to recognize concepts;
- ability to name different semantic groups and to verbalize concepts;
- ability to understand a short and a long sentence, in addition to understanding locatives, verb tenses, time indicators, and singular and plural nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, negation forms, comparatives, etc.;
- ability to utter all the previous items;
- ability to understand and respond to a sentence carrying pragmatic intentions, illustrating functionalism, sense-making, and maintaining and ending a topic; and
- ability to utter speech sounds.
At the end of nine months, while both groups showed improvement in cognitive and expressive language skills, those children who also received scalp acupuncture showed a significantly greater improvement in those areas.

The researchers offered an explanation as to why scalp acupuncture was particularly effective in these children. "Acupuncture is highly effective in children; a fact that can be secondary to the development rate of the cerebrum in children; which is higher than that of adults. Thus, intervention caused by the insertion of needles on the scalp is more apt to regulate the brain function. After the age of 12 years, the cerebrum reaches adult-level shape and form. Hence, the regulatory functions of acupuncture become more limited. Better cognitive performance achieved by the latter group was due to the added effect of the acupuncture sessions, which increased the blood-flow velocity to the brain."

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