

Holistic Therapies FOR KIDS

From infant massage and chiropractic to yoga and meditation for kids, choose and combine the most suitable holistic therapies for your children to make sure they stay happy and healthy, and thrive in all aspects of their life

Writer Insiya Rasiwala-Finn

If I posed the question, “Do we live in a health conscious age?”, you would probably say “Yes.” People run, do yoga, compete in triathlons and cross-fit circuits; while defining what we eat has become the new icebreaker at cocktail parties. Yet across the developed world, North America in particular, chronic health problems continue to spiral and the health of our children is at risk.

In her book *Naturally Healthy Babies and Children*, herbalist and MD Dr Aviva Jill Romm writes, “Unprecedented numbers of young people in North America – with estimates in excess of ten per cent of all children between ages three and 18 – are being treated with stimulant and anti-depressant medications for conditions, such as attention deficit

and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), aggression and anxiety.”

Many of these treatments, incidentally, are not proven safe or effective for children and while anti-depressant prescriptions declined marginally after a 2004 FDA warning in the US, they continue to be prescribed to children.

High rates of asthma, allergies, respiratory infections, obesity, diabetes, autoimmune diseases, including chronic fatigue syndrome and various cancers such as leukemia are also on the rise.

Why are these problems occurring in countries that set the standards for hygiene, nutrition, vaccination and global health and what can we do



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about them?

Dr Romm is convinced that it may be because for so long, we have bought into an 'external' idea of what health is, ie "the size of our clothing; how much we look like a skinny fashion model; the quest for a perfect body; or a daily life free of illness so that we can work more, stay up later and look younger longer."

To be truly healthy, she says, we must "redefine our standard of health so that it is based upon an individual sense of well-being" versus a materialistic, fragmented concept of health and illness, where we address the complaints of the body as mere physical symptoms and attempt to cure only those physical symptoms.

This becomes essential as we become parents or caregivers to our children.

Parenting offers an unprecedented opportunity to reevaluate our attitudes towards health and healing and can be a pivotal time to embrace more holistic models of living. From trying yoga for the first time while pregnant, to realising the

impact of toxins in household cleaning products and processed foods, many parents-to-be are realising that our attitudes and our environment will affect all aspects of the well-being of our child.

Whether you are a proponent of natural therapies, or believe in more traditional models of helping your children stay healthy, here are some of the most effective wellness modalities that support children in illness and health, from newborn babies to teens.

BABY MASSAGE

Infant massage originated in India, where mothers have been passing it down through generations and it is known as a modality whose benefits range from increasing connection between an infant and caregiver, to aiding immune response, digestion and relaxation. The first westerner who documented it was Dr Frederick Leboyer, a French obstetrician known for his seminal book, *Birth without Violence*, who travelled to India and studied yoga

and baby massage, which he realised was essential to the emotional security of a child.

In fact, he said, "Being touched, caressed and massaged is food for the infant. Food is as necessary as minerals, vitamins and proteins. Deprived of this food, the name of which is love, babies would rather die. And they often do."

Natasha Clausen, an infant massage trainer with the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM) was drawn to study baby massage 13 years ago, when she observed a friend who confidently massaged her young baby and the intense joy and relaxation of both the mother and baby in the activity. Today, she teaches classes for pregnant mothers in Hong Kong and is voluble about its benefits for mother, baby and the family unit.

"It's an invaluable tool to explore as you and your baby get to know each other. It has the benefits of bonding, releasing feel good hormones oxytocin and prolactin that benefit both parent and baby. The hormone released aids the contraction of the uterus and the production of breast milk."

Another important benefit, one that any sleep-deprived new parent will appreciate: babies who experience regular infant massage sleep deeply and when awake are happy and alert. Plus it empowers parents – dads can practise the techniques as well – as they learn how something as simple as nurturing touch can ease baby's discomforts and ailments from colic and constipation and they begin to build a toolbox of self-help techniques that become essential to their parenting toolkit.

CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

Craniosacral is a gentle, non-invasive type of bodywork that works with attuning to the rhythm of our body's craniosacral system, ie the network of membranes and fluid that surround and support the brain and spinal cord from the bones of the head (cranium) down to the bones at the base of the spine (sacrum).

Says Bali and Europe-based therapist Mia Watson, who calls her integrative practice Cranio Healing, "It is a subtle but physical way for people to regain a sense of

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"Being touched, caressed and massaged is food for the infant"

~ Dr Frederick Leboyer

OPENING PAGE: Meditation helps kids increase self-awareness and balance. THIS PAGE: Connect with your baby through touch and massage. OPPOSITE PAGE: Yoga allows children to be themselves without having to compete with anyone

themselves that connects emotions with the body and mind, so it helps people gain self-confidence and be themselves without fear."

While craniosacral therapy works for children (and adults) of all ages, Watson notes that newborn babies respond especially well because there is almost no other practice that "is sensitive enough to help them release the shock of birth, check that their core energy has started flowing and unquash them – they often do not have a neck from pressure in the birth canal, or may be bruised."

Watson offers newborn infants a free Cranio Healing session as she views it as essential to setting them up for a healthy life. She also notes that children from zero to four years respond particularly fast to craniosacral work, because they are sensitive and their mental-emotional-physical patterns are not yet deeply ingrained, while teenagers benefit from cranio as it can help them resolve emotional and sexual issues that they may experience with their changing bodies in a non-threatening, safe way.

While craniosacral work can help with healing from broken bones, or recovering from a severe disease, such as meningitis, it can also aid a healthy child to being more grounded and connected in their body. Yet Watson only works with a child when one or both the parents agree to be treated as well.

She is also against treating healthy children.

"If children are sick, treat their parents and clean up the (family) environment – then they will recover. Children don't need wellness therapies, not if they have been treated for the shock of their birth experience. They are bursting with life. They are present, alive, energetic and creative. They need uncontaminated food, air and water, and they need the right kind of attuned attention from healthy, relaxed, integrated adults. Before giving a child a therapy, make sure that all these basics are in place. If you are going to treat a child, make sure you treat the parent first, otherwise it's not much more putting on a layer of makeup. It will wash off fast."

CHIROPRACTIC

The word 'chiropractic' comes from ancient Greek and literally means 'done by hand'. Chiropractors specialise in manual adjustment of the vertebrae of the spine and other joints of the body, which helps to relieve pain, restore normal functioning to the joints and supporting muscles and ligaments, thus maintaining balance in the nervous system, of which our spinal cord is an essential part.

Dr Shamira Rahim, DC, CACCP, is a Chiropractor in Vancouver, Canada; with a significant pediatric focus in her practice. She is animated about its benefits for children.

"There are so many stresses going through life – physical, emotional, chemical – that can affect the nervous system. Chiropractic care works to balance the nervous system and in turn facilitate a child to achieve and maintain optimum well-being within themselves. This is simply keeping the pathways between the brain



and spinal cord, nerves, cells and organs in balance and open.”

She continues, “It’s important to balance the nervous system as there are many different patterns or causes of stress at different periods of childhood development.”

These tend to coincide with periods of rapid growth in children. From zero to one year olds, the spine grows the fastest, specifically from 24 to 36 cm. During this rapid growth period there can be considerable trauma or formation of imbalances as children are learning to walk. This phase of development is also when the secondary curves of the spine are forming, as seen in a child’s neck and low back regions.

“Assessing and treating a child during this period is important to maintain proper function, both of the mechanical spine and functional patterns of the body,” says Dr Rahim.

She is an advocate of continued chiropractic care in children and cites its many benefits, including improvements in sleep patterns, energy and digestive and immune health.

Of her youngest patients Dr Rahim has also noticed balanced crawling, standing and walking patterns, while older children transitioning into the teenage years show better resilience with immunity and normal hormonal changes.

“The normal childhood traumas every child experiences can be a source of spinal and cranial trauma. Most of the time, the pain from the initial injury ‘goes away’; however, traumas and subtle overuses/injuries incurred can continue to affect the future function of the child’s nerve system. In a nutshell: It is much easier to build a child than fix an adult.”

YOGA

While we don’t think of children experiencing stress in the same way as adults, modern life with its fast pace, digital media distractions and higher expectations on children in the way of scholastic and extra curricular success does impact children with stress. Yoga, taught in an age-appropriate way, with visualisations,



THIS PAGE: Guided visualisations can help kids overcome obstacles. OPPOSITE PAGE: Mindfulness and meditation have made inroads into school systems

story-telling, singing and movement, can be a wonderful release and rekindle children’s natural awareness and intuition. It has also been proven to reduce ADHD, increase self-esteem, promote compassion, kindness and focus and helps children to navigate their shifting emotions with ease.

Jenny Smith of Hong Kong’s Gecko Yoga says, “Many children don’t know what yoga is when they first come to our classes, but it doesn’t take long for them to follow the poses, games and exercises we are offering them, and at some point there will be a connection and then they are hooked, and off our yoga adventure we go, week after week after week.”

Do they feel relaxed? Smith says, that what they gain is a way of listening to their bodies, to know what it is that they need to feel good.

“We encourage them to be themselves with strong awareness on breath and positive thinking.”

That in turn calms their busy minds and promotes relaxation.

In a world where there is so much pressure on external achievement and competition, she continues, “Yoga allows children to be themselves; there are no stop watches, ranking ladders, no competition. Their mat is their personal space and we guide them to look within rather than look around at others. It’s a great life-long skill to obtain early in life.”

MEDITATION

From feeling more connected to their inner world, to feeling greater peace, relaxation, focus and well-being, meditation for

children – as young as five and up to their college years – is a proven technique of easing stress and experiencing more balance in one’s mind and body.

Recently, mindfulness and meditation have made inroads into school systems, including programmes like US actress Goldie Hawn’s MindUp, which teaches social and emotional learning skills that link cognitive neuroscience, positive psychology and mindful awareness training to help children feel happier, more relaxed and more able to cope and thrive with school curriculums and general life.

Michelle Harris is a counsellor, teacher and mum who teaches meditation classes to children and adults in the Hong Kong area.

For her children’s classes, which often have particular themes that aim to nurture certain qualities of energy or intentions, or perhaps to overcome obstacles, Harris uses guided visualisations and some exercises or tools to help them increase self-awareness and balance. She also works with the healing and empowering energies of crystals and a Self Expression element or art activity after the meditation. Her goal is to help children to become self-reliant. This, she says is the gift of meditation. “They come back, or connect to their core and trust their inner resources. They can take their relaxation skills and apply them before taking an exam or any stressful situations. They learn how to manage emotions or upsets, etc, as they are learning how to have greater inner/self awareness by learning to communicate better and more honestly with others (as well as understand themselves better).” Harris teaches regular scheduled classes for

children aged eight and up, but will work with younger children upon request.

PRANIC HEALING

Ashish Antia is an Intuitive Therapist and healer in Mumbai, India and a mum, with a background in Yoga Therapy who uses a combination of various energetic modalities to work with adults and children. Children were not originally part of her practice.

“I never intended to work with children as I believe that every child must experience disease to get their immunity to par, pain to develop a pain threshold physically and emotionally, and go through whatever that one must to develop normally.”

Yet after helping a baby gain relief from chronic colic symptoms, she realised that she could in fact help children and has since worked with children with cancer, aided others in recovery from surgeries and emotional issues.

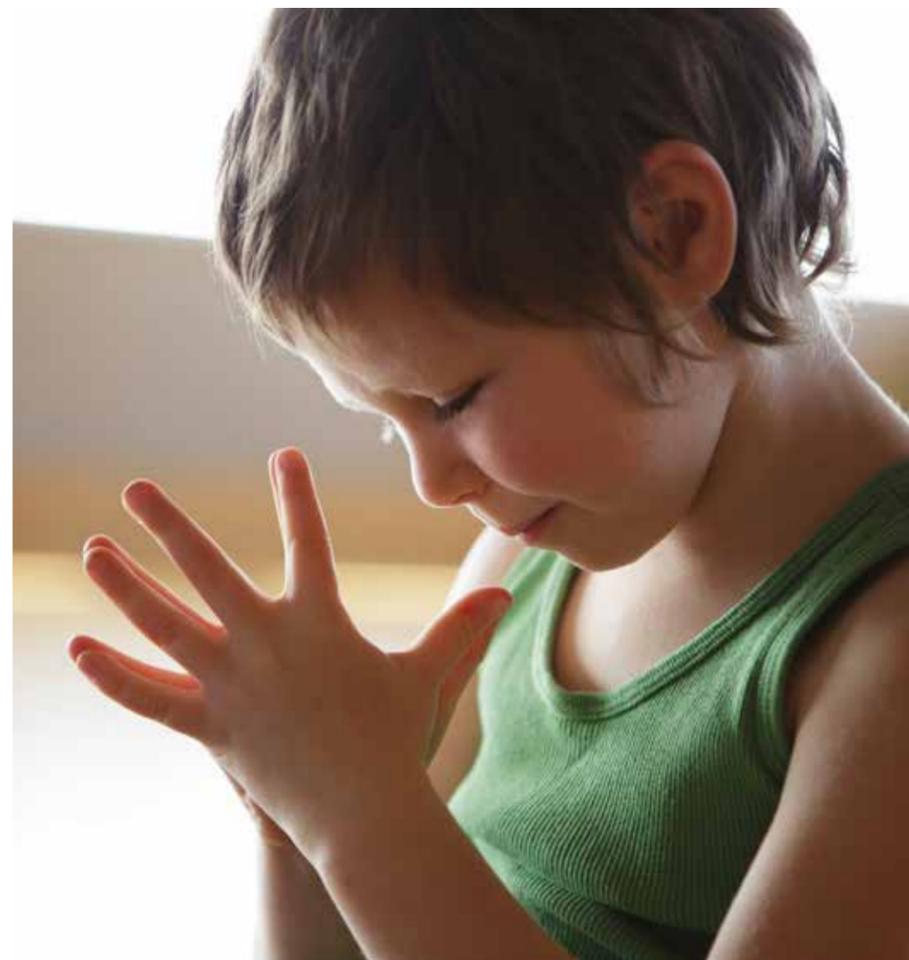
She notes, that “children react wonderfully and very quickly to energy work as they have not conditioned themselves

to work against it”, but cautions that in her experience, similar to Mia Watson’s observations, that “whenever a child displayed any emotional difficulties, the issue is not with the child as much as it is with the parent. The child was only mirroring the parent’s behaviour.” Just like Watson, she also works closely then with at least one parent to effect transformation.

Ultimately, we want the best for our children, to allow them to regain health when sick, to thrive in all aspects of their life and to be happy. Most alternative systems of well-being, such as chiropractic, homeopathy, craniosacral, massage and energetic healing, operate from the premise of working with the ‘whole body and mind’ as a continuum versus an impersonal cause and effect model that is the norm of modern medical systems.

I am a student of Ayurveda and have always tried alternative remedies as a primary option whenever I have fallen ill. Yet, having a child tested my beliefs and instincts as I imagine it does for all parents.

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Infant Massage at The Sanctuary
Natasha Clausen
www.thesanctuary.com.hk

Craniosacral at Cranio Healing
Mia Watson
www.craniohealing.com

Chiropractic at evolve Nurturing Vitality
Dr Shamira Rahim
www.evolvevitality.com

Yoga at Gecko Yoga
Jenny Smith
www.geckoyoga.com

Meditation at Pure Potential
Michelle Harris
www.purepotentialworldwide.com

Pranic Healing at The Healing Boutique
Ashish Antia
www.healingboutique.net

Children do not filter their discomfort as much as adults do, and as parents we want to shelter our children from pain. It can become challenging even for families who believe in holistic therapies, as these often take longer to heal an illness than conventional medicine does.

Yet, the benefits of expanding our understanding of health and healing are manifold. Becoming more involved and attuned to our children’s health allows parents and caregivers to become more empowered to choose healthcare options as related to our families. It allows us to ask questions confidently even when in the conventional medical system and allows us to trust, not negate our intuition and wisdom. Plus it allows us to be attentive to preventing illness by instilling healthy behaviours in our children, versus only treating them when they do fall ill. After all, the more time we spend with our children, the more we understand their needs and moods and can very quickly discern when they need support, help and healing and specifically what type of support and help they may need. 🌿