



A head start

Giuliana Fenwick talks about supporting her son and developing a style of Indian head massage for young people with special needs

From the very beginning I knew that my second son, Ollie, was somewhat 'different'. Being slow to speak and even slower to laugh, little was I to know that Ollie would grow into my big, brave boy whose courage, strength and unwavering tenacity would give me my own strength. He is the reason behind my life's work, my recent book, my fundraising and my public speaking on behalf of young people with special needs, in the UK and overseas.

About Ollie

Ollie is on the 'high-functioning' end of the autistic spectrum, which in my opinion can leave him more vulnerable than others, as from the outset he appears to be so 'normal'. He has Asperger syndrome and since the age of 13, has lived with chronic obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), which becomes debilitating in times of stress.

Ollie is an exceptionally bright boy and an amazing wordsmith, weaving together stories and writing poems as though ink runs through his very veins. As social skills proved very difficult for him to develop for many years, words have always been his friends – his world. Ollie's talents and hard work placed him in nine of the top sets at middle school, with his creative writing leaving teachers awestruck and sometimes in tears.

However, life spiralled downwards at an alarming rate when he joined a vast mainstream college of 1,500 pupils at the age of 13. Suddenly, an autistic boy had to fit into a standardised exam system, in a dog-eat-dog environment. Unable to align booklets or answer multiple choice questions, Ollie felt like he was doing his GCSEs in a foreign language, simply because his brain is wired up differently and there was no support available within the standard educational framework.

I fought very hard to get Ollie funding so that he could have his exams presented in a different and more accessible format, but to my immense frustration, once this was obtained it was spent elsewhere in the college.

As a result, Ollie plunged into the bottom sets, even in his beloved English classes, and he was never given a chance to sit the higher papers. As a result, the word 'disabled' was mentioned in our home for the first time. 'Am I broken, mum?' was all he could sob. He unravelled like a ball of wool and developed serious mental health issues, including psychosis and OCD, which resulted in Ollie being referred to a psychiatrist as well as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Prozac was also offered.

Supporting Ollie and others with complementary therapy

It was at this point that my role as a complementary therapist kicked in. Having trained in Indian head massage and the Japanese art of reiki healing, I started to massage Ollie at 2am one morning, in a desperate attempt to calm him and get him off the floor, where he was sobbing and lining up cupboard doors, begging me to 'make it stop'.

The set massage routine I had been trained in was too invasive and aggressive for someone as sensitive as Ollie, and would actually send him into sensory overload rather than help him to relax. With his bravery and constant feedback, together we refined the massage routine to make it much softer and more 'holding' and nurturing. I also incorporated strands of Traditional Chinese Medicine, ayurveda and reiki, alongside a strong understanding of anatomy and physiology, to ensure the therapy remained rooted in Western science.

Above: Giuliana's style of Indian head massage is softer than the traditional massage and features more holding and nurturing strokes that are more acceptable for young people with special needs



This page far left: As the massage helps the young person feel empowered, they learn to trust the therapist and relax, which also helps them to open up to other people

Ollie began to mend and within just three weeks, he began to thrive. As the results were so incredible, I immediately took it to schools and specialist academies. I offered my services for free at first but within six weeks, I was being paid. Through treating Ollie I had developed the foundations for a business.

I worked with all the young people on my books in the same way I had with Ollie. I placed them in control of their treatments, showing them first the areas I wanted to work, but ultimately allowing them to decide if they were comfortable with this. I also wanted each young person to decide whether they wanted to sit, stand or be in a corner, to help them stay within their own comfort zone. I even massaged one young person while walking from room-to-room, and have become a small monkey on occasion, clambering onto sofas or behind furniture to continue massaging my young clients in whatever way they feel comfortable.

The young people I treat can choose their own music too, if they don't like the relaxing therapy music I would ordinarily use, and they can bring in a laptop or iPad if it helps to divert them from the initial sensory overload. On one occasion, I even massaged a person while *WrestleMania* was on the television, though happily within three sessions the client no longer needed the TV as a distraction. It is all about earning trust – working with, rather than on, someone – and this is achieved by listening and putting them in control, which is hugely empowering for anyone on the autistic spectrum.

The best results come when a young person has had a full treatment, with relaxing music and a few essential oils introduced to the session. Even if it takes a few weeks of flexibility and building trust, it is worth every minute as you start to see results. Seeking permission from the recipient at every level gives them a voice and lowers their boundaries. This in turn helps to eliminate fear and opens them up to new experiences, including touch, which can often be an issue for those on the spectrum. It is about progressing at their pace and watching them bloom and I'm happy to say I've yet to be defeated.

The benefits of treatment

The short-term benefits of treatment are instant. As the young person feels empowered and in control of the session, they learn to trust you and relax, and become more receptive and less defensive. Before long, they start to open up to other help around them and to other people, including their peers. As the young person becomes increasingly more calm and confident – associating touch with comfort, reassurance, relaxation and nurturing – the long-term benefits really start to show and affect all areas of their life; be it at home, in school, or in social situations.

By working on the head, short-term memory, focus, concentration, empathy, language, speech, comprehension, sensory association, controlling impulses, social cognition, reading and processing faces, and memories are all stimulated. By increasing serotonin levels, the client is flooded with feelings of happiness and well-being. Increased melatonin levels promote deeper, more restful sleep patterns and with rest and sleep, all of us function and cope better. Dopamine, the 'pleasure hormone', is also stimulated, helping with memory, sleep, behaviour, attention, focus, learning and confidence. Studies show that those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and executive function disorder (EFD) have significantly reduced levels of dopamine, so massage can be hugely beneficial to these people.

The enteric brain – often referred to as the 'second brain' – is located in the gut and is where trauma, anger and bottled-up emotions are stored, along with issues we haven't been able to 'digest'. This can be eased by massaging key areas, not limited to the head, but on the shoulders and upper back, as well as under the eyes.

The amygdala or 'emotional brain' – in the frontal portions of the temporal lobes on each side of the head – is also stimulated. It is here we lay down our emotional responses and reactions to external stimuli, which are recorded and stored in our 'emotional memory bank' and determine our stock responses to certain situations.

I personally think this treatment should be called 'body and soul massage', as it treats the whole person. Simply massaging the ears alone is like a full body workout, as these contain reflex points that affect every major part of the body.

With hundreds of case studies and lengthy waiting lists, there is growing evidence that this therapy really 'works' and is yielding tremendous results in all the schools where I have worked. As for the person who helped to develop this style of Indian head massage – Ollie – he went on to achieve 11 GCSEs (A to C) and has two As and a B at AS Level. He has also been offered places at universities to study creating writing and publishing.

● FHT Comment: please note that for membership and insurance purposes, members must hold an Indian head massage qualification recognised by the FHT before completing any further/specialist training.

Member offer

Giuliana's book, *Indian Head Massage for Special Needs*, is published by Singing Dragon (RRP £14.99). FHT members can receive a 15% discount by ordering online at www.singingdragon.com and using the discount code IHM at the checkout. P&p applies. Offer ends 31 May, 2016.



Giuliana Fenwick has been a complementary therapist for most of her adult life, and through working with her son Ollie, has developed a style of Indian head massage for people with special needs. She now works full time in schools and specialist academies, training parents, carers, teachers, therapists and other professionals all over the UK, including charities such as MIND. Her work has also taken her to Europe in both training and public speaking roles, working with charities such as ASHD, ASD and LD Belgium. www.therapiesforspecialneeds.co.uk, info@therapiesforspecialneeds.co.uk. Find Giuliana on LinkedIn and Twitter @giulianafenwick.