

Treating Children with Acupuncture

By Gail Reichstein Rex

Most people do not think of acupuncture when they're seeking health treatment for their kids, but as more and more parents are discovering, it can be a remarkable way to alter the course of a single illness, a chronic condition, and even a child's life. Instead of masking symptoms or waiting for them to go away, acupuncture treatments stimulate deep healing that can change the way a body functions – improving health conditions in ways that are safe, virtually painless, and without side effects.

Many parents seek acupuncture or herbal treatment for their child's recurring health problems that have failed to respond to more conventional treatment: chronic ear infections, chronic cough, sleep disorders, fatigue, asthma, bed-wetting, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, constipation, diarrhea, and frequent colds are the disorders most commonly treated with acupuncture, but it can also help kids with anxiety, crossed eyes, epilepsy, eczema, and certain learning problems, among other things. Increasingly common, too, are kids whose parents simply want a treatment with less risk and fewer side effects than the medications or surgeries that are often recommended.

How is it that kids can respond to low-tech treatments like acupuncture and herbs when specialists and modern drugs have failed to help? The answer lies in Chinese Medicine's ability to treat not just symptoms, but also to identify and treat the underlying conditions that allowed illness to develop in the first place.

Since young children are so responsive to their surroundings, they are quite vulnerable to any unusual conditions in their lives. Seemingly mild stressors like food that is hard to digest, temperature changes, new school or childcare situations, trouble with siblings, etc. can easily create subtle imbalances that quickly result in not-so-subtle symptoms. If not completely re-balanced, these symptoms can then contribute to persistent and/or spiraling health problems like chronic ear infections, asthma, and sleep difficulties.

Practitioners of Chinese medicine will attempt to identify one of several patterns of imbalance that lead up to the child's current condition. Did the child have a history of paleness, fatigue, weak cough, whiny behavior, and / or pickiness over food? Such behaviors point to an underlying deficiency of qi, which the body has been unable to produce in sufficient amounts to ward off illness.

Alternatively, the child may have a predominantly excess condition, in which a backlog of incompletely transformed food and drink leads to congestion or stagnation and a child who is phlegmy, congested, and may have a cough, oozing rashes, or pimply skin, abdominal pain, and smelly stools. Whatever the illness, basic differentiations like these will be essential for effective treatment, leading the practitioner to a clearer understanding of the patterns of imbalance as well as strategies for treatment.

The logistics of actually treating a child with Chinese Medicine require a good dose of flexibility and an understanding of children's needs at different ages. Few children before the age of 8 or 9 are able to lie still for more than a few minutes, so they will generally sit in a parent's lap, or lie down for five or ten minutes when they are old enough. The acupuncturist

will insert a single needle, manipulate it for a few seconds, then remove it before inserting the next one. A typical treatment might last about 3 minutes, with the rest of the visit devoted to talking about the child's progress and reviewing suggested dietary and lifestyle recommendations. In addition to acupuncture, Chinese herbal formulas are often prescribed to continue and amplify the effect of the acupuncture treatment. These can be given in pill form, liquid tinctures, or syrups.

It can be astounding to witness a child's response to acupuncture and herbal treatment. Not only do their immediate health problems often resolve, but they can also be set on firmer footing for a healthier and happier childhood as a result.

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