



CranioSacral Therapy & Autism: A Story of Success

By Rebecca Flowers, OTR, BCP, CST-D

I knew Mikey (age 2 years, 9 months) was in my clinic waiting room for his first visit, when through concrete walls, I heard his loud, shrill screams. They communicated everything, "Look at those fish! What's in this tent? I want to see what's behind this door." Of course, like most 2-year-olds, the screams also communicated, "I don't want to sit down!"

CranioSacral Therapy & Sensory Integration

I had become interested in CranioSacral Therapy (CST) years before when I read an article by some therapists on the East Coast who had combined CST and Sensory Integration (SI) (another neurologically based modality in which I was already certified). Therefore, in my clinic I provided SI in a large gym. But what I discovered, as the East Coast therapists' article had described, was that by combining CST with SI, autistic children could make 80 percent gains.

What I've learned in the 27-plus years that I've been practicing CST is that it is the missing "ingredient" in the recipe for helping individuals on the autistic spectrum to live happy, productive lives. No matter how the diagnosis of autism presents itself, everyone on the spectrum wants to *fit in*, to belong, and to feel useful.

As would be expected, on Mikey's first visit I did my clinical observations/evaluation. We tried out some of the equipment in the SI gym, and I gave his mom some suggestions for play at home. Most importantly, I let Mikey get to know me, and he let me get to know him. We established trust and rapport so that when I put my hands on him for therapy, he understood that I was there to help. Every time Mikey's facial expression or body language changed, I mirrored back to him what I was sensing. He relaxed; his mom relaxed; and I could feel the soft tissue under my hands mobilize more easily.

The Autonomic Nervous System



One of the first and most dramatic effects of CST upon individuals with autism (or anyone else, for that matter) is a shift in the Autonomic (or "automatic") Nervous System (ANS). Autism is a stress disorder: 1) stress externally from the bombardment of the senses, and confusion which that creates; 2) and internal stress from gastrointestinal disorders, heavy metals, gut pathogens, and allergies or sensitivities to foods or the environment.

Stress alters neurological function. It places the ANS in Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) overdrive. It places the individual in a state of fight-flight-freeze. This state creates a cascade of changes in the entire body—the heart beats faster; digestion slows or shuts down to allow blood flow to muscles for quick motor reaction; and the brain becomes hyper-alert, making it difficult to focus or rest/sleep.

The Parasympathetic Nervous System

The Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS), on the other hand, allows us to rest, digest, and repair. CranioSacral Therapy can quickly balance the ANS so that, if we've been SNS dominant, we feel calmer and more relaxed. This is often the first change seen when treating someone with autism. Within this more balanced state, all brain function improves—and that includes gut function, social interaction, and communication.

When using CST as treatment, we can directly impact specific cranial nerves and pathways, brain centers, motor and sensory neurological function. We can help improve the brain and body's biochemistry because we are working directly with the one system (the CranioSacral System) which houses the entire central nervous system.

On Mikey's second visit, a week later, he was no longer screaming to communicate except, as most 2-year-olds do, when he had to do something he didn't want to do. Instead, he was pointing or using other signals to communicate. Before long, he was imitating sounds, then repeating a few words. Within one year, he was talking, enjoying (for the first time) being in public places. The family could now go out to eat at a restaurant, and even take a trip to Disney World.

When Mikey was 5 years old, I left my clinic to join Dr. John E. Upledger at his clinic in Florida. At Christmas time that year, I received a card from Mikey. He had neatly printed his entire name (his last name was three syllables) to sign it. This was the child that pediatricians and neurologists at a prominent children's hospital had diagnosed as "severely and profoundly mentally retarded." They had recommended that he be institutionalized.

I've kept in touch with my clinic office manager/receptionist over the years. When Mikey graduated from high school, she sent me a newspaper clipping with a photo of Mikey speaking at his commencement. I am grateful every day for the power and the promise of CranioSacral Therapy!

Rebecca Flowers is a world class instructor for CranioSacral Therapy specializing in pediatrics. Rebecca began her avocation when she received her Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy Suma Cum Laude from Indiana University School of Medicine in 1986. She then established the first Pediatric Occupational Therapy outpatient rehabilitation program at Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie, Indiana. In 1998 she joined the Upledger Institute Clinic staff as an instructor. Ms. Flowers has extensive training in pediatric Myofascial Release, Positional Release and NDT, and in Healing Touch and Esoteric Healing through the International Network of Esoteric Healing. She also has training in Mechanical Link; and advanced training in Interactive Metronome, and Therapeutic Listening. Currently, she is writing a book for parents and therapists combining CranioSacral Therapy and Sensory Integration in the treatment of children.

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