

Pay attention, sunshine

Sunflower therapy has heart-warming success with kids with learning disorders, says Emily M... ony

Six years ago, when Toby Murray Cox was only 10 years old, an educational psychologist diagnosed in him a "developmental delay" of about five years. At the time, the psychologist recommended that he approach the Sunflower Trust, a holistic clinic that was showing promising results with children who were having learning difficulties. "We didn't go, though," his mother Patricia recalls. "I didn't think it would help and decided to put my faith in extra tutors."

As he entered his teens, Toby was due to sit his Common Entrance exams. "His health was starting to deteriorate and he became terribly quiet, pale and shy." Toby also started having epileptic fits first thing in the morning.

After "diabolical" exam results, Toby changed schools from the private to the state sector, where a special-needs teacher also recommended the Sunflower Trust. "We had seen a top paediatrician about the fits," says Patricia, "and he had told us that medically there was nothing more he could do. So we thought we've got nothing to lose."

Unlike most natural health clinics, where one therapist practises one therapy, the Sunflower Trust takes an integrated holistic approach.

The clinic, which is in Guildford, Surrey, was set up by Mark Matthews, an osteopath, 20 years ago. He had suffered from dyslexia as a child. Matthews claims the Sunflower therapy can help children with dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and even autism.

If what he believes is true, the treatment will make children "perform better, feel better, achieve more and have greater self-esteem" if the underlying causes of the problems, such as misalignment of the skeletal system, neurological chemical imbalances, nutritional deficiencies and low energy levels, are tackled. Many of the children who are referred to the Sunflower Trust have already been assessed by GPs and paediatric specialists and are deemed to be beyond help, or "at the end of the line".

Toby was born during a difficult breech birth, and Matthews believed that his "cranial reflexes were inactive and delayed, and mechanically he was out of alignment". After Toby had been measured against a spinograph chart, Patricia says: "I could see for the first time that one limb was longer than the other, and his head was not sitting on top of his spine properly."

Matthews believes that if a child's skeletal system is out of alignment it causes stress to the whole body and can exhaust the child's system. He claims his observations suggest that children with learning difficulties are often out of alignment.

"After the initial treatment, Toby started to play outside, whereas before he wouldn't have had the energy to even leave the house," says Patricia. Treatment, which involved a tailor-made course of cranial osteopathy and applied kinesiology, with nutritional supplements such as omega-3, 6 and 9 oils, started weekly for the first six weeks, before spacing out to a session every three months. The number of fits began to decrease and to lessen in intensity before disappearing completely. Toby, now 16, was assessed by an educational psychologist this summer after taking his GCSEs, and was given a 16-point IQ rise from his first assessment six years ago.

This claim to a rise in IQ in children undergoing Sunflower therapy has recently been researched in a three-year study by the University of Surrey. Some 61 children found to have dyslexia were assessed in the Guildford treatment rooms, and the results showed a 66 per cent improvement in neurological and other tests, with an overall rise in IQ of 12 per cent.

RICHARD CANNON



Sean Smith, 8, spells out the word "concentrate" while being manipulated by Mark Matthews

Sunflower therapy

What is it? A holistic therapy that incorporates osteopathy, neuro-linguistic programming and nutrition. The belief is that by treating the whole person the therapy will be more effective. The treatment includes five assessment stages: structural, as in looking at the skeletal system; neurological; biochemical, ie, intolerances; and psychological.

Suitable for Helping children suffering from dyslexia, dyspraxia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Cost The seven-stage integrated treatment programme usually takes between 8 and 12 sessions over eight months, and costs between £400 and £800. The Trust also has a charitable arm that offers bursaries.

Contact The Sunflower Trust (0845 0547509; www.sunflowertrust.com)

Although IQ is deemed to be constant throughout adulthood, it is accepted that it can change in childhood.

Meanwhile, in the bustling Guildford treatment rooms, Sean Smith, 8, has arrived with his mother for his third session. Smith came with an NHS report from a local ADHD clinic which classified him as having "opposition defiant disorder", which was "rooted in learnt behaviour and emotional reaction to difficulties in his own development, and possibly within the family".

The reality behind the blurb meant that he was having problems with reading and writing, temper tantrums, and showing aggression to his younger brothers and classroom friends. It is difficult to equate the diagnosis with this quiet little boy sitting attentively on the bed.

Matthews has already practised applied kinesiology (the study of body movement) and cranial osteopathy (gentle manipulation of the skull) on Sean that morning, and during the session that follows involving a spelling strategy, Sean is relaxed. When his mother returns to the

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE? DR TOBY MURCOTT

Does Sunflower therapy help children with learning difficulties?

Anecdotal evidence says yes and the fact that educational professionals recommend it suggests that they believe it does. The problem with asking "Does Sunflower therapy work?" is that it is not a single treatment but many different ones added together. Clinical research struggles when asked to assess a complex multi-treatment regimen. The fact that the therapy is individually tailored creates more problems as clinical trials are difficult to conduct when the treatment given to each patient varies. One of the challenges for medical research is to develop good ways of testing this type of complex, individualised, treatment.

Is complex, individualised treatment unusual?

No. Medicine is peppered with multiple treatment regimens. Someone with cancer might receive surgery, drugs, physiotherapy, counselling and advice on nutrition and lifestyle. Again it is extremely difficult for clinical research to provide clear-cut answers to the best approach. Doctors have to use their own skill and experience alongside the evidence.

Is it effective for children?

There are hints that some of the individual steps could help children with learning difficulties. Nutrition is implicated in a number of learning disorders, including dyslexia and ADHD. A single case of chiropractic helping a child with a curved spine linked to ADHD was reported in 2004.

It is possible to speculate that an approach like this, one that examines every aspect of a child's life, can help the family as a whole to adjust to the problem and that improvements may come as a result. But proving this would be very difficult.

Dr Toby Murcott is a former BBC science correspondent

room, Sean, who was slow to write his name at the beginning of the session, spells "concentration", forwards and then backwards for her. She is amazed. "Much of what we see here are symptoms of neurological disorganisation," Matthews claims. "We get bugs in the software and we need to clear them," he continues, as he demonstrates the homework he is giving Sean, lifting up his arms and legs at the same time as reciting a poem in an odd robotic dance in order to activate different parts of his brain at the same time.

Matthews's mission is to help the 300,000 children in this country who suffer from learning difficulties. "We've treated more than 1,000 patients in the past 15 years in this clinic alone, and I've trained 18 practitioners in Devon, Scotland, London and Oxford," he says. "We've treated 20 children for free with bursaries this year, and we hope to treat another 40 next year." For the sake of the Tobys and Seans waiting with their mothers in the waiting rooms, where others have failed, he deserves to succeed.