

# TRUE TALES

CASE STUDY SPOTLIGHT



## Massage Therapy for Autism Spectrum Disorder

A mother with a three-year-old son with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a neurological condition that can make communication and social skills difficult, told massage therapist Dan Vidal about her son's condition in the hopes of improving both his speech and anxiety levels.

The client's Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist scores showed a 22 percent improvement.

**THE PLAN.** A few weeks before the start of the case study, Vidal met with his client's mother multiple times to discuss how one of her primary goals for her son was to improve his sensory overload levels. "In speaking with the client's mother about his health history, she revealed to me that he had been stuck in the birth canal with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck during delivery," Vidal says. "This made me think that the client might have suffered a significant distortion in the alignment for the cervical vertebrae, and possible occlusion of the vertebral blood vessels as a result." Remembering what a fellow massage therapist had done with a similar case, Vidal decided to focus much of the massage work on the C1 and C2 vertebrae.

The client saw Vidal twice a week for five weeks, and sessions ranged from one to two hours in length. Periods of play were also incorporated into the sessions to help put the client at ease. "Usually treatment could only be implemented for one to two minutes at a time before the client would start to squirm," Vidal recalls. "Many times treatment was implemented with the client sitting in my lap while his mother distracted him with an iPad."

**THE RESULTS.** "The client's progress was primarily monitored using the Autism Treatment Evaluation Checklist (ATEC)" Vidal says. "His ATEC scores improved by 20 percent immediately following the first treatment session." This improvement continued through the five-week period, with the client's ATEC scores jumping from a 20 percent improvement to a 22 percent improvement. In the weeks following treatment, the client's mother reported that her son demonstrated increased levels of attentiveness, as well as an improvement in his ability to form vowel-consonant combinations.

**WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT.** Vidal encourages other massage therapists working with clients who have similar backgrounds to his to be patient and to also not force anything. "Take what the client gives you and focus your time and energy on building rapport. It will pay off," Vidal says. ☉



#### EXPERT PROFILE

*Daniel Vidal is a massage therapist at the St. John-Clark Pain Treatment Center in Clearwater, Florida, as well as at the Sarasota Pain Treatment Center in Sarasota. He was awarded an Honorable Mention in the Massage Therapy Foundation's 2017 Student Case Report Contest for his "Massage and Atlanto-Occipital Mobilization to Improve Symptoms in a Boy with Autism."*