

Clinical trials have shown massage therapy as a viable complementary treatment positively impacting some of the characteristic behaviours of autism. Two important studies have emerged in this area within the past few years, both from the Touch Research Institute (TRI) in Miami, Fla.

Touch therapy may be beneficial in reducing the autistic behaviours of inattentiveness, anxiety, attention span, touch aversion and withdrawal. Researchers said this response may be related to the one-on-one attention and predictability of the contact in the study, as compared to a more generalized social touch. Similarly, these factors may account for the improvement in off-task behaviour. Additionally, activity to the vagus nerve (key cranial nerves) enhanced by touch therapy could also account for increased attentiveness in the classroom.

Parents often feel hurt in response to the aloof nature of autism and also feel hindered in their spontaneous parenting instincts, such as cuddling. Not only did the children accept their parents' touch, parents also reported more cooperative behaviour with daily tasks, such as dressing, and a higher level of relaxation in their children overall. At the conclusion, the study team noted parents reported feeling closer to their children and felt that the touch therapy had opened a communication channel between themselves and their children.

Massage Therapy for Autistic Children
The Touch Research Institute's Results
By Shirley Vanderbilt

Originally published in [Massage & Bodywork](#) magazine, February/March 2003. Copyright 2003. Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals. All rights reserved.

Touch Research Institute, University of Miami School of Medicine, FL 33101, USA