



Pediatric Behavioral Health from the Perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is gradually gaining acceptance as a valid form of treatment for chronic and acute pain in the general population. Studies are emerging that confirm its effectiveness in the pediatric population as well. Many common childhood ailments respond well to TCM. This article discusses how TCM can also be used to treat behavioral concerns in the pediatric population. By using the principles and models of TCM that are effective in treating physical pain, behavioral issues in a child can also be addressed. The implications of this are significant as behavioral issues, anxiety, and depression are a growing concern in children and young adults.

Traditional Chinese Medicine in Western Medicine Practice

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been practiced in Asia for thousands of years. It has been a slow process for western medicine to begin to consider it valid, and has not yet fully embraced and accepted it. Scientific studies have aided the process of better acceptance of acupuncture and herbal medicine. National Institutes of Health (NIH) studies have shown that acupuncture is an effective treatment for: headaches, osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia, dental pain, low back pain, asthma, carpal tunnel syndrome, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow and addiction [1]. Vickers et al addresses the effectiveness of acupuncture for chronic pain [2]. Acupuncture for tension-type headaches is shown to be effective according to Lynde, et al. [3].

Acupuncture and herbal medicine, the major components to Chinese Medicine, are a means to treat physical pain. It may be used in conjunction with traditional therapies, with other complementary therapies, or as a single therapy. Anecdotal evidence suggests that illnesses other than pain,

such as gastro esophageal reflux, hypertension, depression, and menopausal symptoms to name a few, can be effectively treated with Chinese Medicine.

TCM in Pediatrics

TCM is also used in the pediatric population. Pediatric patients benefit from Chinese medicine in a number of ways. A review of research done with pediatric acupuncture reveals promising results in treatment of chronic pain, pediatric migraines, enuresis, constipation, allergies, and post-operative vomiting. "While acupuncture holds great promise as a treatment modality for diverse pediatric conditions, a significant amount of research is necessary to establish an empirical basis for the incorporation of acupuncture into standard of care" [4]. McDonald et al show that acupuncture and acupuncture therapies are well tolerated and effective in providing pain relief in the pediatric population [5]. There are also implications for addressing child behavior with TCM. Less recognized but no less important than physical ailments, is the TCM approach to behavioral concerns in the pediatric populations. Stephen Scott Cowen, MD has

brilliantly addressed ADHD through the 5-element system of Chinese Medicine in his book *Fire Child, Water Child* 2012, New Harbinger Publications. The potential for successful intervention of TCM on children and behavior are significant and should not be discounted.

Treating from the Inside Out

Chinese medicine practitioners treat illness (physical, emotional, and mental) from the inside out. This means that rather than treating symptoms for short term relief, Chinese medicine treats the underlying cause of the symptoms. That is, treating the root to resolve the symptoms. When they address the root cause of what is causing illness, pain, or behavior – they are treating from the inside. By treating the inside first, then the outside responds as symptoms begin to resolve. Treating from the inside out is one of the foundational principles of TCM.

Pediatric Emotional Health and Behavior According to TCM

Behavior can be viewed as a symptom to an underlying stressor experienced by the child. From the TCM perspective, the stressor is the root, and the behavior is the branch. Or, put another way, the stressor is what is causing the behavior. A stressor is something in the environment that is conflicting with the child's inner self. This conflict causes a child to feel fearful, insecure and/or anxious. When a child feels these emotions, and doesn't know what to do with these uncomfortable feelings, they act out. Their behavior is a manifestation of these unpleasant, even confusing feelings that they are experiencing within themselves. The stressor is the root to be addressed, and the behavior is the symptom that manifests.

In order to address a behavior, the root cause (the underlying stressor) needs to be identified and understood. By understanding what is behind a child's behavior or anxiety, one can identify the root and can better know how to help. Knowing a child's element type is the first clue to understanding why the behavior is manifesting.

The 5-Element Model

The Chinese base their medicine on the natural world around them. One of the operative models in TCM is the system of 5-elements of nature. A Chinese medical doctor may use this system to diagnose illness and then develop a treatment plan. By determining a patient's element type, the doctor is better able to help and treat the patient on an individual basis. Often, diagnosis and treatment are aimed toward the patient's element type. According to TCM, it is ideal to have a balanced element type – not excessive and not deficient.

Proper balance brings optimal health, both physically and emotionally.

The five elements are: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Each element type has characteristics and qualities unique to that element type. The characteristics apply to their physical make-up as well as their mental or emotional being. For instance, a person who falls under the category of a metal element will be a person susceptible to skin problems such as eczema, allergies, and to respiratory ailments. In addition, a metal person's personality tends to be organized, structured, honest, and thrives on predictability.

The 5-element system is likewise, an effective way to gain insight into a child's physical, emotional, and behavioral state of being. Their element type corresponds with their inner nature, their essence, which is who they are at the core. By thinking of a child's element type as their inner nature, much can be understood about a child's behavior and what is the root cause of it. A child's inner nature is their inner spirit, their essence of who they are at the deepest level. It shapes the child's personality, temperament, behavior, and how they perceive and interact with the world around them. Children are born with their inner nature and it is an important and inherent part of each child. This inner nature needs to be acknowledged and nourished. Nourishing inner nature is a way to ensure a well- balanced element type.

Holistic Parenting

Parenting to the child's inner nature is parenting to the individuality of their child, meeting their needs at their elemental level. Each of the five elements has their unique characteristics. Each element type has its particular weaknesses or stressors which are what trigger a child to behave in a certain way; and each type has its strengths which are what motivates and enlivens a child. By paying attention to the child's element type one can better understand what is driving their actions and behaviors. For instance, one of the 5 elements is water. Children, who are water element types, tend to be deep thinkers, philosophers, creative and imaginative. They live in their own world of imagination and they like to be alone. They have little need for social interaction, activity, or much stimulation. In fact, social interaction, crowds of people, and excessive physical contact are all sources of stress to a water child.

Many parents want their children to be social, involved in extracurricular activities, to be outgoing, and have lots of friends. While this is appropriate in many respects, there are some children, (especially water types) for whom this is not the best approach and in fact will be a struggle for them. Taking the water element example further, when a water child is triggered, when something (such as being forced to

be socially interactive) is conflicting with their inner world, this conflict makes them feel uncomfortable, insecure, or even fearful. As a response, they will respond with certain behaviors such as withdrawal, apathy, or depression. These responses are typical for water children, and are simply signs that something is wrong in their environment and is causing them stress. The overstimulation of social interaction is the stressor or the root cause of the behavior, and the resultant withdrawal or apathy is the symptom or the branch. Address the overstimulation, and the behavior will resolve.

Another example is the wood element. Wood type children are very active, outgoing, vocal, explorers, and seekers of excitement and danger. Wood children tend to be challenged in the typical classroom setting because it is very difficult for them to sit still and listen for long periods of time. Their element is all about moving and experiencing life through movement. When they are triggered by being told to sit still and be quiet, that trigger brings out a reaction of anger and frustration. When they lash out with anger, it may be considered 'bad' behavior. However, it is more helpful and insightful to view it as simply a response to their inner nature feeling threatened and expected to conform in a way that conflicts with their wood element type.

Some schools are beginning to allow for some of their students to move more during class time, providing them with physical outlets. By providing this type of environment, especially for wood children, they are bringing in a more conducive, positive environment for wood type kids. When wood children are allowed to move and explore, they feel in better control of themselves which feeds their confidence and positive feelings about themselves.

Conclusion

Just as physical pain or illness can be effectively treated with TCM, so can a child's behavioral symptoms. Identifying and

understanding a child's inner nature through understanding their element type, is the first important step in addressing behavior. When a child's inner nature is acknowledged, respected, and then nourished, there is a greater chance that their external self will flourish. This approach lessens the conflict of what a parent thinks their child should be and act like and instead helps the parent to see who their child is at the core – their inner essence and their inner nature. Honoring a child's inner authentic self, will help allow the child to grow up confident, secure, and emotionally healthy. It is a heart-felt approach to holistic parenting.

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