

Babies, acupuncture and the secret to a good night's sleep

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Babies as young as six weeks old are receiving acupuncture to treat complaints including sleeping and feeding problems and even developmental disabilities such as autism.

Parents are turning to the alternative therapy when traditional treatments do not have the desired effect.

Mary, a mother of two from Sydney's eastern suburbs, has been sending her daughters Savannah and Hailey to an acupuncturist since they were just a few weeks old. Three-year-old Savannah and one-year-old Hailey initially received acupuncture to treat colic, and have continued treatment for other ailments including chickenpox, colds and flu.

When Savannah was diagnosed with autism a few months ago, Mary turned to acupuncture, in addition to more traditional therapies, to see if it would help. She said that since the treatment began 10 weeks ago, the results have been encouraging.

"I believe it's played an important part in our overall treatment of Savannah in bringing about beneficial changes in her," said Mary, who did not want to use her surname.

"We've really seen Savannah come back out of her shell, we're getting better eye contact, she's engaging more and initiating play.

"Both her speech therapist and occupational therapist, independently and unprompted, have told me they've noticed a wonderful increase in her interaction."

Dr Clare Cunningham, a paediatrician at Sydney Children's Hospital in Randwick, said she was not aware of any scientific evidence that showed acupuncture could assist in improving conditions such as autism.

But she said some parents had found varying degrees of success using alternative therapies such as massage and dietary changes to treat the symptoms of autism.

"Almost all parents with a child with autism will at some stage turn to alternative medicine," she said. "It doesn't surprise me that some parents would use acupuncture."

Bondi Junction acupuncturist and registered nurse **Maria Deligiannis**, who treats Savannah and Hailey, said babies made up almost a third of her clients, with demand for toddler treatments growing in recent years.

She said most parents came to her wanting to treat problems with breast feeding, digestion, excessive crying, sleeping, colic and reflux.

She said she used a combination of acupuncture, gentle massage and dietary change to treat the ailments.

One-year-old Ella Hurrell began acupuncture sessions with Ms Deligiannis when doctors could not work out what was causing her temperature to drop dramatically at night.

Her mother, Suzanne, said Ella's temperature improved almost immediately after the first session.

She said Ella had been treated by doctors with several courses of antibiotics but her condition improved when she started acupuncture and homeopathy, and changed her diet.

Dr Kerrie MacDonald, a paediatrician and Australia Medical Association counsellor, said it was important before starting any treatment for parents to find out what the possible side effects were and to balance that with the benefits.