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# HOW WE LIVE

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Pam Tindall (right) performs qigong massage on Jake Erikson. Tindall also taught his mother, Karen Erikson (left), to do a daily 15-minute protocol. "It wasn't until we did alone that anything changed," Erikson says.

MARK B. GIBSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

# A touch of calm

A research project on qigong massage therapy to help autistic children brought relief – and “spectacular days” – to one family

By **KERI BRENNER**

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**THE DALLES** — Two years ago, Karen Erikson was praying for relief from the hell her life had become since her youngest child, Jake, was diagnosed with autism.

“He would sit in a corner rocking, banging his head against the wall, biting himself, screaming uncontrollably,” recalled Erikson, 41, who lives in the Columbia River Gorge town of Lyle, Wash. “Jake was withdrawn, detached from the world. He didn’t speak, and he wouldn’t allow anyone to touch him.”

A lot has changed in two years. Erikson sat on the living room couch during a recent interview and beamed as 3½-year-old Jake — now talkative and friendly — played with his toys and ran up to guests to chat.

“Are you hungry?” Jake asked a visitor, displaying one of his toys for inspection. He bounded off to

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**Karen Erikson,**  
whose son, Jake,  
is diagnosed with autism

romp around on the floor with another guest.

“He would have never been able to tolerate this many people in a room before,” Erikson said.

A notice in a December 2008 edition of the White Salmon Enterprise newspaper led Erikson to apply for Jake to take part in a research project on the use of qigong massage to treat childhood autism.

“They were seeking 65 kids from the Portland area and one from the gorge,” Erikson said of the Qigong Sensory Training study, run by a Western Oregon University research team led by Dr. Louisa Silva.

Supervising Jake would be Pam Tindall of Possibilities Consulting in White Salmon, Wash., a Silva-trained qigong massage therapist.

Results of the study, published in *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, are promising. For Jake, the results were nothing short of miraculous.

“I used to think, ‘Will he ever be able to have a normal life?’” Erikson said. “Now I see him hanging

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## Qigong: Theory based on problem of blocked energy

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out with other kids at preschool, and he just blends in."

Oregon Health & Science University researchers, usually reluctant to diagnose children younger than 3 as autistic, had diagnosed Jake because "they said it could be nothing else," Erikson recalled.

Erikson could not take Jake grocery shopping because he would throw tantrums. He wouldn't speak or make eye contact with anyone. He wouldn't allow his mother or anyone else to touch him.

"He used to hate any sounds," Erikson said. "That fan that just turned on would have sent him running out screaming."

Qigong (pronounced "chee-gung") massage works on the premise that the primary problem in autism is a blockage of sensory information. Exactly why the blockage happens in the first place is a matter of national debate, but the WOU research deals just with the matter at hand — releasing the blocked energies.

"Open the sensory pathways with qigong massage and the child quickly begins to receive coherent data from the senses," Silva said.

State education officials have yet to form an opinion on the treatment.

"This is something that is new, and we do not have a position on it," said Eric Richards, director of operations for the Oregon Department of Education's spe-

cial education division.

Tindall said the protocol is a type of patting motion more like a hands-on light touch session than a muscle-kneading massage. The first round of patting, Tindall said, clears energy blockages along the body's 12 primary meridians, or energy pathways as identified in Chinese medicine. Blocked energy is released and dissipated downward, through the feet.

Then the patting motion is repeated, this time with the intention of "filling" the unblocked empty spaces with fresh, vibrant energy. Other movements involve stretching the arms and, finally, doing bicyclelike pedaling with the legs.

"Go faster," Jake said, clearly enjoying the bicycle pedaling, while Tindall holds his feet and follows along.

When she lays down his legs after the pedaling, Jake is calmer and seems happy to rest on his back.

During the five-month study that began in March 2009, Tindall worked on Jake twice a week for about 30 minutes a session. She also taught Erikson to do a daily 15-minute protocol at home. Erikson did it twice a day — once first thing in the morning and once at night.

"I started out just doing it at night, but I found if I did it in the morning, we had spectacular days," Erikson said.

About once a month, Erikson took Jake to the research study site in Portland, where he received another qigong session and staff evaluated his progress.

"I had taken him previously for occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy," Erikson said. "But it wasn't until we did the qigong that anything changed."

For information on Qigong Sensory Training, go to <http://qsti.org>