

The gentle touch

A new kind of reflexology is finding favour in schools thanks to its calming effects, says Lorna Strong

It's hailed as "ground breaking" by one head teacher and is helping children with autism to improve how they function and learn.

Functional Reflex Therapy, or FRT for short, is a new approach to reflexology that has been developed by a former teacher, Lorraine Senior. She has more than 20 years' experience working with children with autism, neurological impairment, learning difficulties and complex health needs.

Reports from parents

For some time there have been reports from parents of children with autism that the likes of reflexology and massage therapy have helped to release tension in their children. They testify to improvements in sleep issues, reduced displays of anxiety and tantrums and even the lessening of digestive problems.

Senior, who turned from being a teacher into a qualified reflexologist, developed FRT with the support of the UK's Association of Reflexologists. The relaxation technique is now being delivered in schools for children with SEN, including young people on the autism spectrum.

FRT embraces the reflexology

principle that different points in the feet, lower legs, hands and forearms relate to different areas of the body. By applying skilful touch to specifically identified areas, the therapy is thought to encourage positive change.

Special toolkit

However, FRT differs from conventional reflexology in using a special toolkit, kept in a bag. Therapists use the kit bag to encourage pupils to take responsibility by preparing for their session, and to make choices within the therapy. The

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idea is to help progress in meeting goals in areas such as speech and language and occupational therapy.

The first school to introduce FRT was Essex-based Harlow Fields School and Sixth Form College, for pupils with SEN. Head



Hand in hand: FRT in the classroom



The developer: Lorraine Senior



Ready and willing: Lorraine Senior, pictured carrying out FRT on a pupil, says that pupils choose to attend sessions and to engage in the therapy

teacher Sue Davies says of the therapy: "It gives pupils a chance to relax in a deeper way than perhaps they have ever known."

Senior has provided regular one-to-one therapy at the school and Davies says she has been surprised at how well children have adapted. "I'm Impressed with the way pupils with the most challenging behaviours have responded," she says, adding that they "willingly choose to attend the sessions and willingly choose to engage".

Senior claims that using FRT on a regular basis can help to alleviate the stress and anxiety issues that are often seen in children with SEN. She says it is particularly effective if used "in the moment", when it is most needed.

Identified targets

Pupils may start their session by lying on a reclining chair to reduce anxiety and stress before any hands-on therapy starts.

While keeping to her main focus of helping the child to relax, during a session Lorraine often assists members of the school's multi-disciplinary team in reaching identified learning targets. This may include introducing new symbols to support the speech

and language therapist, or working on independence skills to support the occupational therapist.

Davies believes the therapy should be rolled out in more schools. "It has a place on the timetable in every school in the country," she says. In her view: "Children's mental health and wellbeing is of paramount importance and children can only truly learn when they are in a comfortable place emotionally."

Home life

Senior can also work with parents, helping with issues that may impact on the child's wellbeing and home life. She says: "I look to address issues highlighted in the parental questionnaire with the application of reflexology. This may include issues such as sleep problems or digestive disorders."

After a session, Senior gives parents a photograph, video or written feedback so they can see how their child is getting on. She mentions that a parent was recently so impressed with what she saw in a video – how quiet and happy her son was, and how he lay still most of the time – that she booked herself onto a workshop to learn how to carry out FRT at home.

Take it further

Parents, carers and members of school multi-disciplinary teams can learn an FRT routine through workshops, while school teams can incorporate the routine into the classroom timetable to complement behaviour management strategies. Training is also available for qualified reflexologists. Find out more at www.functionalreflextherapy.co.uk