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*A boy hugs his father after Qigong massage.*

## A Parent-Delivered Treatment for Autism

# The Qigong Sensory Training Program

by Maria Broderick Ed.D., Lic. Ac.,  
and Louisa Silva, M.D., MPH

“When we believed that autism was permanent and unchangeable we wouldn’t have thought of trying to improve it. Now, we believe autism is treatable.

We do the massage every day.”

*(Deb M., mother of a 6-year-old)*

If you were told that you could help reduce the severity of your child’s autism with your own gentle touch and loving energy, how might you respond? If you were told that in the first five months of therapy, tantrums would cease, sleep be restored and communication improve, would you leap at the chance? Researchers from Western Oregon University report that a simple daily routine involving organized parent touch can do just that. Parents who have been trained to deliver a form of healing called qigong (pronounced *chee gong*) can in fact make a difference in their children’s ability to connect with others, regulate their behavior and ultimately overcome some of the myriad barriers to development that autism presents. Researchers at Western Oregon University, led by Dr. Louisa Silva, have developed and researched a program that teaches parents how to deliver this active, yet gentle, hands-on intervention. Parents who have been through the program report a series of encouraging transformations in both their children and themselves.

“I remember starting the program and thinking if I could only feel there is some hope here, I’d be so happy by this time next year. I never dreamed he’d emerge so tuned in, so vocal, so inquisitive, so loving, so aware and so happy. I’ll never stop singing the praises of qigong. Qigong offers parents and children hope of a better life.”

*(Tina B., mother of a 3-year-old)*

Working daily with their children, parents learn to administer 12 simple, hands-on patting, pressing and shaking movements that address most areas of the body in an organized way that draws on Chinese traditions of pediatric massage. The techniques have been demonstrated by research to bring about gradual, steady improvements in children’s awareness and self-regulation. Touch is “the mother” of all senses, and from early in life, triggers relaxation and bonding. For a child, parent touch is more powerful and soothing than any other. Parents learn to adjust their technique to help their children’s bodies relax and open up. The techniques are designed to improve circulation, and as the improvement manifests, discomfort with touch on heads, hands and feet is replaced with eye contact and smiles. The protocol, known as Qigong Sensory Training (QST), can be learned either via a book and DVD or through an interactive workshop led by a trained practitioner. Once learned, regular practice of the protocol empowers parents to take a new view of what is possible for their children’s development. Parents who have been through the formal training describe themselves as less stressed, more connected to their children and more hopeful for their futures.

“Qigong calmed him down, and it calmed me down. It gave us a tool for his behaviors when he was having his off days. But more than that, I feel like qigong opened up things for him, so he can learn how to be himself and be okay with his learning style, and learn how to interact with the world. It just opened him up for that connection.” *(M.M., mother of a 6-year-old)*

## Review of the Literature

Several research studies, including a randomized, controlled design study, have been conducted to date on the effectiveness of Qigong Sensory Training for autism spectrum disorder. In one study, at the end of five months of QST therapy, treated children showed improved behavior and social/language skills, and decreased sensory and self-regulatory impairment, compared to the children in the control group (Silva et al., 2009). In a recent review of 130 cases (Silva, Schalock, & Ayres, in press) of children under the age of six being treated with the protocol, the effects of treatment on the main symptoms, such as behavior, social/language delay, sensory and self-regulatory impairment, as well as on parenting stress, were observed and compared. After the first five months of treatment, parents had reduced the severity of their children’s autism by an average of 30 percent. Improvement was confirmed by teachers who were blinded to the treatment group; in addition, there was also a large decrease ( $p < .0001$ ) in parenting stress.

## QST Movements

QST involves 12 simple movements delivered gently by the parent, often as part of a bedtime routine. The movements are straightforward and easily learned. As one parent notes,

“It’s a lot easier than I thought it was going to be. At first I was like, ‘Oh, my gosh! I’m not ready for this.’ But it’s not hard. It really isn’t!”

*(Alice M., mother of a 5-year-old)*

The first two movements involve patting motions on the head, back, legs and feet, and help the child settle excess energy, agitation, irritability and sleeplessness. The third and fourth movements focus on the ears, sides of the body, shoulders and hands, and help the child develop language. The fifth and sixth movements engage the arms and fingers in a gentle swinging motion, and help the child connect emotionally with the parent. The seventh movement is on the chest, and helps the child to self-soothe. The eighth and ninth movements target the belly and legs, and strengthen digestion and/or alleviate constipation. The tenth and eleventh movements gently massage the lower legs and feet, helping to settle the child, and the twelfth movement integrates the effects of the full protocol. Children who resist touch can be gradually introduced to the movements and, over time, come to anticipate the parent’s touch with enthusiasm. Children often memorize the movements and “help” the parents deliver QST by supporting the movements with their own hands, vocalizations and body movements.

As part of the training, parents are encouraged to follow

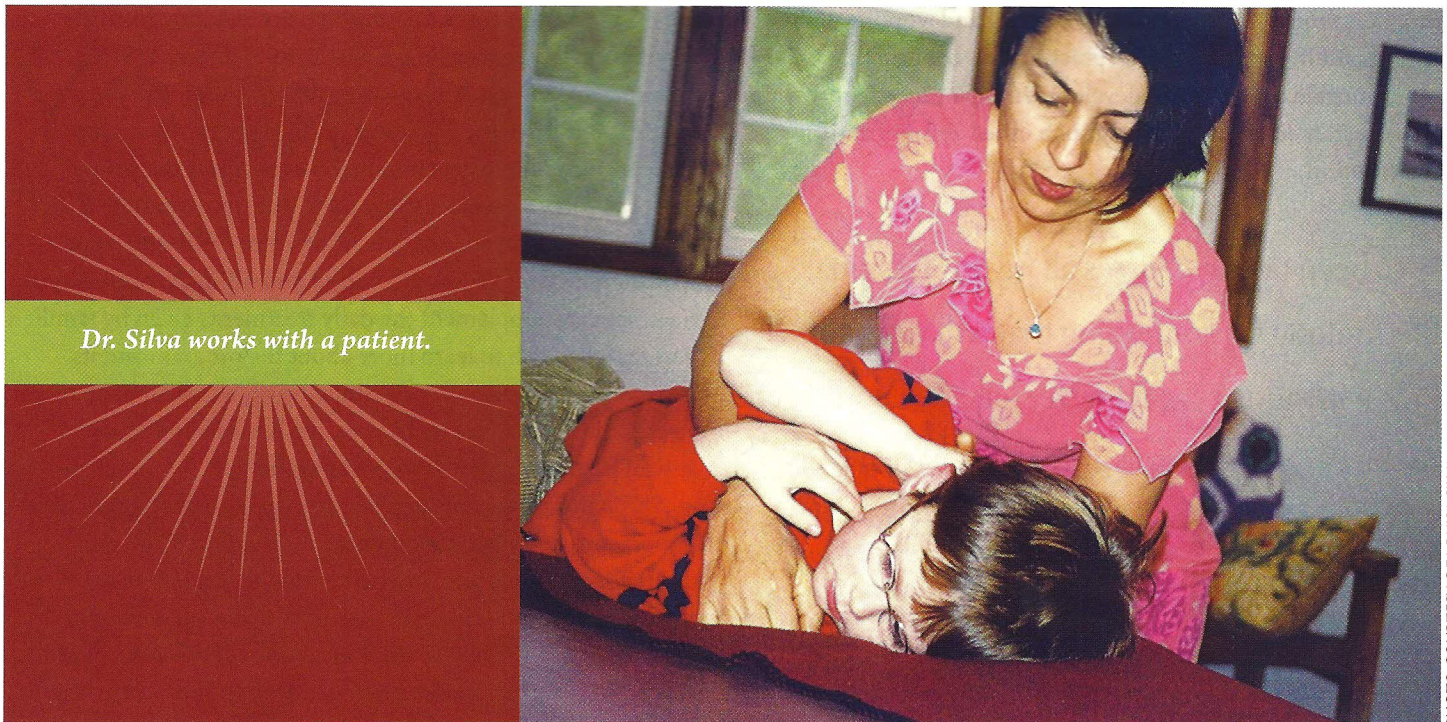


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Dr. Silva works with a patient.

Chinese medical tradition and develop their own *qi* (life force) to make the energy reserves within them available to treat their child. Basic qigong exercises that bring energy to the parents' hands are demonstrated. Parents who persist with these exercises find themselves more centered, better rested and more able to manage the stresses associated with caring for an ASD child. They also come to understand that their child's situation can be improved by their own efforts, and that realization builds resolve and restores hope.

"We started looking for sensory help and had no idea that other areas like speech and language would also improve. I had no clue. I am just dumbfounded by the whole thing!"

*(Bonnie L., mother of a 5-year-old)*

### Parent and Practitioner Observations

Parents who complete the program often become advocates for the approach. Interviews with parents who have been through the program reveal their appreciation for the changes they see in their children. Parents comment on improvements both in self-regulation and sensory regulation.

"He used to have major tantrums, hitting himself, throwing himself against the wall. Now we might have a minor tantrum now and then, but then he calms down."

*(Dan S., father of a 6-year-old)*

"Now he wants to brush his own teeth; he lets us brush his hair. I even checked him for lice last night. When I started, he said, 'Don't hurt me.' After a moment, he said, 'That doesn't hurt.' I was checking him like any other kid and he didn't scream or fight."

*(Keith R., father of a 4-year-old)*

Practitioners add their voices to parents' observations of the effects the QST program has on families. A number of early intervention specialists, occupational therapists and acupuncturists have taken the professional version of the QST

program, which involves in-depth training and working with families for five months. These practitioners confirm that QST results in gains in children's development that exceed those they are accustomed to observing through other forms of autism intervention.

"I've been taking courses all my professional life, looking for something that will work for kids with autism, and I never felt like I could get to the core of the issue until this. I have never seen change like it has occurred with these kids. They just opened up and changed before my eyes. First off, really basic, foundational things changed. Their sensory systems changed. Their bowels, sleep, and eating changed. I have been working with kids for a lot of years using different methods as an OT, and this is the first time that I have found a way to have an effect on the sensory systems that could change their basic interaction with life, and other people." (K.S.)

### Supplementary QST Resources

Over 300 families have been trained so far in QST. Most of the families reside in Oregon, where the program began and has been most widely publicized. More recently, families in Massachusetts and Connecticut are participating in the first East Coast version of the parent training. It is the intent of

the program team at the Qigong Sensory Training Institute to support all parents who wish to learn to deliver QST at home by making available a variety of resources at [www.qsti.org](http://www.qsti.org). In addition to the book and DVD, parents can sign up for workshops for instruction on how to deliver the parent protocol. They can also register for a "dual intervention" program hosted by trained practitioners of QST who work with families over a 5-month period, providing 20 professional treatments to supplement the daily treatments given by families. Parents who wish to learn more about the program and its effects can also purchase a documentary film available on the website that shows the journey of families and children with autism participating in the QST program.

Through Qigong Sensory Training, parents can realize the opportunity to direct their love for their children and their desire for closeness into an intervention that requires only their hands, their heart, their persistence and a few simple instructions to deliver. To learn more about how you can get started with this ancient medicine in your home, please visit [www.qsti.org](http://www.qsti.org).

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maria Broderick, Ed.D., Lic. Ac., is a licensed acupuncturist and doctor of developmental psychology. She is currently taking QST training from Dr. Silva through the QST Institute.

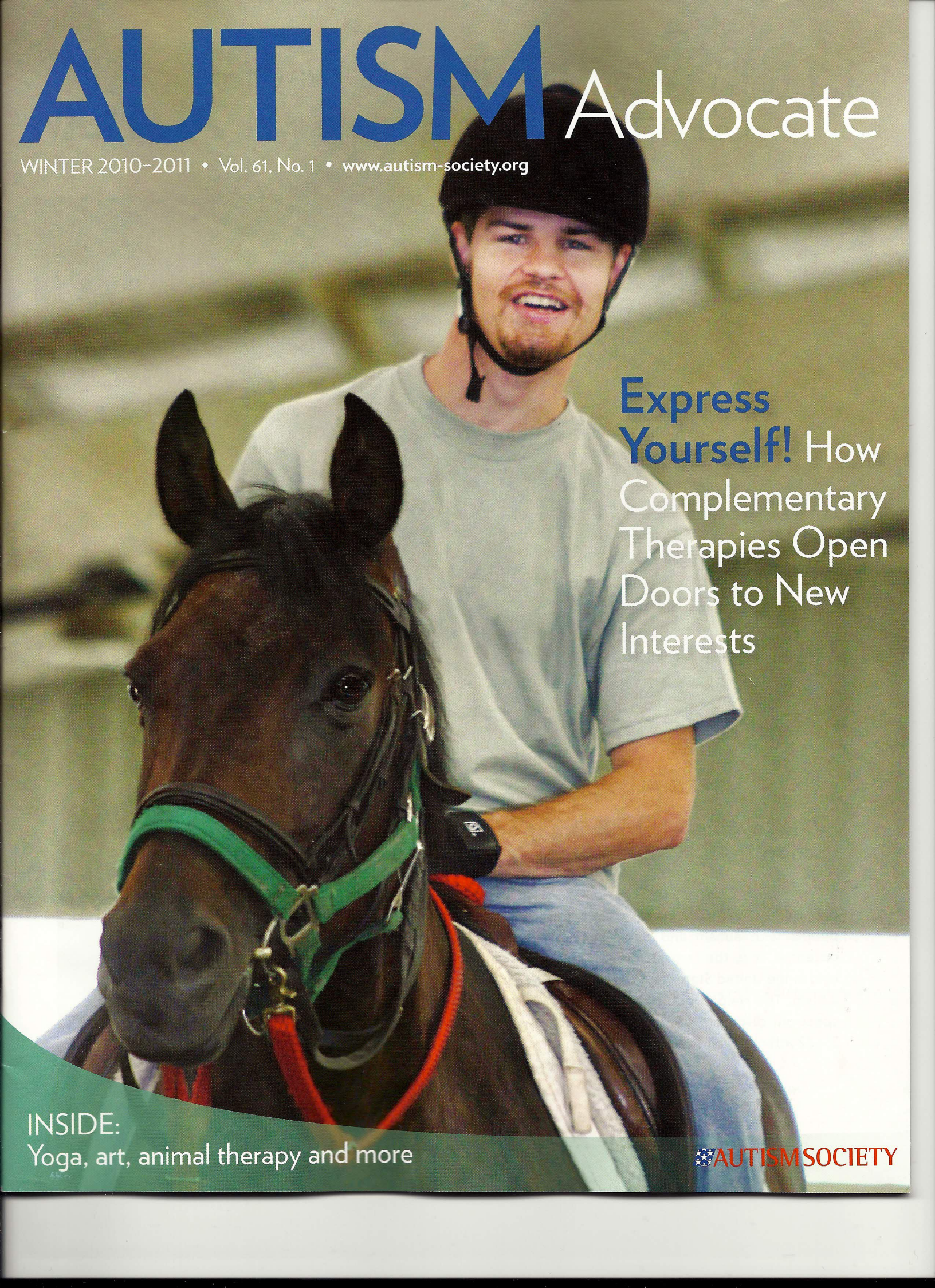
Louisa Silva, M.D., MPH, is a physician of both Eastern and Western medicine, and is the primary researcher for the QST intervention.

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