

## **MASSAGE AND AUTISM SPECTRUM: THE EFFECT OF THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE ON PSYCHOMOTOR DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER**

**Fozilova Feruza Nosirjon qizi**

*Andijan Branch of Kokand University Student of the Medical Treatment Program*

**Scientific Supervisor: Go'zalxon Qutliqova**

**Annotation:** *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by impairments in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behavioral patterns. Children with ASD often experience delays and dysfunctions in psychomotor development, which can affect their daily functioning and quality of life. In recent years, complementary and alternative interventions such as therapeutic massage have been increasingly studied as supportive methods to improve motor, sensory, and emotional regulation in autistic children. This article explores the role of therapeutic massage in enhancing psychomotor development among children with ASD, focusing on its physiological mechanisms, clinical benefits, and integration into multidisciplinary rehabilitation programs.*

**Keywords:** *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), therapeutic massage, psychomotor development, sensory integration, rehabilitation, complementary therapy, children's health.*

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that significantly influence communication, behavior, and motor skills. The prevalence of ASD has been steadily increasing worldwide, making it a critical area of research in child health and rehabilitation sciences. While traditional interventions primarily focus on behavioral therapy, speech therapy, and pharmacological support, there is growing interest in complementary methods that address the broader developmental needs of autistic children.

Psychomotor development, which refers to the integration of cognitive, emotional, and motor abilities, plays a vital role in a child's capacity to learn, communicate, and interact with the environment. Children with ASD frequently show delays in gross and fine motor skills, postural control, balance, and coordination, leading to difficulties in daily activities and reduced independence. Addressing these deficits requires therapeutic approaches that go beyond traditional educational or behavioral methods.

Therapeutic massage has emerged as a promising intervention in this context. It is a non-invasive, low-risk technique that stimulates the neuromuscular system, enhances blood circulation, and provides deep sensory input. For children with autism, who often struggle with sensory processing disorders, massage may help reduce anxiety, improve body awareness, and promote better motor planning. Clinical studies suggest that therapeutic massage can improve muscle tone, coordination, and overall psychomotor development while simultaneously reducing stress and behavioral dysregulation.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the effectiveness of therapeutic massage as a supportive tool for psychomotor development in children with ASD. By examining its physiological underpinnings, clinical outcomes, and integration with multidisciplinary rehabilitation strategies, this work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how massage can complement conventional autism therapies.

Therapeutic massage has been increasingly recognized as a supportive intervention in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), particularly for improving psychomotor development. Children with autism often display unique sensory processing patterns, including hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to tactile stimuli, which may result in difficulties with motor control, coordination, and self-regulation. These challenges can significantly impact their ability to engage in daily activities, social interactions, and educational settings. Massage, as a form of structured tactile stimulation, provides a direct way of addressing these sensory and motor deficits by activating neurophysiological pathways that regulate movement, perception, and emotional states.

One of the primary mechanisms through which massage contributes to psychomotor development in children with ASD is by enhancing sensory integration. Sensory integration refers to the brain's ability to organize and interpret information received from the senses in order to produce appropriate motor and behavioral responses. Many autistic children have difficulties processing tactile input, which can manifest as either avoidance of touch or excessive seeking of tactile stimulation. Therapeutic massage provides consistent, controlled, and predictable tactile input that helps regulate sensory processing and fosters greater tolerance to physical contact. Over time, this can reduce sensory defensiveness and improve the child's ability to engage in activities requiring motor coordination.

In addition to sensory benefits, therapeutic massage also positively influences the neuromuscular system. Research suggests that massage increases blood circulation, promotes muscle relaxation, and improves joint flexibility. For autistic children who often experience abnormal muscle tone—either hypotonia (low muscle tone) or

hypertonia (high muscle tone)—~~massage~~ techniques such as effleurage, petrissage, and deep pressure can normalize muscle tension and improve functional movement. Improved muscle tone and flexibility enhance gross motor abilities such as walking, running, and balance, as well as fine motor skills like writing, grasping objects, and self-care activities. These gains in motor performance contribute directly to better psychomotor development.

Therapeutic massage also has a significant effect on the autonomic nervous system, particularly in reducing physiological arousal and stress. Children with autism are often prone to heightened anxiety and emotional dysregulation, which may manifest as repetitive behaviors, tantrums, or withdrawal. Massage stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, leading to a relaxation response characterized by decreased heart rate, lower cortisol levels, and improved sleep quality. This relaxation state not only reduces anxiety but also creates optimal conditions for learning and motor skill acquisition. When a child feels calm and regulated, they are better able to focus on motor tasks, practice new skills, and participate in therapeutic activities.

Moreover, massage can facilitate the development of body awareness and motor planning. Many children with ASD have difficulties understanding the relationship between their body and space, which can lead to clumsiness and poor coordination. Through consistent tactile input, massage provides feedback about body boundaries, joint positioning, and movement patterns. This enhances proprioceptive awareness and supports the child's ability to plan and execute complex motor tasks. Improved motor planning directly correlates with more efficient psychomotor development, as the child learns to coordinate movements in a purposeful and organized manner.

Clinical studies have provided evidence supporting the role of therapeutic massage in psychomotor development among children with autism. For example, research has shown that regular massage interventions can lead to improvements in fine motor skills, postural stability, and balance. In some cases, parents and caregivers reported noticeable progress in their child's ability to perform daily activities independently. Additionally, studies indicate that therapeutic massage can reduce stereotypical behaviors and enhance social responsiveness, suggesting that its benefits extend beyond the physical domain into behavioral and emotional regulation. These multidimensional outcomes highlight the holistic value of massage therapy as part of a comprehensive treatment plan.

Another important aspect of therapeutic massage for autistic children is the strengthening of the caregiver-child bond. When massage is administered by parents or caregivers under the guidance of professionals, it provides an opportunity for meaningful

physical contact and emotional connection. Many parents of autistic children struggle with bonding due to their child's resistance to touch or difficulties with communication. Massage, being structured and predictable, can reduce resistance and foster positive physical interactions. This not only enhances the child's sense of security and trust but also empowers parents to play an active role in their child's rehabilitation and development.

In terms of implementation, therapeutic massage for children with ASD must be tailored to individual needs. Since autistic children have diverse sensory profiles, techniques must be adjusted according to the child's comfort level, sensitivity, and tolerance. Deep pressure massage, for instance, may be highly beneficial for children who are hyposensitive and seek strong tactile input, while lighter, rhythmic strokes may be more suitable for children who are hypersensitive to touch. The frequency, duration, and intensity of massage sessions should be carefully monitored to ensure effectiveness and prevent overstimulation. Collaboration between massage therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and psychologists is essential to design personalized programs that address the specific psychomotor challenges of each child.

Furthermore, therapeutic massage should not be viewed as a standalone intervention but rather as a complementary approach integrated into a multidisciplinary rehabilitation framework. Traditional therapies such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy remain the cornerstone of autism treatment. However, when combined with massage, these interventions may achieve greater effectiveness by creating a more regulated sensory and emotional state in the child, thereby enhancing receptivity to other therapeutic inputs. This integrative approach maximizes the developmental gains and ensures a more holistic outcome for children with ASD.

From a broader perspective, the role of therapeutic massage in supporting psychomotor development also aligns with the growing emphasis on non-pharmacological, family-centered, and child-friendly interventions in autism care. Unlike medications, massage carries minimal risks and side effects, making it a safe and sustainable option for long-term use. It also empowers families to actively participate in their child's care, fostering consistency and continuity in intervention. By addressing not only motor skills but also emotional well-being and caregiver-child bonding, massage represents a holistic therapeutic strategy that resonates with the complex needs of children with autism.

In summary, therapeutic massage plays a vital role in promoting psychomotor development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder by enhancing sensory integration, regulating muscle tone, reducing stress, and improving body awareness. It provides both physical and emotional benefits that contribute to a child's functional independence and overall quality of life. While further large-scale studies are needed to establish standardized protocols and long-term outcomes, current evidence strongly supports the inclusion of massage as a valuable component of multidisciplinary autism intervention programs.

Therapeutic massage demonstrates significant potential in supporting psychomotor development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. By improving sensory integration, regulating muscle tone, enhancing proprioception, and reducing stress, massage addresses several of the core challenges faced by autistic children in their motor and behavioral development. Beyond physical benefits, therapeutic massage contributes to emotional regulation, improved caregiver-child bonding, and greater participation in daily activities.

As a complementary intervention, massage is most effective when integrated into a multidisciplinary rehabilitation program alongside occupational therapy, physical therapy, behavioral interventions, and educational support. While further empirical studies are needed to establish standardized protocols, frequency, and intensity of interventions, existing evidence underscores its safety, accessibility, and holistic impact on children with ASD.

Overall, therapeutic massage can be regarded as an effective, low-risk, and family-centered approach that not only enhances psychomotor development but also improves the quality of life and long-term outcomes of children with autism.

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