



Staff practise on each other during training on an Inset day

All hands and feet

Sophie Chalmers examines a therapy that helps students relax and puts them in the right frame of mind for learning

‘Sometimes being in control is very important for young people with autism and they find it hard to give this up,’ says Kathleen Wall, interim headteacher at Harlow Fields School and College for pupils aged three to 19 who have severe and complex needs.

‘Having someone do some reflexology on their hands or feet gives them permission to let go and let someone else take control, even if it is just for 30 seconds initially.’

‘Some pupils who are constantly on the go are able to relax in the moment,’ she continues. ‘Other pupils are not keen on touch, and the Functional Reflex Therapy (FRT) gives them a framework to accept someone touching them in a good way.’

Finding calm in a chaotic world

Reflexology is based on the principle that different points on the feet, lower leg, hands, face and ears correspond with different areas of the body. It involves applying pressure using thumbs, fingers and other parts of the hands to work these points to effect physical changes in the body. There are differing theories as to how and why it works, but what is certain is the sense of relaxation and wellbeing it induces.

FRT is a new therapy designed for children and adults with autistic spectrum disorders, learning difficulties, neurological impairment, challenging behaviours and complex health needs. Developed by former school teacher and qualified reflexologist Lorraine Senior, it draws on traditional reflexology practices

supported by the FRT toolkit to help with preparation and communication.

For people on the autistic spectrum or with ADHD, the support this framework provides allows them to sit or lie peacefully yet purposefully and feel a sense of calm in what can seem like a frenetic world.

The benefits in the classroom

‘The nervous and endocrine systems are influenced by states of long-term stress, anxiety, anger and tension,’ says Mrs Senior. ‘The stress related to the fight or flight response makes learning abstract information difficult. For example, it is easier to learn your times tables in a relaxed frame of mind.’

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‘FRT therapists use simple hand and foot routines to improve relaxation and mood, relieve tension, encourage social interaction and increase receptiveness. Providing it on a regular basis has been shown to alleviate stress, anxiety, anger and tension, particularly in the moment.’

Mrs Wall agrees. ‘We offer students a range of therapies to meet their different needs,’ she says. ‘Those who receive FRT look forward to it and it has a knock-on effect on the rest of their school day – they are more relaxed and return to class better able to cope and ready to carry on with their lessons.’

A parent’s perspective

Tahira Crow, whose child receives FRT at Harlow Fields, comments: ‘After several weeks attending the sessions, my son began to be more comfortable with the approach. He started to accompany the reflexologist to the therapy room independently and began recognising the session on his visual timetable, indicating to the therapist that he was listening, and following some instructions. He started carrying the FRT bag for the therapist and removed the towel, which meant he was helping to prepare himself and the space for the therapy.’

Video recordings gave his parents the opportunity to see how he was enjoying the sessions: he lay still in the reclining chair (most of the time), quiet and happy. ‘I feel this has been a valuable therapy

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for my son and I enrolled on the FRT workshop for parents to learn how to do the relaxation routine themselves.'

She adds: 'We have since incorporated the practice at home – my son recognises the FRT bag and is more than happy for me to carry out the routine I learned on the workshop. It is lovely to be able to offer him something that he enjoys and helps him relax. We are hoping that, in time, he will be able to ask for an FRT session by going to get the bag himself.'

Quantifying the benefits

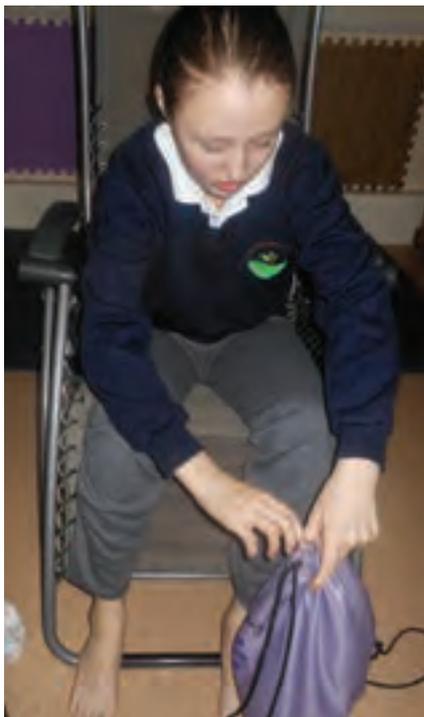
One six-year-old, who was selectively mute at school, spoke for the first time at the end of one of his FRT sessions, twice asking for 'more'. Later that day, his teacher reported that he also said 'Hello' at the appropriate moment during registration.

'The evidence is all anecdotal,' says Mrs Senior, 'but feedback from the children suggests they enjoy it, teachers have noted that they are more receptive on their return to class, and a few parents have commented that their child sleeps well on the day of their therapy.'

'However, the benefits can be hard to quantify because a number of other factors may affect the impact. For example, if a child goes back into a lesson they find stressful, the effects of the therapy may be short-lived. And sometimes something outside everyone's control can affect a session itself, such as maintenance staff starting the lawn mower outside. While I could hardly hear it, the sound was unfortunately not far enough away for the young person I was working with.'

Working as a team

The primary outcome of FRT may be relaxation, but FRT therapists



Students help prepare by carrying the toolkit bag to the therapy room and getting out the towel for the session

“The framework supports pupils to sit or lie peacefully yet purposefully and feel a sense of calm”

see themselves as part of a school's multidisciplinary team and, as such, often work on secondary targets set by the student's teacher or other team members.

These may include walking appropriately from the classroom to the

therapy room, following instructions, making choices (for example, whether they want music on or a blanket laid over them) and independence skills (for example, removing shoes and socks and putting them back on at the end of the session). The speech therapist might be introducing a new symbol – say, 'wait' or 'listen' – and ask the FRT therapist to incorporate this into their session.

'Sometimes the teacher wants to encourage a child to move more freely around and become comfortable in, or at least tolerant of, an unfamiliar area of the school,' says Mrs Senior. 'Children usually have around 20 half-hour sessions over two terms. That gives them enough time to recognise what is going on. If they have a difficulty going to new places, it might be a few weeks before they get to the therapy room at all.'

Extending the reach

To maximise the impact of the intervention, Mrs Senior has developed the FRT Rainbow Reflexology Relaxation Routine to teach members of the multidisciplinary team, teachers, TAs, parents and carers some of the relaxation techniques. This gives them the opportunity to run sessions with individuals and small groups in the classroom or support their child at home.

'Mrs Senior ran a couple of training sessions at Harlow Fields on an Inset day and we all practised on each other,' says Mrs Wall. 'It was great fun and the routine was easy to learn. A number of teachers have now worked the FRT relaxation routine into their timetable so that there is continuity when Mrs Senior is not there – often they have sessions in reflection time or during PSHE lessons.'

FRT therapist Janet Hardman provided training for parents and staff at Rowan Park School, Merseyside, for students aged three to 19 with severe, complex, profound and multiple learning difficulties, ASD and sensory impairments. Karen Lynskey, headteacher, comments: 'This was very positively received and enabled parents and staff to use the approach throughout the day and at times when pupils become upset and agitated.'

Mrs Lynskey continues: 'Pupils are calmer, less anxious and therefore more able to learn after their sessions. The behaviour of one young person, who was particularly tactile resistant and very closed off from others, has improved dramatically. FRT is having very positive outcomes for pupils and their families.'

Find out more

www.functionalreflextherapy.co.uk



Positive touch techniques and holds to specific areas on the hands, feet and lower legs promote relaxation and may encourage other changes within the body