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# Unlocking a Child's Potential

At Oxygen Oasis Hyperbaric Wellness Center, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is helping to minimize the effects of autism. *by* BILL DONAHUE



**Arti Vyas knew early on that her young son wasn't developing at the same pace as other children his age.** Like any caring parents would, she and her husband did not hesitate to invest their time and resources into learning about the root of their son's developmental delays and then seeking interventions to help him "catch up."

"He's been in therapy since he was nine months old," Vyas says of her son, though she prefers not to use his first name. "He's had developmental delays from the very beginning. His speech was delayed. He wasn't walking or crawling on time. Common sense told us we had to take action."

Now seven and a half years old, Vyas's son has been making steady improvements through occupational and speech therapy, but in her quest for the most comprehensive treatment, Vyas also sought out additional therapies, including hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBOT for short) at Oxygen Oasis Hyperbaric Wellness Center. The Joint Com-

mission-accredited facility came highly recommended from a friend. As an added benefit, the facility was also based in Langhorne, not far from the family's home in Bensalem.

"A friend from a social group told me all about the therapy's ability to help children on the spectrum," says Vyas. "We wound up going for 20 sessions last year—they call the sessions 'dives'—and the dives went very well. The staff was very accommodating in terms of the time we needed; my son is a morning person, and he also liked one chamber in particular, and they always made sure we got that one."

Vyas completed the therapy along with

her son, the two of them lying in the same monoplace HBOT chamber for each hour-long session. The sessions began in June 2017 and concluded a month later. Afterward, Vyas saw "a big improvement" in her son.

"Before we did those dives, he was having a hard time explaining himself," she says. "Now he's able to tell us how he's feeling, and he can hold a conversation. Last year he never could do that. His handwriting has improved, too, and he's continued to get better."

## 'A Million Steps Forward'

To the uninitiated, these strides might seem relatively minor, but to a parent of a child with autism or some other developmental delay, they represent "a million steps forward," according to Victoria Bliss-Calkins, owner of Oxygen Oasis.

With April being Autism Awareness Month, organizations such as Oxygen Oasis

ABOVE: U.S. Army veteran David Torres, shown here using HBOT to treat for post-traumatic stress, along with his 3-year-old daughter, Gia, who has autism

aim to shine a spotlight on this family of complex medical and neurological disorders, which affect many as one in 68 American children (predominantly boys), according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More so, they want families to know innovative therapies such as HBOT can address many of the symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorder.

“The effects can be life changing,” Bliss-Calkins says.

HBOT is a form of noninvasive wound healing that has been used to treat everything from multiple sclerosis and Parkinson’s disease to sports injuries and post-traumatic stress. During each dive, which typically takes one hour, recipients are immersed in 100 percent oxygen at two to three times the normal atmospheric pressure. The environment increases oxygen concentration in the body at 15 to 20 times greater than normal at the cellular level, thereby accelerating the body’s ability to heal, according to Bliss-Calkins.

For children with autism, HBOT can reduce neuro-inflammation, which helps poorly functioning brain cells function more effectively. As a result, recipients tend to experience significant improvements in overall functioning, receptive language, social interaction and eye contact, according to research published in the *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry*. Also, because the therapy improves blood flow and oxygen delivery to all tissues of the body, it can address other conditions common among individuals with autism, including skin and digestive disorders.

“The level of improvement ranges by individual, depending on the severity of the disorder,” Bliss-Calkins says. “Sometimes these children come in and they’re extremely excited, vocal and physical; they’re walking on their tiptoes, which is a condition called stimming; they do not make eye contact; and sometimes they’re not able to speak. Usually, the first changes parents notice after the therapy is in the way their child behaves.”

She says parents may notice “remarkable” behavioral changes in their children.

“Parents will tell us, ‘We can’t believe how rapidly they are developing,’” she adds. “Some children go from stimming to walking flat footed. Others go from being super excited to being much calmer. We had one parent who literally had no interaction with their child other than being a caregiver, and now they’re able to have that bond.”

“For these families,” she adds, “these are big steps in the right direction.”

## Early Intervention

For patients with autism, Oxygen Oasis typically recommends a treatment plan of 120 dives in



Oxygen Oasis’ caring and accommodating staff is trained to help patients receive treatment for everything from autism and Parkinson’s disease to sports injuries and post-traumatic stress.



The Joint Commission-accredited facility offers treatment in both multiplace and monoplace hyperbaric chambers.

total. The dives are split into three increments of 40, separated by several “off weeks” between increments, according to Jason Friel, a certified hyperbaric technician who serves as safety and operations director for Oxygen Oasis.

“It depends on the individual,” says Friel. “HBOT heals the brain, and as the brain has time to heal, the individual will not lose any of the ground they gained. It’s safe for all ages, so the therapy is equally effective whether you’re 18 years old or four years old. That said, the earlier the intervention the better.”

Bliss and Friel are quick to emphasize that HBOT is not a cure for autism. However, when used in combination with other adjunct therapies, physicians and caregivers have noted significant improvements in communication, interaction and behavioral health in patients with autism. In order to facilitate this multifactorial approach, Oxygen Oasis works closely with comprehensive education and support organizations such as Talk About Curing Autism (TACA). The facility also has a certified MAPS (Medical Academy of Pediatric Special Needs)

physician—Michael Montico, M.D.—on staff. Dr. Montico specializes in the medical issues associated with autism. (Editor’s note: Dr. Montico will be one of the featured speakers at the upcoming TACA PA Autism Conference, scheduled for May 11 and 12, at Penn State Great Valley in Malvern.)

Vyas says she has such faith in the therapy that she signed her son up for 20 more HBOT sessions, scheduled to take place after the end of the school year.

“I highly recommend it,” she says. “Each child is different, but I think it’s something every parent of a child with autism or developmental delays has to try. I don’t understand exactly how the therapy works, but it works. From what I’ve seen in the changes from my son, it’s been amazing.” ■

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