

Tuesday Afternoons with Hamna

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Quite some time ago, I received a phone call from Hamna's mum enquiring about BabyGym. The first thing I asked her was "how old is your baby?" expecting the usual answer "3- 6 months", but no, I was told she is 3 years old and Autistic. I had just qualified as a BabyGym Instructor and had never worked with special needs kids before, so her call caught me off guard but I told the mum I would definitely get back to her. I did a little research and then found that with these special Autistic angels, deep massage was really important, and that made sense why mum would want to do BabyGym. The second thing I did was to get in touch with Joanne, the Advanced BabyGym Instructor I trained with, and asked her advice on Hamna and the family's need for BabyGym. Although I was out of my comfort zone, I was very eager to do BabyGym with Hamna so a week later I made the call and explained the process:

- a) We would do the classes at their house, since she was comfortable with her surroundings, we could get a better advantage of actually getting to work with her
- b) I would break down each BabyGym session in 2, thus doing half hour sessions, so that this facilitated for her short concentration span, also this is easier when dealing with her mood and behaviour
- c) We would use a doll to demonstrate on mostly, as it was more important for mum to get familiar with the exercises so that she could repeat them later on Hamna.

We finally began the first lesson, I was scared and didn't know what to expect. Hamna was hyperactive, jumped around the room, and made an agitated sound. She tried to pull my head scarf off and I had to block my eyes, she would also start to throw herself at her mum, signalling the end of the session. Through this entire time Hamna's mum was absolutely amazing; she persevered and kept on massaging her. By the 5th week of BabyGym, we were doing 'Week 3' of the BabyGym programme and that is where we started to see drastic changes in Hamna's behaviour. She calmly sat with us on the floor, while we did the exercises, allowing her mum to massage her and to give her different things to 'taste and smell'. When I walked away from the day's session I had tears in my eyes; I had never felt so fulfilled in my life; it was the first day Hamna made eye contact with me, she participated so well and she even gave me a greeting hug and kiss.

At this time her mum advised me of the following day-to-day changes:

- Hamna was starting to take naps in the afternoons which she never did before, and her mum commented on how calm and relaxed she had become
- Hamna was starting to listen and follow instructions better. They went to the river and she kept running to the water's edge, disregarding her mums warning. Mum did the ear massage and Hamna calmed down, and didn't go near the water's edge again
- Hamna would usually throw whatever she was holding, but during our 6th session I saw something different. We played with blow bubbles and I closed the bottle and handed it to her, she tried to open it and then took the bottle and placed it firmly back in my hand. So I opened the bottle again and blew a few more bubbles and handed her the bottle back, and she repeated this exchange a good few times, smiling and laughing, and making eye contact throughout

- Her mum handed me a glass of juice, Hamna climbed into my lap and placed her hands on the glass and guided it to her mouth, holding the glass steadily. Although I held the glass for security, it was all her own controlled movements
- I also used an earbud to 'draw' in the palm of her hand, and when I released the ear bud she used it to draw in my hand. I thought this was a coincidence, but we continued with the game a few times
- Mum and Hamna are using the smell and taste games to communicate with food. Hamna can let mummy know which foods she wants by smelling the food and reacting appropriately, instead of throwing it when she doesn't like it
- They went to a nursery, and they were walking past the farm, and she stood very still, obviously not liking the smells, mum and dad gently took her hand, and she calmly continued walking, whereas in the past she would get upset and throw tantrum
- They have also found that she is starting to interact with her cousins; her mum says she actually recognised a cousin after a long time, displaying a smile and wanting to play
- She is starting to recognise her clothing, at night she knows where her pyjamas are and brings them to mum
- She has been saying the word 'UP', which is another progressive sign, as she didn't talk at all
- And then for me personally this is the most touching, Hamna's granddad visited them, and she took him by the hand and led him to her room, trying to communicate and show him something



Her mum messaged me in July, excitedly telling me that Hamna's test results have come out clear of Angelman's disease. Also, she had her 6 monthly visit with her Paediatrician, with astonishing results, they were told that her progress is amazing, that her brain has started to develop again. With this really exciting news, and encouragement from all her therapists, her parents are very excited to continue with BabyGym. So we will start from BabyGym 2: Firm Foundations' 'Week 1' again and progress all the way to BabyGym 3 Advanced sessions as we know repetition is the key to success. This will refresh all mums' previous knowledge and give us time to focus on each of the senses, muscles and milestones and end with speech development.

Working with Hamna and her mum has been such a positive experience, we had only hoped for a calmer Hamna and we had achieved that and so much more. I have now worked with her and mum for 3 months and am totally amazed at the changes and development in her. Mum and dad are very dedicated and have tried anything and everything to help their child, including BabyGym, Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy. I look forward to the rest of the journey with Hamna, and hope that the next update will hold even more success.

I feel proud that BabyGym is providing Hamna with a physical Firm Foundation, and look forward to the emotional and intellectual progress to follow soon.