During and after five weeks of tai chi lessons, adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) showed less anxiety, daydreaming, inappropriate emotions and hyperactivity, according to a study by the Touch Research Institute (TRI).

"Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: benefits from Tai Chi" was conducted by Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D., Tiffany Field, Ph.D., and Eric Thimas.

ADHD, often treated by drugs such as Ritalin, is characterized by inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. A 1998 TRI study showed that massage was effective in increasing focus, improving mood, reducing fidgeting and lowering hyperactivity in adolescents with ADHD. This study examined whether tai chi, the Chinese martial art of slow-moving, meditative exercise, would have similar effects.

Thirteen adolescents with an average age of 14-and-a-half years and a diagnosis of ADHD participated in the study. They were taught tai chi postures for 30 minutes, twice a week for five weeks.

Sessions consisted of breathing exercises accompanied by slow raising and lowering of the arms, twisting and turning of the arms and legs, shifting body weight, rotating and changing direction.

The Conners Teacher Rating Scale was used by the subjects' teachers to evaluate their behavior prior to the tai chi classes, during the classes and two weeks after the classes ended. The 28-item scale rates overall hyperactivity, as well as subcategories of anxiety, asocial behavior, conduct, dreaming and emotion.

Results of the study showed that the adolescents' teachers perceived them as less anxious, emotional and hyperactive. These improved scores remained consistent throughout the two-week follow-up period, without tai chi.

"The results of this study and our earlier massage therapy study provide encouraging support for two alternative therapies for treating adolescents with ADHD," state the study's authors.

"In addition to little or no side effects, especially appealing are the documented effects of Tai Chi and massage therapy for reducing anxiety and hyperactivity, the major and most difficult symptoms to manage in children with ADHD." (See "Massage Eases ADHD," May/June 1999.)
