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It Was Never “Just a Phase”

Most parents sense it long before there is a label. Their baby cries for hours and cannot be soothed. Their toddler barely eats, cannot poop regularly, or never seems rested. Their preschooler melts down over “tiny” things, dreads transitions, or seems constantly “on edge.”

Years later, that same child may be sitting in an office hearing words like ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD, Tourette’s, or “sensory processing disorder.” What if these are not separate problems, but different chapters of one story—the story of a nervous system under too much stress for too long?

This article is about that big idea: that early struggles like colic, poor weight gain, reflux, and constipation are not just “phases” to survive, but early warning lights on the dashboard of the autonomic nervous system— and how chiropractic care can support healthier trajectories for body, brain, and behavior.

One Nervous System, Many Ages, Many Names

Think of your child’s nervous system as the master “regulation system” for everything: sleep, digestion, heart rate, immune function, movement, emotions, and attention.

A key part of this system is the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which has two main modes:

- Fight-or-flight (sympathetic)—wired for survival, defense, and speed
- Rest-and-digest and social engagement (parasympathetic/vagal)—wired for growth, healing, connection, and learning

In an ideal world, children move fluidly between these states. They get activated when needed such as running, playing, coping with everyday stress, and then easily settle back into calm, connected, “ready to learn” mode. That flexibility is a sign of a healthy, adaptable nervous system. But many kids do not live in that perfect world.

Birth stress, early adversity, sleep deprivation, inflammatory foods, toxins, screens, and chronic stress in the home all add load to a baby’s fragile nervous system. If the stress is bigger than the child’s capacity to adapt, dysfunction happens.

The same system, different symptoms

- In infancy, that overload may look like colic, reflux, constipation, shallow or restless sleep, weak feeding, or “hard to soothe.”
- In toddler and preschool years, it may appear as developmental delays, late walking or talking, sensory overwhelm, rigid routines, frequent meltdowns, or trouble with potty training.
- In school-age years and beyond, as life demands more self-control and higher-level thinking, the same underlying dysregulation may show up as ADHD, anxiety, OCD, Tourette’s, learning challenges, chronic tummy pain, or “mystery” behavior problems.

From the outside, these look like totally different conditions; inside the body, they are all expressions of the same core issue: a nervous system that has been stuck in survival mode and has had trouble organizing itself for growth.

The “Hidden Player” in Early Life

Most parents think of colic, reflux, constipation, weak feeding, or “hard to soothe” as gut-related problems. Pediatricians often look for food allergies, formula issues, or structural causes. These are important to rule out.

But the gut is not working alone. It is wired directly to the brain through the vagus nerve—a key parasympathetic (rest-and-digest and social engagement) pathway. When the nervous system is stressed and the vagus nerve is under-functioning, digestion slows, muscles tighten, and normal function is disrupted.

The same “vagal brake” that helps the gut relax also helps the heart slow, the breath deepen, and the body shift out of fight-or-flight into safety and connection. When that brake is weak or inconsistent, children don’t just have digestive symptoms—they also struggle with:

- Settling to sleep and staying asleep
- Handling transitions and surprises
- Regulating emotions and impulses
- Focusing, listening, and learning

The big idea is this: Gut dysfunction is often an early indicator of nervous system problems. They can be the first chapter in a story that, if not redirected, becomes ADHD, anxiety, OCD, or other neurodevelopmental labels later.

Where Chiropractic Fits: A Different Door into the Same System

In the traditional medical model, they often chase symptoms: a reflux medication here, a laxative there, a behavior chart later, and—years down the road—a stimulant or anti-anxiety drug. Each step may be helpful or even necessary at times, but none of them ask the crucial question: How well is the nervous system itself communicating and adapting? Chiropractic starts with that question. In chiropractic, a vertebral subluxation is more than a misaligned vertebra, it is a pattern of neuro-biomechanical stress.

- Distorted input into the brain can cause distorted output: changes in muscle tone, posture, functional movement, organ function, and—crucially—autonomic balance.

Research in chiropractic and child development has shown that subluxations can:

- Increase “noise” in the system and lower a child’s stress threshold
- Push the body toward sympathetic (fight-or-flight) dominance
- Alter sensorimotor integration—how the brain filters and makes sense of incoming sensory information. In other words, subluxation is about how the child’s nervous system is experiencing and responding to the world.

Connecting the Early Red Flags to Later Labels

When you step back and lay the timelines on top of each other, a common pattern emerges:

1. Early red flags

- Colic, reflux, constipation
- Poor weight gain or “picky” feeding
- Hard-to-soothe crying, very light or restless sleep

2. Emerging developmental concerns

- Delayed motor or speech milestones
- Retained primitive reflexes • Sensory seeking or sensory avoidance
- Frequent meltdowns, rigid routines, school refusal

3. Later diagnostic labels

- ADHD, anxiety, OCD, TS, “behavior disorders”
- Learning challenges, social struggles
- Ongoing gut issues, headaches, chronic pain

From a chiropractic perspective, these are not separate conditions to be treated in isolation, but points along a trajectory shaped by:

- Early stress and adversity
- Autonomic and HPA-axis programming
- Gut-brain and sensory integration
- Subluxation and altered afferent input

This is why a child’s story of dysfunction in infancy matters when evaluating their ADHD and anxiety at age 8. It is why the “baby who never slept” matters when the teenager is on three medications for mood and migraine. The nervous system remembers.

Chiropractic care, when grounded in a brain-based, autonomic-aware approach, offers a powerful way to support these pathways. It can help children move from the “early colic, reflux, constipation, and failure to thrive (FTT)” chapter into a future where their nervous systems are more resilient, their bodies more at ease, and their true selves can shine through more fully.

For many families, that shift is the real miracle.

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