BENEFITS OF MASSAGE FOR INFANTS AND MOTHERS

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In many countries, across many cultures and for many generations, mothers have massaged their babies. Mothers too have received massage throughout pregnancy, during labour and over the first months of parenthood. Yet only in the last 30 years has massage therapy been rediscovered in the West, and only now are we coming to understand its benefits for mothers and children.

Infant massage consists of a simple routine of rhythmic strokes, gentle holds and easy exercises. It is easy for parents to gain competence and confidence in their ability to massage. The routine provides familiarity and a structure. Repetition can help to organize disorganized behaviours. Variation is also encouraged. For example, adding rhymes, songs and games can make the experience more interesting for the baby, or the routine can be shortened or simplified to help a child who is easily over-stimulated.

Infant Massage and the Parent-Infant Relationship

Infant massage helps establish the bond between infant and mother. When birth is a healthy experience, infant massage enhances this bonding. When the mother-infant relationship is interrupted due to illness of mother or child, or when the relationship needs to be established (as in adoption), infant massage helps heal the wounds of separation. Closeness and learning to be sensitive to each other’s cues are the essence of early attachment, and massage enhances both.

Infant massage involves setting aside a special time every day to relate intimately to the baby. Allowing the infant to choose for himself whether or not he wants to be massaged is an important part of the experience. Mothers learn a simple routine: putting oil on their hands, rubbing them together, making eye contact and asking the baby if he wants to be massaged. These behaviours signal that massage is about to begin and the mother should wait for a positive response before proceeding. If a child opens up and extends his limbs, the massage can begin. But if a child withdraws, pulls his limbs in or cries, the mother is encouraged to try again later. Respecting the baby’s response is important and helps develop trust and communication between baby and mother.

Throughout the massage, the child can choose whether or not to continue. Crying is not necessarily a reason to stop; it depends on the nature of the crying. Is it a signal to stop or an expression of emotion? For example, an infant who has had heel pricks may cry when her heels are massaged. This may just be a way of telling her mother about the hurt. It’s not necessarily a signal to stop. Parts of the body can hurt when massaged, yet it may be a “good hurt” that is part of the healing process. The next time that the area is touched, it may not hurt as much. Listening carefully to the cry tells the mother how to respond.

When a mother has to perform painful procedures on her child, infant massage can bring balance by adding pleasure to the mothering experience. Through infant massage, the mother can touch her child in a loving and healing way. As a “non-essential” part of caregiving, it may be less emotionally loaded than other activities. For example, not feeding a child who has difficulty eating has dire consequences, but allowing a child to choose whether or not to be massaged lets both mother and child experiment with choice. The experience may help an over-controlling mother learn to back off without feeling rejected or fearing that doing so will harm her baby.

Physical Benefits of Massage

Focused attention and learning to communicate support the development of emotional attachment. But massage has physical and intellectual as well as emotional benefits. Infant massage increases the ability to handle stress, and studies suggest that massage has a beneficial effect on the immune system (Reite 1990, Ironson et al. 1996). Enhanced weight gain has been found in massaged premature infants possibly due to increased levels of epinephrine, nor-epinephrine and dopamine and increased vagal activity that may increase the production of food
absorption hormones (Field & Schanberg 1990). Massage has also been found to reduce stress hormones and increase brain growth in premature infants (Knaster 1998).

Massage therapy has been used for centuries to enhance health and heal neuromuscular and musculoskeletal problems as well as emotional difficulties. Yet no one is sure of its underlying physiological mechanism. Traditionally, therapeutic massage is thought to increase blood and lymph flow thereby removing metabolic wastes from tissues and improving body functioning. It relaxes muscles, soothes nerves, stimulates the skin and indirectly stimulates the internal organs. Many traditional healing methods include massage as an integral part of their systems. Massage therapy promotes a feeling of health and well-being. Tiffany Field postulates that increased tone of the vagus nerve and insulin hormone secretion are critical to understanding how massage works. Reduction of stress hormones and strengthening the immune system may also play a key role in creating health. Ashley Montagu, author of Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin (1985), thought that tactile stimulation of the skin was a requirement of our species.

Massage therapy is often regarded as “just” a relaxation technique. However, when compared to other relaxation techniques, such as rocking or reading to children or, in the case of adults, other relaxation techniques, such as listening to quiet music, the group that has been massaged always fares better (Knaster 1998).

**Settings Where Massage Has Been Used**

The Touch Research Institute (TRI), founded by Dr. Tiffany Field and funded by Johnson & Johnson, has done over sixty-three studies on the benefits of massage. Here are some examples of their work:

- Massaged full-term babies of depressed mothers had greater daily weight gain, more organized sleep-waking patterns, less fussiness, improved sociability, soothe-ability and interactive behaviour, lower levels of stress hormones and greater serotonin levels.
- Neonates exposed to cocaine who received 15-minute massages hourly, three hours per day for ten days, experienced greater weight gain, had significantly fewer post-natal complications and stress behaviours than the control group and demonstrated more optimal behaviours on the Brazelton (1984) examination.*
- Children with severe burns who received 10-minute massage therapy treatments experienced reduced anxiety, anger, depression, pain and itching.
- Autistic children had less stereotypical and off-task behaviours and increased social behaviours after they were massaged.
- Children with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) were less hyperactive and able to focus longer on tasks after they were massaged.
- Children with severe burns who received 10-minute massage therapy treatments experienced reduced anxiety, anger, depression, pain and itching.
- Infants and neglected children, aggressive adolescents, cerebral palsy, infant colic, cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome and sudden infant death syndrome to name a few. Their website can be reached at www.miami.edu/touch-research/triresearch.html.

Although massage has helped many children with special needs, massage therapy cannot be safely practiced on everyone. Restrictions apply to persons with diabetic, heart or circulatory disorders who run the risk of stroke. If a baby is not well, check with a medical doctor and a registered massage therapist before starting a massage program. Techniques can be adapted to meet special requirements.

**Massage Helps the Caregiver**

Massage can be beneficial to the giver as well as the receiver. “Grandparent” volunteers massaged infants for three weeks and received their own massages for three weeks. After giving massages the “grandparents” experienced lower anxiety and less depression. Lifestyle and health improved. The effects were not as strong for the period they received massage (Field et al. 1997).

**Massage Therapy for Mothers and Mothers-to-be**

Massage during pregnancy, labour and the postpartum period is becoming more widely practised as its benefits are recognized. Pregnancy is a transitional time in a woman’s life, physically, emotionally and psychologically. Massage therapy helps relieve physical discomforts of pregnancy such as postural strain, muscle spasms, oedema, fatigue, stress and tension. In animals, skin stimulation promotes the production of prolactin and mammary and placental development. In many studies the mothering behaviours of animals are enhanced by touch (Montague 1985). Massage therapy can prepare a mother for labour by helping her practice relaxation. She also learns to identify and control the

* For information on the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale, see www.web1.tch.harvard.edu/brazelton/
muscles of the legs, pelvis, back and buttocks. Massage of the perineum helps prepare for labour by stretching the opening of the vagina and is recommended by midwives.

Massage during labour is becoming more common. One study found that a 20-minute massage each hour given by the birth partner reduced labour pains, need for medication (critical when women are allergic to obstetric medication) and delivery time (Field et al. 1997). The women left the hospital in 24 hours and suffered less postpartum depression than new mothers who had drugs (Knaster 1998). Most prenatal classes teach some massage to their mothers and fathers.

Postpartum massage therapy helps restore the body to its pre-pregnancy condition and it helps mothers adjust to the stress of carrying and caring for newborns. Traditionally, mothers in Malaysia are massaged every day for six weeks, beginning on the second day after birth (Field 1997). Massage therapy rehabilitates the skin, connective tissue and musculature of the abdomen. It improves circulation, prevents muscle spasm and can reduce depression and stress hormones. Recovery from Caesarean section is enhanced.

Massage therapy can be helpful for women who have been traumatized. In a study of women who had been sexually abused, women who received massage for 30 minutes twice weekly for a month, reported feeling less depression and life event stress. The control group also experienced less anxiety and stress but had an increasingly negative attitude toward touch (Field et al. 1997).

The scientific understanding of how massage therapy works is just beginning. As more research is done, more people will try it and discover what mothers and their babies have known instinctively for thousands of years. Touch is a fundamental expression of love, and love is the essential human bond. Nowhere is that more clear, or more critical, than in the relationship between mother and child. Ashley Montagu (1971) describes the power of a loving relationship between a mother and her son in Elephant Man.

“The basic plan of the mother-infant relationship, from conception to birth, and onward, is that the loving behavior of the mother and child for one another confers survival and growth benefits upon each other. In this beautiful mother-and-child interconnectedness and interaction the basic pattern is laid out for humanity to follow toward the achievement of healthy growth and development, that is, to live as if to live and love were one.”

References