

Infant Massage - Everyone Benefits

By Maria Mathias, LMT

People often ask what attracted me to infant massage. To answer, I have to go back to 1981, when I was teaching massage at a Midwest community college. Students wanted to know if massage could help children sleep better, help tummy aches, calm children after a tense day at school, or relieve a colicky infant. Searching for answers to these questions led me to my first training session in infant massage instructor certification, and I've been teaching parents infant massage ever since. Why do I teach parents? Because it works: It benefits the baby and the whole family.

A loving massage by a parent enriches a baby's body and soul, and softens many of the "bumps in the road" for a new baby and his or her family. I have worked with countless families who were worn out because of a fussy baby. They tried everything, including taking long rides in the car at night to calm the baby - and, perhaps, to steal a few moments of quiet.

With the exception of babies with medical problems, the rule, rather than the exception, is that massage greatly reduces (if not resolves) fussiness within the first week. This gets the family out of crisis, and helps both baby and parents to sleep better. And since it doesn't take long to see positive results, most parents are motivated to learn more.

History

Infant massage has been around for centuries. It jump-started in the U.S. in the late 1970s; the 1980s was a decade of slow but steady recognition, primarily by parents with "well babies" and the infant massage instructors teaching them; and the 1990s saw an expansion of infant massage into hospital-based inpatient and outpatient programs, as well as community programs servicing families of at-risk and/or special- needs children. Working with these populations clarified the need to create an individualized massage approach that would support each child's unique sensory and nervous systems, thereby defining and birthing a new

paradigm of infant massage.

This approach was assimilated into the well-baby population with the emerging realization that every child is unique, and will, therefore, benefit most from a massage approach carefully designed for his or her changing needs at a given moment. The key to this approach is teaching families to touch their babies deliberately and mindfully, and closely watching the infant for cues that tell whether the touch their baby is receiving is pleasurable, needs to be changed, or should stop altogether.

The growing popularity of infant massage paralleled an increase in research to study the effects of touch on infants, including its effect on premature babies; babies exposed to cocaine; children with autism; and even parents with postpartum depression.

Benefits

The application of infant massage as a catalyst for normalizing a baby's physical and emotional life has a wide range of benefits, including helping to promote relaxation; improving sensory integration; helping aid deeper and longer sleep; encouraging mid-line orientation; assisting in bonding and attachment; helping improve state regulation; assisting in vocalization; stimulating the circulatory and GI systems; assisting in pain relief; and enhancing neurological development.

The benefits of infant massage are a two-way street: The baby usually comes more into accord with his or her own nature, but the parent's experience also is illuminating. Recently, during a parent/baby group session, one baby started to cry very deeply, which caused his mother to cry. She said that until that moment, she had never realized her baby was a person and that he had feelings. She said she felt guilty every time he cried, and she didn't know what to do. She and her husband were both highly successful career people who had not planned on a baby, and now that he was there, they felt lost. But this day was the turning point. With tears streaming down her face, she picked up her son. He stopped crying and became beautifully quiet and alert. Mother and son gazed at each other for about 20 minutes - it was like witnessing a birth. I've seen this profound bonding happen many times, which is why I've continued teaching families for over two decades - I'm inspired by each family's success.

Infant massage contributes to infant-parent attachment. The experience resonates with the baby, while bringing out nurturing qualities in parents. This is why infant massage is advocated as a parenting interaction, rather than as therapy performed by a massage therapist. Many leaders in the infant mental

health field share this view: Infant massage is for those who will be raising the baby over the long haul. This can be a tough pill to swallow for some aspiring infant massage instructors, although the desire to massage babies is almost always discarded after experiencing the powerful effect the process has on families.

Many new parents who massage their babies come to realize over time that the most life-giving returns are related to attachment and deeper communication, and that the experience has helped them to better know their children. Touch has welcomed the new baby into the family structure by demonstrating not only that baby is safe and protected, but truly cherished. All parents have that power at their fingertips.



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