

Infant Massage: Communicating Love Through Touch

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Before birth, a baby is perfectly at home in a mother's body. The warm, watery temperature-controlled world of the uterus combined with the reassuring rhythm of the mother's heartbeat is an environment in which the baby thrives. After twenty weeks gestation, babies are sensitive movement, light and sound. They are aware of the gentle caressing they receive when their mother's belly is rubbed or stroked. As observed in many expectant parents, massaging the mother's belly appears to be innate, and perhaps, unconscious.

The instinctive stroking, along with talking to the fetus as it is massaged has been shown to be beneficial to both parents and their baby. Massaging and talking to the baby are ways parents express their growing bond. And fetuses reportedly respond with recognition to the sound of their parents' voices by moving their legs, arms and head. These early, loving interactions encourage feelings of closeness between parents and their unborn baby.

Birth floods the baby with new sensations and request him to adjust in numerous ways. Many parents instinctively begin to gently touch and stroke their newborn as they gaze into his eyes for the first time. Nurturing touch is a way for parents to help ease the "transition from the womb to the world" for their new baby (Montagu 1986). Massage can be a wonderful extension of the parents' natural impulse to communicate love and concern. And touch is the primary way newborn babies encounter their caregivers and experience their environment.

Touch Research

In the past twenty years, there has been a dramatic increase in research on the benefits of touch in infancy as well as the role of nurturing touch as a factor in enhancing parent-infant attachment security. Early scientific research on the relationship between touch and healthy development involved the use of laboratory animals. Numerous studies demonstrate the importance of touch to facilitate physical growth and healthy emotional and behavioral adjustment in laboratory animals (Hammet 1922, Montagu 1986, Harlow 1958). Research at Duke University (Schanberg 1987) has identified the presence of a

specific "growth gene" which is secreted in response to tactile stimulation in rats.

Frederick Leboyer (1985) observed that for human infants: "Being touched and caressed, being massaged, is food for the infant. Food as necessary as minerals, vitamins and proteins." Massage has been shown to facilitate growth in preterm infants and infants prenatally exposed to cocaine in studies by Dr. Tiffany Field and colleagues at the Touch Research Institute (TRI) in Miami, Florida USA (1996).

Attachment and Bonding

Bonding, as described by Klaus and Kennell (1982), refers to "a unique relationship between two people that is specific and endures through time." Bonding is a process that begins for the parents long before the birth of their baby. Their desire for an infant is often expressed in parents' efforts at quality prenatal care and preparation for a positive birth experience through childbirth education. As the pregnancy progresses, parents report feeling more attached to their baby when they hear the baby's heartbeat, experience the first movement of their baby or after seeing their baby during an ultrasound. In addition, family dynamics, including the quality of the parents' relationship or support from other significant individuals, enable the parents to focus their affection on the developing baby.

Attachments are "specific, enduring, emotional bonds whose existence is of major importance in the process of sociopersonality development" (Bornstein and Lamb 1992). Bowlby (1969) states that "intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves throughout life and into old age." The level of security of attachment that one forms with a primary caregiver will greatly affect one's actions, reactions to others and interpersonal relationships throughout life (Kramer 1995).

Bonding and attachment involve a reciprocal interactive system between parent and infant in which both individuals are active participants. Through complex motor and sensory abilities, infants evoke responses from adults who are sensitive and committed to observe, understand and respond appropriately to their infant's cues. Harmonious interactions with consistent caregiver are vital to the infant's well being and development.

Benefits of Infant Massage

New and innovative approaches to increasing nurturing touch have recently been implemented in the United States, although they have existed in other countries for generations. McClure describes massage between parent and baby as being a gentle, warm interaction, rather than a manipulative technique. Infant massage allows parents to engage and relax their child in a mutually pleasurable interaction (Leboyer 1985).

Nursing contact, holding and touch facilitate emotional growth and attachment between parent and baby. Infant massage incorporates several elements of bonding (eye to eye contact, touch, odor, verbal communication and biorhythmicity) into a structured program of parent-child interaction (Evans 1990). Infant massage is often described as a "dance" between parent and baby in which the cues of the infant are understood, listened to and responded to in a way that reinforces the social reciprocity.

Benefits for Infants

Infant massage promotes both physical and psychosocial benefits for babies. Physical benefits include relief of symptoms of colic, teething, constipation and digestive problems, restlessness and sleeplessness. Simulation helped increase the baby's weight gain and improve overall development. Relaxation resulting from the massage helps the baby to release stress.

Many parents who massage their infants report becoming much more aware of the subtle signal or cues (engagement or disengagement) their babies give. During the massage process, parents listen to their baby's sounds and watch his body and movements for an indication of how to proceed with the massage.

Even though infants cannot speak, they communicate through their bodies. The parent or caregiver talks to the infant, asks permission to massage, questions the infant, facilitates dialogue and observes the infant's response. Examples of engagement cues are stilling, smiling, looking at the caregiver's face, reaching out and raising the head. Examples of disengagement cues are pulling away, crying and being fussy, hiccups, frowning and turning head away. As parent and baby engage in this type of reciprocal interaction, they deepen their ability and willingness to

understand and respond to each other. Sensitivity to an infant's cues developed during massage strengthens communication during other social and care giving interactions.

Parents indicate increased feelings of competence and confidence in their parenting role as a result of infant massage. Parents feel more capable of helping their baby relax in times of stress. In addition, baby's daily massage time offers a parent the opportunity to relax and unwind from the busy pace of life. This is especially beneficial for parents working outside the home who must be separated from their baby during the day.

For fathers, massage provides an opportunity for intimacy and a special time with their babies. Scholz and Samuels (1992) discovered that fathers who massage their one-month-old babies for eight weeks showed greater involvement with their infants in a one-minute observation period than fathers who did not massage their babies. Infants who were massaged had more eye contact, vocalizing, smiling, reaching and orienting responses toward their fathers than infants who were not massaged.

Parents who are separated from their infants shortly after birth due to illness, cesarean section or other complications find massage to be an especially beneficial means to help them become acquainted with their baby. For hospitalized babies whose earliest exposure to touch as associated with pain and discomfort due to medical procedures, massage is a way to reexperience touch as a positive, loving encounter.

In a recent study involving teenage parents with postpartum depression, Field (1996) found that parents who massaged their infants fifteen minutes daily for two weeks experienced improved mood, affect and anxiety, as well as decreased saliva cortisol levels and decreased heart rate. In addition, mothers perceived their infants as easier to soothe, while babies showed increased vocalization, decreased restlessness and improved affect during mother-infant play.

While research on the benefits of nurturing touch and massage continue to evolve, it is clear to those who practice it that infant massage provides numerous emotional, social and physical benefits to babies and their parents and caregivers that last a lifetime.

Table: The Benefits of Infant Massage for Parents and Babies

Benefits	For the Infant	For the Parent
Psychosocial		
	Bonding	Improved ability to read infant cues
	Increased self-esteem	Bonding
	Enhanced sense of love	Increased confidence
	Enhanced sense of trust	Promotes intimacy
	Enhanced communication	Increased communication
		Developed trust
		Developed respect
Physiological/Physical Growth		
	Improved body awareness	Improved sense of well-being
	Stimulated circulation	Reduced blood pressure
	Increased digestion, which can lead to weight gain	Relaxation
	Reduced colic symptoms	Increased prolactin
	Muscle tone coordination	Promoted health
	Body/mind connection	Reduced Stress
	Calmed nervous system leading to more restful sleep	
	Increased elimination	
	Increased respiration	
	Increased vagal activity	
	Reduced stress	
	Increased hormonal function (i.e., stimulates endorphins, serotonin, somatotropins, gastrin, oxytocin and insulin)	
	Stimulated lymphatic circulation	
	Improved sleep patterns	

Infant Massage and Childbirth Education

Since childbirth educators encourage the use of touch and massage as ways to prepare for labor and delivery, it may seem natural to suggest that parents consider the benefits of stroking and massage with their newborns. Many childbirth educators have the opportunity to share information and resources in infant massage along with other parenting information during reunion classes with parents and babies. As McClure (1986) states, "When parents know why their caress is so important to their babies, they are more likely to relax and give way to their natural inclinations."

Massaging a tiny newborn may seem challenging at first and many parents enjoy an opportunity to participate in classes offered by the International Association of Infant Massage (IAIM), founded by Vimala McClure in 1981. The IAIM-US Chapter has over 1,100 members nationwide as well as in other countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark and Sweden.

The mission of IAIM is: *To promote nurturing touch and communication through training, education and research so that parents, caregivers and children are loved, valued and respected throughout the world community.* The certified instructor members of IAIM are parent educators, working directly with parents

and caregivers to enhance their relationships with babies through teaching massage strokes, communication techniques and the value of one-to-one interaction.

While the basic well-baby program is the primary focus of IAIM's work with families, members throughout the world are working with a wide variety of special needs clients, setting up classes in hospitals, special needs programs, social service agencies, recovery programs and homeless shelters, to name a few.

Numerous parent education programs have incorporated IAIM's approach to infant massage into their classes for parents as a valuable tool that contributes to parent effectiveness and reduces the risk of abuse. Teaching infant massage as part of an overall parenting education program may help to break the cycle of abuse for many families (Bavolek 1993).

The birth of a baby is the beginning of a continuum of events that does not stop at the birth itself. Parents need continuing support and education. They need to learn ways of relating to their baby that build the foundation for the relationship. Infant massage as an integral part of postpartum parent education can provide parents with just this kind of education and skill.

For information on Infant Massage classes for parents and certification in your area, contact: The International Association of Infant Massage, at: iaim4us@aol.com or visit their website: www.iaim-us.com.

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