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Loving Touch: The Benefits of Infant Massage

by [Troya Renee Yoder, MS](#)



Infant massage can relieve pain, offer comfort, and provide a lasting bond between parents and babies.

When 2-month-old Jake attended his first infant massage class, he was screaming. According to his young mother, Jake screamed most of the time, and she had lost all confidence in her ability to soothe him. While medical doctors were looking into physical reasons for Jake's constant crying, his mom needed

help right away.

Peg Farlow and Maria Mathius guided the young mother's hands in a clockwise circle on the infant's tummy. With less than 10 inches separating mother and screaming infant, Farlow remembers the moment when the mother's fingers rested over the descending colon and her son stopped crying. "He blinked his little eyes and gazed deeply into his mother's," Farlow remembers. "The magic that occurred between infant and mother energized the whole room."

Farlow, a licensed massage therapist, certified infant massage instructor, and speech/language pathologist in Alabama, instructs parents in the basics of infant massage. "All babies need safe, nurturing touch and that is what massage offers," she explains. "Teaching caregivers how to use touch/massage offers them the opportunity to do something for their child that is comforting, and is really fun for them, too."

Massage has been around for centuries. It was widely used in Europe during the Renaissance. It eventually came to the US during the 1850s where it was used to promote overall health. As medical science progressed in the first half of the 1900s, massage dropped off the radar and stayed that way until the 1970s. Massage therapy in infants in particular appears to show overall health benefits.

Massage techniques in the US include combinations of ancient Indian methods, Swedish massage, acupressure, reflexology, and yoga.

The regular routine of infant massage offers additional benefits to both child and caregiver that are not necessarily provided by normal affectionate touch.

"Infants are not fully developed at birth. They need help in every way to survive," she says. "Massage provides much of that help, toning the respiratory, circulatory, and gastrointestinal systems, in addition to providing the cues so necessary for the emotional health of the developing child."

Premature infants benefit from massage as well. A handful of small studies found that premature infants who had regular massage therapy gained weight faster and were able to leave the hospital sooner than those without massage therapy.

A number of studies have indicated that the benefits of infant massage include:

- Strengthened immune system
- Improved muscle tone
- Enhanced development of the nervous system
- Increased circulation
- Improved sleep
- Reduced symptoms of gassiness, colic, and constipation
- Reduced fussiness and irritability
- Increased alertness during awake times
- Strengthened parent-child communication and bonding
- Increased caregiver confidence

"While infant massage provides innumerable physiologic benefits to infants, it should not be thought of as a therapeutic treatment done to a baby. It is an affectionate interaction experienced with a baby," reminds McClure. In fact, some studies suggest that cultures that hold, massage, and rock their babies produce adults that are less aggressive and violent.

Shel Franco of Madison, Wisconsin, has been massaging her boys since day one. "I feel more connected to them," she says. "I'd like to think my boys will have a healthy idea of intimacy, that they will know how important touch is, and how the right touch can flood your heart and soul with peace." On a more practical level, Franco admits that massage helps her calm her boys when they are especially tired or over-stimulated, which helps her relax as well.

And it is not just moms who should massage their infants. A study from Australia showed that dads who massaged and bathed their infants on a regular basis fostered better response from the 12-week-old infants—as measured by eye contact, smiling, vocalizing, and reaching—and were more involved with their babies.

There are numerous books and videos available that can teach the basic strokes of infant massage, but classes offer parents so much more.

Flaine Weisberg and Rita Day, both registered nurses and certified infant massage

Liane Weisberg and Tara Day, both registered nurses and certified infant massage instructors, teach infant massage classes. "Parents are taught many things in class such as how to read their baby's nonverbal cues as well as the strokes," they say. In addition, they often discuss other issues of importance to new parents, such as feeding, teething, sleeping, and development. "The group can be a wealth of information and support for these issues," Day adds.

A typical session is conducted sitting on the floor with the lights dimmed and soft, soothing music playing. Weisberg and Day begin the session with a brief breathing and relaxation period. Weisberg and Day model the strokes on dolls while parents practice on their infants. The session ends with the singing of a Bengali lullaby. The words mean, "I love you my dear baby." By the end of 3 1-hour classes, parents have the skills necessary to give their infant a total body massage.

"The whole bonding process is strengthened because you cannot massage your baby and be removed from them," says Weisberg. "By learning to read their baby's cues and watching them, parents have more positive encounters with their infants."

Resources:

Healthy Children—American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.healthychildren.org>

International Association of Infant Massage

<http://www.iaim.net>

Canadian resources:

About Kids Health—The Hospital for Sick Children

<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca>

Massage Therapy Canada

<http://www.massage.ca>

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