

NURTURING TOUCH VITAL FOR BABIES AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH: Parents and Caregivers

There are many reasons why babies and children should receive a massage and shown positive, nurturing touch on a daily basis. Research has shown that massaging your child will assist with their health, well-being and development, both psychologically and physiologically.

Modern parents are seeking natural, gentle and effective ways to help their baby with many common conditions babies experience in the first year of their life. Colic, reflux, constipation and sleeping issues are some examples whereby using specific massage strokes and techniques will help relieve discomfort and pain and assist your baby's health and development.

Baby massage should only ever be performed by the parent or close caregiver. This is because massage is a form of touch; positive intimate touch as it involves skin-to-skin contact. Touch is very powerful and healing; for a baby, touch is the first form of communication. Your baby is experiencing massage constantly whilst in-utero; for you to continue massage after your baby is born is not only a wonderful bonding experience for you both, but provides reassurance for your baby. Massage is also a great way to spend quality one-to-one time with your baby.

It is important to learn how to massage your baby from a professional, such as a certified infant massage instructor, or CIMI for short. Infant massage instructors are professionally trained people who have learnt specific infant massage strokes and techniques. A Certified Infant Massage Instructor will ensure that you are applying the correct pressure, rate, and rhythm, something you would not receive from simply reading a book on baby massage. Massaging your baby incorrectly could potentially do more harm than good and create more discomfort for your baby.

So what does infant massage involve? Infant massage involves the parent or caregiver massaging their baby using a series of strokes, applying the correct amount of pressure, rhythm and technique. Techniques include Swedish massage, Indian massage and Reflexology. An instructor may also teach parents lymphatic exercises, yoga based movements, touch relaxation technique and the colic massage sequence, which is said to help with colic, wind or constipation. Massaging your baby is an activity you do with your baby rather than to your baby, the difference being that parents learn to understand and discover how their baby communicates its needs through body language, or their non-verbal cues, such as grizzling or turning their head to the side or not maintaining eye contact. These are signs that your baby is simply saying 'no thanks'

to a massage. Essentially parents are 'getting to know their baby' through touch and positive interaction. Infant and children's massage also teaches kids that it is okay to say 'no' to touch as it teaches them about appropriate touch. It is also about the parent respecting their child's response as to whether they would like a massage or not. The ideal time to massage your baby is called the 'quiet alert' or 'quiet inactive' state; this is when your baby has woken from a sleep and is happy and content to look around the room. For young babies or newborns this may not always be the case, they may wake hungry and cry out for a feed! Massage in this instance may be performed after the feed, allowing at least 20 minutes or so for milk or food to be digested. As we know, who would like a massage on a full stomach! How long you should massage your baby for is always determined by your baby, remembering that when your baby is signaling a 'no' cue that they have had enough massage time and massage should stop. Ceasing massage at this point may also prevent over-stimulation, something that many new parents are unaware of. Newborns are very susceptible to being over-stimulated, and this is why learning with a CIMI will give you the confidence and understanding about what to look for when your baby is becoming tired (yes, there are a lot of signs other than yawning!).

According to the Touch Research Institute in Miami, Florida, and the University of Warwick medical school in the United Kingdom, studies show that massage for babies and children on a regular basis has many benefits, including increased weight gain in premature and low birth weight babies and can help with developing the parent-infant relationship. Another study found an improvement in the mother-infant interaction with those mothers who had post natal depression. Established by Dr Tiffany Field, Ph.D, the Touch Research Institute was the first research centre worldwide solely dedicated to the study of touch. The centre has over forty research papers on infant massage and children's massage alone. The University of Warwick says that massage may help infants sleep more soundly, cry less and reduce levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Other benefits noted include strengthening the immune system and relief from discomfort and pain such as colic, wind and constipation. Massage is also an effective therapy for many childhood conditions, including autism, cancer, asthma, Down Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy.

Massage benefits babies and children in so many ways. The power of touch is in your hands; modern parents in western civilization are now discovering massage and feeling confident and empowered at the same time. Most of all, it is easy to learn and lots of fun for both parent and child!

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