

THE BENEFITS OF INFANT MASSAGE

By Anita Epple

Many parents have hectic lifestyles; juggling a host of responsibilities and activities and many new mothers have the added stress of having to return to work due to financial commitments. Quality time with children can often be affected because of this and Infant Massage; an age old tradition, is simple, free, can be administered almost anywhere and has a host of emotional and physical benefits for both parents and baby.

In her book *The Power of Touch* Phyllis K Davies provocatively states that *'Touch is not a pleasant stimulus, but a biological necessity'*. Certainly Bernard Brazelton, child psychologist, believes that touch is central to the development of the bonding relationship between mother and infant. Infant Massage is a form of positive touch and therefore without doubt, an extremely important form of communication between parent and baby and helps with the attachment and bonding process.

Infant Massage and the very idea of attending classes to learn the art, when discussed amongst new mothers provokes differing attitudes of 'well that should be instinctive' to 'I'd love to be able to do that'. In this age we are forced to be divorced from our babies because of the pressures of our everyday lives and there is a need for the parents and babies to become less dependent upon each other, and touching our babies, especially massage is not as instinctive as it might have once been. Sharon Heller in her book *The Vital Touch* believes that our brain's biochemistry and structure, which has evolved over millions of years, has mainly adapted to life within small, close communities and is unable to accommodate the self-reliance and isolation of today's modern life, this makes it clear that we should not assume that we can struggle alone and that support from the surrounding community and infant massage classes can help with this feeling of isolation.

Infant massage should be a pleasant experience for both the mother and the infant, and whilst it does not always come naturally to mothers/parents, it is not difficult and this can be learned from others practicing or from specially designed Infant Massage Classes. The aim of such classes is to teach basic, safe strokes to parents whilst building their confidence in touching their babies – thus

empowering parents. Through massage parents can learn how their babies communicate with them by understanding their baby's positive and negative cues; promoting understanding and a mutual respect for one another. The classes can also serve to help parents understand about overstimulation of the baby and why babies cry and use self-calming techniques. Infant-massage also offers an opportunity for positive touch and early play, including music and rhymes in the infant massage classes. Studies have show that using nursery rhymes can be a wonderful learning tool and can even enhance brain development of the child and in addition studies have shown that positive touch with infants leads to healthy physical and brain development

When an infant leaves the comfort of the womb and enters the new phase of its life, this can be very stressful for a newborn and massage can reduce this stress; which is as important for tiny infants as it is adults. Regular massage can help a baby adapt to its new environment and reassures the infant so that when it finds itself in a stressful situation parents can administer a massage; reminding the infant that this is reassuring and pleasant and thus reduce the baby's stress levels; helping to calm and soothe the baby. Tiffany Field from the Touch Research Institute, Miami reported that Cortisol levels (hormone secreted when under stress) were reduced when infants were massaged and not rocked. Massage also stimulates the production of another hormone, Oxytocin (hormone secreted by both sexes and can act as a natural pain reliever) and can reduce pain and induce a calming effect. It can also stimulate the mother's own nurturing instinct.

Massaging babies strengthens the immune system and increases resistance to infection; it regulates and strengthens the digestive system and alleviates colic, wind and constipation. It also improves blood circulation and helps drain the lymphatic system as well as improving the overall condition of the skin (provided a non-contaminated, organic vegetable oil is applied). Massaging the infant's face can alleviate nasal congestion and help drain mucus from the nasal passages. Evidence also shows that some, however not all, premature infants who receive positive touch from their parents in hospital show physical and neurological improvement over those who are not massaged and generally have more rapid weight gain and development, also the massage serves to positively affect the growth of the baby later. (*J Goldstone, Bulletin of Massage Studies*)

Many babies find massage very soothing, and they may even fall asleep immediately after having one. If massage is introduced after a bath as part of the baby's going to bed routine it can help to release the tension in baby and mother; and improve the baby's circulation, deepen and regulate the breathing, and increase the levels of oxygen in the bloodstream; which leads to deeper sleep. The massage can help to make sleep time more peaceful with a familiar pattern to it (*GICM: How Infant Massage Can Help*) which is very useful if a mother has a fussy baby.

Post natal illness (PNI) is a major problem, with implications for the mental health of our future generations; it is often under-recognised and under-treated. Baby massage is a highly effective way of helping those mothers that are suffering emotionally. Studies have shown that infant massage can help break the cycle of negative interaction between mother and baby. Very often mothers who are suffering from PNI avoid eye contact and this unfortunately, can be the case with their own child.

Massage can certainly help with the bonding and attachment of baby and mother. For many years it was thought that attachment of the child to the mother was mostly due to the fact that she fed the infant and this was influenced by Freud. It wasn't until many years later that Harry Harlow's experiment with infant monkeys dispelled this thought. Harlow fed the monkeys using a basic feeding substitute but also allowed the babies to have access to a surrogate, warm, cuddly terrycloth mother. The babies clung to the cloth mother and ignored the feeding machine. This shows that warm, loving contact is vital to babies and that touch connects the baby to the mother (*Heller, S 1997*) and not the need to obtain food. Studies by Dr John Kennell and Dr Marshall Klaus (*GICM: How Infant Massage Can Help*) have shown that there is a sensitive period for humans to bond, but may take months or even years. Kennell and Klaus define bonding, "a unique relationship between two people that is specific and endures through time". The doctors describe kissing, cuddling and prolonged gazing at the infant as indicators of a developing bond and have found that there is some correlation between the lack of early bonding and attachment with abuse, neglect and failure to thrive. However, strong attachment can develop a sense of security in a child and the child is more likely to grow up more self-assured and self-confident. As attachment is founded in the very early months, by its very definition Infant Massage has a profound effect on the emotional well-being of the infant and can be used to achieve a sense of security for the growing child. The emotional benefits of infant massage; such as quality, one-to-one

loving touch can also be experienced by fathers too. Cullen, C et al (2000) suggests that fathers that gave their infants daily massages 15 minutes prior to bedtime for one month, showed they had better interaction behaviour with their infants. It is important to involve older children too. Sibling rivalry can be a real issue when a new baby joins the family; involving the older child in the massage routine can help with feelings of resentment, perhaps massaging their teddy alongside or just holding the oil bottle!

Teaching mothers infant massage can show them how to actively enjoy their small babies, understand their bodies and become more confident about handling them. As mentioned earlier, infant massage can also stimulate an increase in the hormone Oxytocin, responsible for maternal feelings; this is vital for mothers suffering from post natal illness. In turn the baby is more relaxed, happier and the cycle of negative interaction between infant and mother can be broken. (*GICM: How Infant Massage Can Help*). Research by Field et al (1996) provided evidence to suggest that babies who were in a control group that received massage from their mothers who were suffering from post natal depression (and not rocked as in another group) gained more weight, had less sleep problems, were calmer and interacted better with their mother, and surprisingly there was a huge benefit for the mothers too as their Cortisol levels were lower and their Serotonin levels (hormone secreted that controls mood swing and feelings of well being) were higher, thus indicating that they were suffering less from the depression. This indicates clearly that there is a huge link between the mind and the physiological effects of our bodies and that physical benefits give emotional benefits.

Infant massage has become more of a trend in the UK over the last seven or eight year, as more parents undertake classes to learn something that, in many cultures, is as natural as feeding and nurturing a child. There are a host of physical and emotional benefits to be gained by infant and mother (not to mention fathers, siblings and grandparents). All babies and mothers are different and not everyone will experience all the benefits. It is hoped that over time, infant massage will be accessible to all, regardless of status, thus providing children with emotional stability; a sense of self-worth and confidence and in turn encouraging parents to spend quality time with their children.

It is appreciated by infant massage teachers that this is not a hands-on therapy and this teaching skill can be useful for therapists and health professionals alike, who have a genuine interest in working with

parents and wish to enhance the way in which a parent relates to their infant. Teaching parents can be extremely rewarding for the infant massage teacher. A qualified infant massage teacher uses a lifelike demonstration doll to demonstrate the strokes leaving the parent to interact with their own baby. A basic, organic vegetable oil is the recommended medium for infant massage, without essential oils so as not to mask the mother's smell or overload the infant's young, immature liver.

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If you would like to develop your practice and teach parents this wonderful skill contact Touch-Learn Ltd for more information on 01889 566222 or mail@touchlearn.co.uk. Touch-Learn has been training professionals in the UK for six years and is accredited by the Guild of Infant and Child Massage, the University of Central England, IGPP and IPTI. Courses consist of five days; split into two parts over four months, there is an element of self-directed study and competency assessment.

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