

CONSIDERATION ABOUT THE AGE OF A BABY AND THE INTRODUCTION OF A MASSAGE ROUTINE

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From time to time we receive calls from both parents and health professionals asking us how old a baby should be before having massage. I am also often taken to task about this matter by fellow infant massage teachers and training providers, who have misinterpreted what we at the GICM believe is the best plan of action.

Our philosophy is that ideally a baby should have had the six week (or eight week as it now is in some areas) health check. Our reasoning behind this falls into three categories. The first concerns the infant massage teacher's accountability and absolute need to practise safely. The second reason concerns the potential of over stimulation of the infant and the third (which is linked to the second reason) concerns parent self esteem and enjoyment of the massage class experience.

Practising Safely and being Accountable

We now live in a very litigious society, where a culture of casting blame now exists to the point that independent radio stations often air adverts from solicitors toting for business by encouraging anyone who has been involved in an accident (that was not their fault) to come forward and claim their prize, by putting the matter in the hands of the courts. We, as professionals, must protect our interests. By waiting until a baby has had its six or eight week check we can be assured that they are not going to suffer any ill effects, on a physiological level, when being massaged by their parents.

You may be wondering if this is a little unnecessary, but when you consider that 1 in 100 babies are born with clinically unstable hips and approximately 1 in 800 develop a true dislocation

(<http://www.patient.co.uk/showdoc/40001094/>); and that the prevalence of congenital heart disease in the UK is about 8 in 1000

(<http://www.patient.co.uk/showdoc/40024575/>) any potential hip dysplasia and heart problems can be picked up at this health check. It is therefore necessary to consider the implications to you as a professional and the baby, if teaching massage to parents with babies who have not had this check.

Over Stimulation

When babies are born their life experiences take on a whole new dimension and they need time to adjust. Positive touch, holding and containment are wonderful tools for parents to use at this early stage in their baby's life. However, a massage routine may be far too stimulating in the first few weeks after birth.

Consider, not only the new environment that a baby has to adjust to, but certain aspects of the anatomy and physiology of the newborn. Senses are experienced more intensely by the infant due to the fact that their early experiences are multi-sensory, or 'synaesthetic' (Carter 2000). For example, there are connections between the auditory and visual cortices, which means that a baby 'sees' sounds and 'hears' colour. As the cortex develops the sensory information becomes categorised and the senses are experienced in a singular fashion (Carter 2000). Also, consider the Meissner Corpuscles, the main touch receptors, which are tightly packed in the skin of a newborn, but slowly disperse with age. For example, there are 80 Meissner Corpuscles per square millimeter in a three year old, and 20 per square millimeter in a young adult. The Meissner Corpuscles may not have dispersed much by the time a baby is six or eight weeks old, and synaesthesia may still be present, but by this stage they are at least becoming familiar with their surroundings and are more likely to be able to cope with the massage routine.

Enjoyment for Parents

We all run our classes in different ways, and some infant massage teachers only do one to one teaching. However, in the main, the majority teach a course of between four to six classes. Some teachers are independent and charge for the service and many are health professionals or para-professions who have heavy case loads and fit the courses into their busy schedule.

If a parent has booked on a course (particularly if they have paid) they may find it quite frustrating if they find that not only does their baby not want massage during the class session (often the case with babies of all ages, because it is not the right time for them) but they find that the baby will not tolerate

any or only a few strokes of the massage routine between classes. They return to each class and listen to the other parents enthusing about how much their babies have enjoyed the massage and may feel that a) they are missing out and b) it is their fault. The course is just the beginning of their experience and we try to encourage the parents to continue after the course ceases. However, a parent who had the opportunity to massage their baby at some point during the duration of the course is much more likely to continue and is less likely to do so if they feel they lack practice.

Disclaimers

This is not to say that I have not taught parents with babies that are less than six weeks old. I have. On these occasions I have asked the parent to sign a disclaimer. This simply states that they take full responsibility for any potential consequences. Another occasion when a disclaimer may be useful is for parents who do not feel it necessary to take their baby for a check up. This is their choice. We, as infant massage teachers, are about empowering parents and if they do not believe it necessary to take their child for a check up, that is their prerogative. By getting the parent to sign a disclaimer, we allow them that choice, but protect ourselves as professionals.

Colic

Colic is often a problem for babies who are younger than six weeks old. Parents may need help when this is an issue. For a health professional, such as a health visitor, it may be suitable for them to show a colic routine to parents during a home visit or at the clinic. For private teachers it is advisable that you suggest that the parent just checks with the baby's medical practitioner to confirm that it is colic and nothing more serious, before teaching the colic routine. Again, the disclaimer is an option if the parent does not want to take this route.

So, to conclude, teaching parents with babies who have had their six/eight week check protects you, the professional, and hopefully means that all parents and babies have the opportunity to experience massage without it being a frustrating or over stimulating experience. However, the use of disclaimers means that you can still empower parents by giving them the choice to join your classes, or show them the colic routine that may give relief to their baby and encourage them to join a class at a later date.

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