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Infant Massage

by Phyllis Hanlon

As he awaited surgery, 6-month-old Sylvestor was not allowed to eat for eight hours prior to the procedure. Hungry and uncomfortable, he fussed and cried in his crib. Fortunately, his mother had just learned the art of massage. She gently began to stroke his face and neck. Within minutes, his tiny body began to relax and he drifted into a restful sleep.

Scenarios like this are playing out in hospitals, homes and other settings where infant massage is performed. Research is bearing out the benefits of healthy touch for babies. Tiffany Field, Ph.D., and her colleagues at the Touch Research Institute in Miami, Florida, for instance, have conducted more than 100 studies that confirm the positive effects of infant massage, including relief for gas, colic, constipation, earaches, asthma, colds, sleeping problems, teething and several other conditions. Many programs, workshops and seminars have taken their cues from this research in developing infant-massage educational tools.

The massage therapist’s role

The primary role of the massage therapist in infant massage is instructor, teaching parents how to massage their babies.

“Infant massage is a wonderful added set of skills for a massage therapist,” says Linda Storm, executive director of Infant Massage USA, which offers infant-massage training. "Rather than massaging the babies, the therapist can teach a class of parents who massage their babies."

One type of parent class could be 60 to 90 minutes in length, held once a week for five weeks, and taught to a half-dozen parents at a time, Storm says. “Since the parents are massaging their baby, this relieves wear and tear on the therapist’s body,” she adds. “Parents may be encouraged to schedule a massage for themselves, thus adding to the therapist’s clientele.”

Massage therapists can choose from many infant-massage training programs offered in person or online. Judith Koch is one massage educator who offers home-study training in infant massage, through her Institute of Somatic Therapy.

“They are a myriad of benefits to infant massage, both physiological and psychological,” Koch says. “A relationship has been shown between skin-to-skin touch and intelligence,” she adds. “The tactile
Feeling love and attachment to parents is one of the most important gifts a baby can receive.

stimulation a baby receives in its first months of life up through the first year can impact their brain development permanently.”

According to Koch, feeling love and attachment to parents is one of the most important gifts a baby can receive, and even the most frail of newborns should receive some touch.

Koch points out the benefits of massage extend beyond the infant. "A new parent massaging her infant will reap benefits by taking that quiet time for the two of them together," she explains. "It helps enhance communication between infant and parent. It will make for a calmer and happier baby, which will result in a calmer and happier household, and help the parent to be more aware of their baby's physical condition."

The World Institute for Nurturing Communication offers live training in infant massage to parents and massage therapists. The organization’s CEO, Andrea Kelly, recently developed a new program based on the science and research of Bruce Lipton, Ph.D., author of The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles.

The institute’s Triad Model incorporates the total dynamics of infant, child and lifetime growth, which is also called epigenetics. Focused on compassionate communication, the program aims to build confidence and develop a safe, creative and positive environment in the home through infant massage.

“Touch is critical for stress management and social development,” says Kelly. “Parents can use massage strokes to soothe, relax, stimulate and play with their babies. Infant massage is paramount to maximizing a child’s potential.”

A family activity

Many cultures, including those in India, Africa, Mexico and Japan, embrace a philosophy of touch from an early age, according to Kate Jordan, educator and owner of Bodywork for the Childbearing Year, based in in La Jolla, California. Jordan was an infant-massage educator for 20 years and today teaches massage for mothers.

Jordan says there is a connection between infant massage and pregnancy massage. “Ultimately, a mother is far more
likely to massage her baby if she has received massage," she explains.

Research shows full-term babies of mothers with a normal pregnancy who received massage had higher scores on the Brazelton scale, a rating system that identifies an infant's strengths and weaknesses and offers insight into the newborn's capabilities.

"Those infants also had better orientation and excitability, lower rates of depression and tended to smile and vocalize more," Jordan adds.

While both mom and baby learn from each other during massage, Jordan urges dads to participate as well.

"This is especially important if the mother is breastfeeding," Jordan explains. "In that setting, the mother is 'it.' Massaging the baby is a 10- or 15-minute process and gives the dad a bonding experience."

**Health benefits**

In most cases, massage therapists learn infant massage on dolls rather than on babies. They then demonstrate for parents using the dolls or, sometimes, a baby. Jordan points out massaging an actual infant offers a truer experience since dolls don't cry, sleep or wiggle.

Karen Stoner, owner of A Caring Touch Massage Therapy in State College, Pennsylvania, says while massage induces relaxation and relief for common issues in infancy, such as gas, those who have a cold or chest congestion will also benefit from massage. She suggests gentle, downward strokes on the face to relieve sinus pressure and cupping or tapping on the body to break up chest congestion.

"Massage helps the immune system in general," she says. Babies who are crying, teething or who have hiccups may also find comfort through massage.

Stoner likes to incorporate movement into massage for older babies, which can help them become kinesthetically aware. "At first, babies act homolaterally, meaning they rarely cross the plane of the body," she says. "When you crisscross the body, bringing the right arm to the left shoulder, you stimulate the brain and increase body awareness."

She cautions parents to stop the massage if the baby gives negative feedback.

The benefits of infant massage extend from the baby to her parents. "When parents massage their baby, hormones are released to help [the parents] relax," she says. "Through massage, they learn to understand their baby, building their confidence as well as enjoying the interaction with other parents."

Those who massage infants typically need not bother with oils or lotions, but when skin is so dry it requires a lubricant, Stoner recommends cornstarch, which offers the benefits of powder without causing respiratory issues. For those who prefer to use oil, she finds extra-virgin olive oil to be a safe option.

Products with high linoleic acid content, such as cold-
Infant massage can help babies establish body awareness and a sense of personal space.

Pressed, unheated safflower oil, also nourish the skin and grapeseed oil, if organic, is also acceptable. Products containing mineral or nut oils should never be used due to possible allergic reactions. “Whatever you use should be as pure and simple as possible,” Stoner says.

The pediatric inpatient setting

Infant massage has been gaining traction inside hospitals and other medical facilities for several years. The following examples of massage therapists teaching infant massage to medical professionals and parents shows how this specialty can be a viable career path.

Twenty-five years ago, massage therapist, nurse and perinatal education coordinator Teresa Kirkpatrick Ramsey introduced massage to a metropolitan hospital, St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Dayton, Ohio, where she trained volunteers to give infant massage to more than 160 babies every month.

Read “Mothering the Mother: Create Sanctuary for New Moms,” by Kate Jordan, at www.masseagemag.com/mothering, to learn how massage therapy benefits mothers following delivery.

She went on to create Baby’s First Massage, a program for health care professionals and new parents.

Now offered at medical centers and other venues across the country, Ramsey’s program earned approval for continuing education credits for the Ohio Nurses Association.

Ramsey also developed a home-study course that allows for independent, flexible study, and a training video using dolls, which new parents view in the hospital after delivery.

Massage therapist Linda G. Garofallou earned the respect of physicians and nurses once they observed her give an infant-massage session and witnessed the results. She works in the Child Life Department at Children’s Hospital of New Jersey at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, where she gives annual workshops in pediatric massage to incoming residents and offers biannual trainings to pediatric intensive care nurses. “There is a new level of respect and understanding” regarding infant massage among medical staff there, she says.

Garofallou has also taken her trainings into clinics and drug rehabilitation centers, where she works with disadvantaged moms and their babies, some of whom arrive in this world with numerous medical challenges.

“The babies often reject touch, and it starts a cycle of rejection at an early age,” she says. “It makes it very difficult to build a relationship.”

Massage is a tool that can help parents take a step toward developing a healthy relationship, Garofallou adds. “It can help change the trajectory of their lives.”

Garofallou first gives disadvantaged mothers an arm-and-hand massage so they can experience nurturing touch themselves, before teaching them how to massage their babies.

“These women are dealing with physiological and emotional issues, and massage teaches [them] to think in a different way,” she says.

A helpful tool

When it comes to infant massage, flow is key, says massage therapist Ronda Cheatham, owner of A Touch of Grace Massage Therapy in Remington, Virginia. She teaches parents to perform a milking stroke, running the pads of the fingers in long, gentle strokes down one leg or arm and then up and out; as well as a feather stroke, giving the baby a sense of his own body awareness. “It helps them establish a personal space,” she explains.

Rapid, light strokes in a clockwise motion on the baby’s tummy mimic the way the digestive system works and

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help relieve gas, colic and constipation. Moving the fingertips lightly back and forth above the umbilical cord in a spider-walking motion also helps relieve tummy troubles; alternatively, a kneading motion just below the ribs stimulates the gastrointestinal system, according to Cheatham. These strokes help to prepare the digestive system to accept food and aid in preventing jaundice and weight loss, she says.

Also a doula, Cheatham massages mothers before, during and after giving birth, and massages infants soon after they are born. She says when she works with babies who are born to drug-addicted moms or have other medical issues, massage helps release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers.

"Massage helps [the body] release endorphins without drugs or injections," Cheatham says. "With the endorphin activation, stress levels drop while immunization levels and the senses of safety and security are increased, and all of this brings the individual into a more balanced state of well-being overall."

The trauma of the birthing experience understandably induces some type of discomfort in most infants during or after their arrival, according to the massage therapists interviewed for this article.

The intensity of the birth process, Jordan says, involves the infant leaving the safety and warmth of the womb for a cold, bright world. Massage is an effective way to transition into new surroundings and also help the family become accustomed to the new member.

Stoner learned this lesson when her 2-month-old daughter screamed incessantly with early teething pain. Unable to quell the baby's cries, Stoner called upon her skill and knowledge as a massage therapist to solve the issue. As she began to gently stroke her daughter's arms and legs, she witnessed visible relaxation. The tender, soothing movements reduced the tension that gripped her little body, calming both her and her mother.

"Massage gives parents a sense of control. It's another tool all parents should have," Stoner says.

Writer Phyllis Harlon's specialty areas include health and medicine, religion, education and business. She regularly delights in the joys of massage. She recently wrote for MASSAGE Magazine on "Spa Therapies for Cancer Patients" (April 2012) and "Happy Clients, Healthy Practice: Market and Up-Sell Spa Techniques" (November 2011).