



Mental health in infancy and early childhood affects social functioning, psychological well-being, and physical health throughout life.



Infant Massage: Nurturing Touch that Lasts a Lifetime

Written in partnership with Tina Allen, Liddle Kidz Foundation

Babies and children simply love to be touched. In fact, they thrive on it and it is a crucial part of their development. Children need physical contact for healthy growth and development. Normal affectionate touching is important; however, a regular routine of infant massage can offer additional benefits to both the caregiver and child. Nurturing touch promotes physiological, neurological and psychological development and function.

What is Infant Massage?

Infant massage is an ancient tradition of providing nurturing touch as a way of communicating and bonding with baby. Massage can help foster mutual trust and understanding between the caregiver and child.

In comparison to other parts of the world, infant massage is fairly new in the United States and other western countries. The use of nurturing touch and massage can be traced back thousands of years and to various cultures around the world.

Throughout India, Africa, and the South Pacific, massage is part of regular parenting practices and is handed down from generation to generation. Grandmother teaches mother, mother teaches daughter, and baby receives full benefits of this loving tradition.

Benefits of Infant Massage

Clinical research has shown that massaging babies can aid in their physiological and neurological development and function, help soothe common discomforts, promote restful sleep for the infants (and in turn the caregivers), and increase healthy attachment and bonding.

Much of the research available today supports benefits of infant massage for babies born prematurely. This research has been ongoing since the 1970's and has been conducted at various institutes with infants who were born prematurely, exposed to drugs in utero, and with infants who had developmental and motor problems. All categories of these babies showed benefits after receiving nurturing touch.

One specific study, performed at the Touch Research Institute in Miami, examined the use of infant massage of preterm infants to improve growth and development. The data of this study suggests that the growth and development of newborn infants can be facilitated by tactile-kinesthetic stimulation. Greater weight gain and superior performance on developmental assessments persisted across the first six months for the group of infants who received the massage treatment. Dr. Tiffany Field of the Touch Research Institute has suggested that these enduring effects may be mediated by better parent-infant interactions. Heightened responsiveness of the newborn infant may enhance the early parent-infant relationships which, in turn, may contribute to optimal growth and development at later stages in infancy.

Studies have shown increased weight gain, improved immune function, and myelination of nerves, all of which are needed to encourage appropriate emotional, cognitive, and physical development.



Healthy babies can also experience a variety of behavioural and developmental improvements when they receive regular massage from their parents or caregivers. These benefits may include weight gain, neurological development, and improved digestion.

In addition to the many physical benefits, massage can become a regular time for caregivers to check in with baby, alerting them to subtle changes in baby's health, and encouraging the caregiver to communicate with baby in a language the baby understands – touch. If massage is a regular scheduled time of the day, it can also result in precious relaxation time for both caregiver and child. With the baby lying on his or her back, making eye to eye contact, full focused attention results in full communication and support. Massage enhances communication and deepens feelings of attachment between parent and baby, promoting the physical and emotional well-being of babies and young children.

Infant Massage Relaxes and Soothes

Not only will baby feel relaxed, so will the caregiver! Nurturing touch is a naturally rewarding way to relieve stress for both caregiver and baby. Touch has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (stress hormone) in our bodies. Cortisol is always present in our bloodstream, but high levels of this hormone can be found in our bodies during times of extreme stress. Babies who have high levels of cortisol can experience damage to the area of their brain that controls memory and cognition – the hippocampus.

Infant Massage Deepens Bonding

Infant massage provides the caregiver with essential one-on-one time that will enhance caregiver bonding, understanding, and ability to nurture. During massage, oxytocin is released in both the giver and receiver's body. Oxytocin helps to provide us with loving, nurturing feelings which in turn help us to bond. Mothers experience an increased production of oxytocin during labour and breastfeeding. Research now shows that even close physical contact and touch stimulates oxytocin production; great news for mothers and fathers.

Infant Massage Improves Communication

Touch is our first form of communication so it is natural to assume that communicating through touch enhances the caregiver's ability to understand baby's special needs and respond appropriately. Infant massage increases the caregiver's confidence and sensitivity to baby's unique cues and forms of communication. When babies receive attentive responses to their needs, they grow to become healthier and more secure in adulthood.

Infant Massage Contributes to Development

Infant massage stimulates growth and healthy development of baby's body, mind, and spirit. Massaged babies gain healthy weight better than babies who do not receive massage. Additionally, nurturing touch helps to enhance the digestion process by stimulating our food absorption hormones – glycogen and insulin. The systems of the body are stimulated during massage which assists in the absorption of nutrients and elimination of what is not



needed. For some babies, infant massage has also been shown to be effective at reducing the symptoms associated with constipation, gas, and colic.

Infant Massage Helps Baby to Sleep Better

Not only does massage help baby to release the stress that builds daily from new experiences, it allows him to relax. Massaging a baby has been shown to encourage him to sleep deeper and for longer periods of time. This can translate to the caregiver being able to sleep longer as well!



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Resources:

Liddle Kidz Foundation: Certified
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www.LiddleKidz.com

Touch Research Institute [http://
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Basic techniques for parents
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