

The benefits of massaging babies



By Lemise Kassim.

The aim of this piece of research was to ascertain that massage had specific benefits as part of routine baby care.

It was expected that the results of this survey would feature subjects like relaxation, benefits for sleep assistance, and bonding. It was also expected that parents would find the techniques helpful with digestive problems, such as colic, constipation, and perhaps reflux. Secondary benefits might have been entertainment and fun, or simply a celebration of the baby's body.

The survey did reflect many of the expected results and it also highlighted some interesting and exciting unexpected observations. Further research with larger numbers will need to be carried out to confirm some of the findings

The Survey

This was aimed at one hundred clients who had attended at least one baby massage course held by 'Massage My Baby' in Brisbane. The course consisted of six x two hour sessions in which a group followed through a gentle stretching and massage routine for their babies under the guidance of Lemise Kassim. The course recognised the need for mothers (or carers) to relax and be supported too. Every client was, therefore familiar with techniques of stretching and moving of babies' bodies for health and relaxation benefits. The survey questioned participants about their perception of the benefits of massage because as the primary carers they were using massage for problems identified by them. They were in an excellent position to report on the results of massage – a 24-hour perspective! Simply observing immediate effects in the class does not give the whole picture.

Results

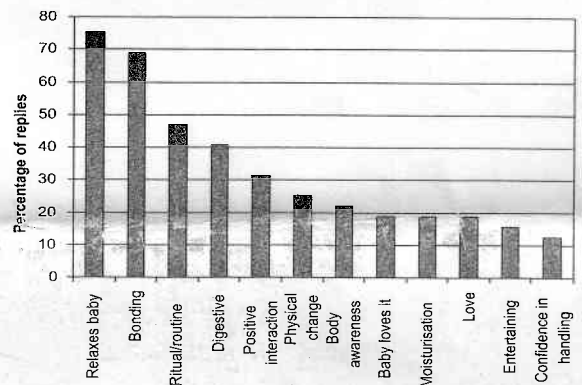
About a third (32 per cent) of the forms were returned, which is common for this kind of survey. The results demonstrated that massage was beneficial for many common baby issues. The survey also showed some unexpected benefits of massage, which are of importance to mothers in particular.

Table 1
Age range of children in the survey

Continuing massage after course	Stopped massage after course	Average age at start of course	Age now: up to 6 months	Age now: 6 months – 1 year	Age now: 1 – 2 years	Age now: over 2 years
32*	2	11 weeks	9	4	15	4

*In the group of continuing massage, 14 reported occasional massage, and 17 continued regularly, one reported using the techniques on an older child, too. *In two cases siblings had attended the course, thus increasing numbers by two.*

Figure 1: Reported benefits



As can be seen from Figure 1, the main reported benefits of baby massage were relaxation and bonding. It can be seen that a large number of cases, have incorporated massage into their baby care routines. Digestive issues (colic/wind/constipation), particularly "colic" came high on the list. Troubleshooting of physical problems (in hips, legs or shoulders) with body awareness came fairly high. Some of the benefits mentioned were: the enhancement of growth and development, working out damage to muscle fibres with vaccine entry, relief of

cradle cap, respiratory issues relieved, association of relaxation with smell of oil, nappy free time, intimacy, involvement of father and also of older siblings.

Sleep

A baby's sleep pattern is unique. Many parents become distressed when their child seems to be taking a long time adjusting to night-time sleeping, or when they simply don't sleep during the day. A baby's sleep cycles cannot be controlled, and sleep is not a skill to be learned, and the pattern will reflect the baby's biological development. Parents nevertheless, can be distressed by disturbed sleep, and this was a major issue arising in the survey. The majority (58 per cent) of babies with problems showed improved sleep and positive sleep effects following massage. Interestingly, even some of the babies who had no problems experienced deeper and longer sleeps following massage. Sixty nine per cent of respondents found their babies were quicker to settle, 23 per cent said their babies slept longer, and 22 per cent reported deeper sleep. As a result of the observed benefits, 59 per cent of parents have included massage as part of their baby care routine. This is usually at bedtime after a bath. Only one respondent noted a negative effect, and she found that massage in the middle of the day altered the baby's sleep pattern so he would sleep less at night. She was able to adjust her timing, and thus fit in better with her desired routine. See Figures 2 and 3 for a breakdown of these results.

Figure 2: Massage and sleep

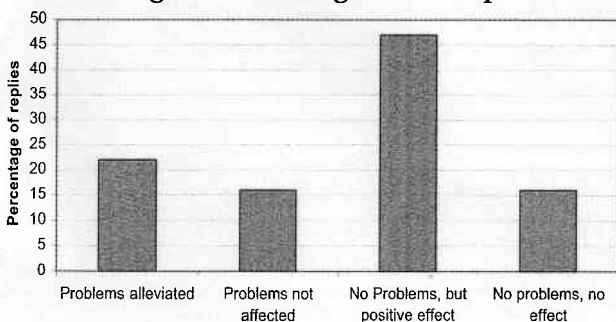
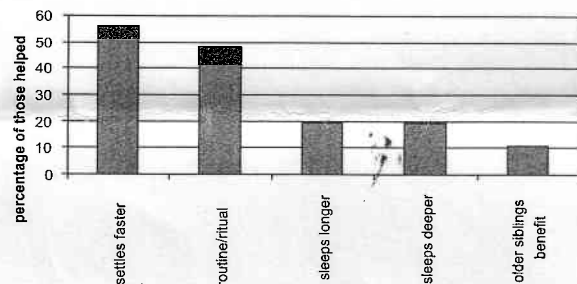


Figure 3: How massage helps with sleep



Bonding

The respondents were requested to define bonding, and then how massage helped. Key words used in the replies, which give an overall feel for the perception of what bonding is, included: communication, relationship, connecting, emotional and together. Some typical answers for how massage helped were:

Bonding is making a loving connection with baby through touch, sight and voice. Massage for Zac and me is definitely beneficial for making that connection. He will smile at me and look in my eyes when I first put the oil on him and occasionally he will get playful and wait for me to catch him. Usually it is a quiet, relaxed time where we just talk softly and make ooh and ahh noises. He loves it (so do I).'

'Bonding to me is the depth of closeness and intimacy felt with your baby which helps you tune into their needs and I have found the more bonded I have felt the more patience I have at tougher times. The greatest benefit I have found is the intimacy and bonding achieved from baby massage.'

'Bonding - any activity that deepens our relationship. Having hands touch her skin, having a giggle and fun together while massaging. Finishing with a cuddle and breastfeed. The closeness of touching is very satisfying for me as a mother to do. It is one way I get to touch her all over - to stop and express my love for her through caressing her skin.'

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Colic

Colic came high as a major problem that is alleviated by massage. Colic is described as a set of symptoms which arise in some babies, and commonly include sharp, intermittent pain and distension of the abdomen. It is accompanied by difficulty expelling wind, fussing while feeding, and crying and screaming. Severity of symptoms varies from day to day, and time of day. Babies may draw their knees up for relief, and this action can be mimicked by manual movements in the massage routine. Onset may be immediately after birth, or can develop later. In most instances all is well by four months, but symptoms can continue beyond.

There is much debate in medical circles about the actual existence of this problem (Robyn Parker), but in my classes it has become obvious that babies do present with a painful abdomen, and wind can also be relieved, if this is the cause. In some instances the cause of the wind pain can be food related and some mothers manage it with diet. In some instances it is not possible to ascertain the reason, so it is imperative to have a method of relieving the pain. Massage seems to be the most successful means of achieving this.

These are my observations from teaching. The survey results, Support these observations with 13 (41 per cent) respondents reporting relief through massage, and many reporting the softening of the abdomen and relief of wind even when wind was not perceived as a problem.

Discussion

The survey supports the hypothesis that massage is useful as part of baby care.

'Crabby arsenic hour – that terrible time of night where everything goes wrong and nothing helps – except a nice bath and a relaxing massage. Zac loves his bath and enjoys having his clothes off. Instead of a horrible screaming time, it's lots of fun.'

Many mothers in the survey already use it regularly and have continued as their child grows, still incorporating massage at two years and over. (Table 1)

'This year I have been massaging my son (who is six years and started grade 1) at bedtime. I found it really relaxed him and calmed him and he also talked to me a lot at this time. This helped us both at a difficult time while he was getting used to full time school days with the increased physical, emotional and intellectual demands.'

Others have even reported including massage as a family experience, transferring techniques to older siblings, and their partners. Children will still ask for massage into their teens. Parents can play an important role in their child's development, and indeed, some were even noting physical and emotional development as a benefit.

'I carry out massage most evenings after bath time with "big brother", a four year old, on the bed. It is part of our winding down before bed. It is bonding between mother and baby and baby's other siblings. Both now take turns to massage one another and stroke Mum too! It is learning about 'safe' touch, especially for my older child (protective behaviours).'

The benefits of touch in child development have been widely reported and are now established in premature baby units as a means of promoting growth and development. Massage therapists need to be able to teach parents and carers good techniques, and give them knowledge of oils and safe practice. If bonding in a child's first relationship is achieved, then this sets them up for good experiences later in life. Touch is also implicated later in self-esteem and confidence issues. Another good benefit was giving mothers confidence in handling their babies, and permission to help their babies when problems arise. Mothers who lack confidence may find they become depressed or feel inadequate.

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'Birth was not traumatic, but baby was in special care from birth for approximately three days without Mum's touch. I was worried about bonding, having heard how skin on skin was so important following birth. She was three days without me, I am no longer worried, seeing her reactions, and loving my touch and time.'

As can be seen, there can be immediate and long-term effects from carrying out baby massage. As massage therapists, it makes our work very rewarding and satisfying to be able to see such positive results. This is another benefit of baby massage, and we do not have to wait weeks to see the results, babies respond so quickly, that the results are immediate. It is much better to trouble-shoot problems at this early age, than to leave them unattended for years, until they present as adults with conditions which could have been prevented.

Acknowledgements

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Lemise Kassim has trained in the UK and Australia. She holds an Honours degree in Biology, Diploma in Massage Therapy, and 22 years of experience of working with Women's Health. She runs group and individual 'Massage My Baby' courses for mothers and provides training for massage therapists. She brings in diverse techniques, being a Bush Flower Essence practitioner, counsellor, mother of two (aged 15 and 10) and experienced Baby and Pregnancy Massage Therapist.

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Getting your Child to Sleep, Vicki Lansky

Baby Love, Robyn Parker

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Fund	from 22/12/03 Incorporating	Phone	Status
* Australian Regional Health Group	Cessnock & District Health Benefits Fund Federation Health GMF Health GMHBA Health Insurance Fund WA Latrobe Health Services Mildura District Hospital Fund St Lukes Medical & Hospital Benefit Association United Ancient Order of Druids Friendly Society Westfund Yallourn Medical & Hospital Society	03 9545 0800	C
* Australian Unity		03 9697 0911	D
* BUPA Australia Health	AXA HBA Health Insurance Mutual Community SA National Mutual Health Insurance	1800 060 239	D
* CBHS Friendly Society		1300 654 123	C
Credicare		07 3365 0022	C
Defence Health		1800 335 425	C
* Government Employees Health Fund	Australia Post-Tel Institute Electricity Credit Union QLD Police Credit Union Queenslanders Credit Union Uni Credit Union	1800 025 463	D
* GMF Health		08 9021 0729	D
* Grand United Friendly Society	FAI Health Insurance	1800 800 245	D
* HCF		131 334	C
Health Care Insurance		1800 804 950	C
Health Partners		08 8236 4520	C
* IOOF		131 369	C
* IOR Health Fund		07 3229 7366	D
* Lysaght People Care	Transition Benefit Fund	02 4224 4306	C
Manchester Unity		131 372	D
* MBF		131 137	D
Medibank Private		132 331	D
Naval Benefits Health Fund		1800 333 156	C
* NIB Health		02 4921 2773	D
* NRMA Health		08 8233 1874	C
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QLD Teachers' Union Health		1300 360 701	C
Queensland Country Health	MIM Employees Health Society	07 4750 3200	C
Railway & Transport Employees Friendly Soc		07 3844 2600	C
Reserve Bank Health Fund Friendly Soc		1800 027 299	C
Transport Friendly Society		03 9429 1888	C

C - Certificate IV D - Diploma * List sent to fund

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