

RESEARCH

Massaging Kids Lowers Parents' Anxiety

A program that trained parents to massage their disabled children resulted in reduced parental anxiety and increased parental perceptions of self-efficacy.

"A Training and Support Programme for caregivers of children with disabilities" was conducted by staff of the Interdisciplinary Research Centre in Health, Coventry University, West Midlands, England.

Eighty-two children and their caregivers, the majority of whom were mothers, participated in the study. The children ranged in age from newborn to 16 and had a wide variety of disabilities, from mild colic to cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, epilepsy and chromosomal disorders.

The training and support program involved parents learning a simple massage routine they could give their kids at home. Parents received one hour of massage instruction per week for eight weeks. One massage therapist worked with each child-caregiver pair throughout the eight-week program. The parents were also provided with a training pack that included a list of contraindications, instructions on techniques, diagrams and photographs.

"The aim is not about treating children, but giving parents something practical and useful to do in the care of their children," state the study's authors.

"It's about parents and children connecting, bonding, having quality time together, doing something that is pleasurable for both giver and receiver," they continue. "It is about using the important sense of touch for these things and, of course, touch for communication."

Questionnaires assessing parents' levels of anxiety, depression and self-efficacy were distributed immediately before and after the program, and again 16 weeks later. Qualitative data evaluating parents' perceptions of their children's well-being and changes in symptoms were collected from home record sheets completed by parents and monitoring forms completed by therapists.

Self-reports from parents showed that their own anxiety levels were significantly lower. The caregivers perceived that their children were eating and sleeping better, were more mobile, had increased bowel movements and body awareness, were more calm and relaxed, and that they found the massage enjoyable.

Qualitative data collected throughout the program reflected that the children were in fact sleeping and eating better, and were more calm and relaxed.

"Comparisons of study variables over time showed significant improvements in parental

self-efficacy for giving children massage and self-efficacy for managing children's psychosocial well-being," state the study's authors. "Regardless of the nature of children's disabilities, relaxation emerged as a salient outcome for both giver and recipient."

- **Source:** *Interdisciplinary Research Centre in Health, Coventry University, West Midlands, England. Authors: Lesley Cullen, Ph.D., and Julie Barlow, Ph.D.*